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The Ascent of the Soul

Amory H. Bradford

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**To The Memory of
My Father**

*That each, who seems a separate whole,
Should move his rounds, and fusing all
The skirts of self again, should fall
Remerging in the general Soul,*

*Is faith as vague as all unsweet:
Eternal form shall still divide
The eternal soul from all beside;
And I shall know him when we meet.*

— In Memoriam.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the following chapters will be evident to all who may care to peruse them. I have endeavored simply to read the soul of man with something of the care that one reads a book containing a message which he believes to be of importance.

While one class of scientists are seeking to explore the physical universe, another class, with equal care, are studying the human spirit, and, already, startling discoveries have been made. My work is in no sense new in kind, but it is such as one whose whole time is devoted to dealing with the inner life would naturally give to such a subject. It hardly needs to be added that my method is practical rather than speculative. I am more interested in helping the ascent of the soul than in accounting for its origin. In carrying out my plan I have considered the following subjects: The nature and genesis of the soul, its awakening to a consciousness of responsibility, the steps which it first takes on its upward pathway, the experience of moral failure, its second awakening, which is to an appreciation that the universe is on its side, the part of Christ in promoting its awakening, the sense of spiritual companionship by which it is ever attended, the discipline of struggle, and the nurture and culture best fitted to promote its growth. I have also sought to read some of the prophecies of the soul, and have found them all pointing toward a continuance of its being beyond the event called death, and toward the fullness of Christ as the goal of humanity. I have found a place for prayers for the departed even among Protestants of the strictest sects.

A study of the soul, like a study of history, inspires optimism. It is hard to believe that it could have been intended first for perfection and then for extinction. It is equally difficult to believe that any soul will, in the end, be "cast as rubbish to the void."

In these studies I have tried ever to be mindful of my own limitations, and not to forget that a fraction of humanity can never hope to comprehend the fullness of truth. Of that side of the spiritual sphere which has been turned toward me, and of that alone, have I presumed to write. All that I claim for this book is that it is the contribution of one, anxious to know what is true, toward a better un-

derstanding of a subject which is daily receiving wider recognition and more thorough consideration.

AMORY H. BRADFORD.

MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY, *August 30, 1902.*

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THE SOUL

It is no spirit who from heaven hath flown
And is descending on his embassy;
Nor traveler gone from earth the heaven t'esp'y!
'Tis Hesperus – there he stands with glittering crown,
First admonition that the sun is down, –
For yet it is broad daylight! – clouds pass by;
A few are near him still – and now the sky,
He hath it to himself – 'tis all his own.
O most ambitious star! an inquest wrought
Within me when I recognized thy light;
A moment I was startled at the sight;
And, while I gazed, there came to me a thought
That even I beyond my natural race
Might step as thou dost now: – might one day trace
Some ground not mine; and, strong her strength above,
My soul, an apparition in the place,
Tread there, with steps that no one shall reprove!

– Wordsworth.

I

THE SOUL

Subjects which a few years ago were regarded as the exclusive property of cultured thinkers, are now common themes of thought and conversation. Psychology has been popularized. Materialistic doctrines are at a discount even in this age of physical science.

It is difficult to explain the somewhat sudden appearance of intense interest in questions which have to do with the life of the spirit; but, whatever the theory of its genesis, there is no doubt of its presence. This, therefore, is a favorable time for a somewhat extended study of the stages through which we pass in our spiritual growth. I shall endeavor to use the inductive method in this inquiry, and trust that I am not presumptuous in giving to these essays the title,

THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL.

The phrases, "The Ascent of Man" and "The Descent of Man" are familiar to all readers of the literature of modern science. One of the most eminent of American writers on science and philosophy too soon taken from his work, if any act of Providence is ever too soon, has made a clear distinction between evolution as applied to the body and as applied to the spirit. In lucid and luminous pages he has taught us that evolution, as a physical process, having culminated in man can go no further along those lines; that henceforward "the Cosmic force" will be expended in the perfection of the spirit, and that that process will require eternity to complete.

More perspicuously than any other author, John Fiske has introduced to modern English thought the conception of the ascent of the soul, considered in its relation to the individual and to the race.

This subject naturally divides itself into two departments, viz.—the ascent of each individual soul and, then, the far-off perfecting of humanity. I shall make suggestions along both lines of inquiry. I do not know of any writer who has, in a compact form, presented the results of such studies, although there have been illustrations, especially in literature, which indicate that many thinkers have had in mind the attempt to trace and describe the progress of the soul from

its bondage to animalism toward its perfection and glory in the freedom of the spirit.

Goethe, in "Faust," has made an effort to follow the process by which a weak woman and a weaker man, ignorant of the forces struggling within them and susceptible to malign influences from without, through terrible mistakes and bitter failure, at length reach the heights of character.

The Trilogy of Dante is a study of the soul in its slow and painful passage from hell, through purgatory, to heaven. Perhaps, however, the noblest and truest effort in this direction to be found in the world's literature is "The Pilgrim's Progress," in which a man of glorious genius and vision, but without academic culture, reflecting too much the crude and materialistic theology of his time and condition, follows the progress of a soul in its movement from the City of Destruction to the City Celestial. The City of Destruction is the state of animalism and selfishness from which the race has slowly emerged; and the City Celestial is not only the Christian's heaven, but also the state of those who, having escaped from earthliness, having conquered animalism and risen into the freedom of the spirit, breathe the air and enjoy the companionship of the sons of God.

It is my purpose in a different way to attempt to trace some of the steps of what may be called the evolution of the spirit, or, in the light of modern knowledge, the growth of the soul as it moves upward. At the outset I must make it plain that I am speaking of evolution since the time when man as a spirit appeared. Given the spiritual being, what are the stages through which he will pass on his way to the goal toward which he is surely pressing?

Just here we should ask, What do we mean by the soul? The word is used in its popular sense, as synonymous with spirit or personality. Man has a dual nature; one part of his being is of the dust and to the dust it returns; the other part is a mystery; it is known only by what it does. Man thinks, loves, chooses, and is conscious of himself as thinking, loving, choosing. The unity of this being who thinks, loves, chooses in a single self-consciousness constitutes him a spirit, or personality; and that is what the word soul signifies in its popular usage. There is another technical definition which may be true or false but which is of no importance in our study.

The problem of life is the right adjustment of spirit and body, so that the former shall never be the servant but always the master of the latter.

We are on this earth, in the midst of darkness, with nothing absolutely sure except that in a little while we must die. We are two-fold beings in which there is war almost from the cradle to the grave, and that war is caused by the effort of the body to rule the soul and of the soul to conquer the body.

At the gates of this mystery we continually do cry, and little light comes from any quarter; indeed, it may be said no light except that of the Christian revelation, and the, as yet, not very pronounced prophecies of evolution.

One of the questions, which in all ages has been most persistently asked, concerns the origin of the soul. Perhaps, in reality, that is no more mysterious than the genesis of the body; but the body is material and we live in a world of matter, and it is comparatively easy to see that our bodies are from the earth which they inhabit. Our souls, however, are invisible, immaterial, ethereal. There is no evident kinship between a thought and a stone, between love and the soil which produces vegetables, between a heroic choice and the stuff of the earth, between spirit and matter. Well, then, whence does the soul come?

It will be interesting at least to recall a few of the many answers which have been given to this inquiry.

One theory of the genesis of the soul is called Emanation. That means that in the universe there is really but one source of spiritual being, one Infinite Spirit, and that all other spiritual beings have proceeded from Him as the rays of light are flashed from the sun; and that, in time, all will return to Him again and be absorbed in the being from which they have come. Thus all spirits are supposed to have proceeded from one source—God. As all natural life in the end is but a manifestation of solar energy, so all human beings are supposed to be only bits of God, for a time imprisoned in bodies, and some time to return to the Deity and be absorbed in Him, or in it.

Another answer to the question as to the soul's origin is that of Preëxistence. This may be called the Oriental theory, for almost the

whole Orient holds this view. The substance of the teaching is suggested by Wordsworth, in his "Ode to Immortality," in the following lines:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar."

Many Occidentals have believed in preëxistence. One of the most intelligent persons whom I have ever known once affirmed that she had had thoughts which she was sure were memories of events which had occurred in a previous life. This answer only pushes the question one stage further back, and leaves us still inquiring, Where do the souls of men originally come from?

Another answer to our question affirms that every individual soul is created by God whenever a body is in readiness to receive it—that when a body is born a soul is made to order for it. An old poet wrote as follows:

"Then God smites His hands together
And strikes out a soul as a spark,
Into the organized glory of things,
From the deeps of the dark." [1]

The Greek myth of Prometheus is an illustration of this teaching, for "Prometheus is said to have made a human image from the dust of the ground, and then, by fire stolen from heaven, to have animated it with a living soul." [2]

Another answer teaches that all human souls have been derived by heredity from that of Adam. This is a speculation found in mediæval theology, and in the Koran.

A fanciful theory suggests that all souls have been in existence since the universe was formed; that they are floating in space like rays of light; and that when a body comes into being a soul is drawn into it with its first breath, or first nourishment. This is pure imagination, but intelligent and earnest men have believed it to be the true solution of the problem.

One other answer to this question of origin teaches that souls are propagated in the same way and at the same time as bodies; that when a human being appears he is body and spirit; that both are born together, both grow together; and then, some add, both die together, while others believe that the spirit enters at death on a larger and freer stage of existence.

I have recalled these speculations concerning the soul in order to show that in all ages this question has been eagerly put and reverently pressed. How could it have been otherwise? And what more convincing evidence of the spiritual nature of man could be desired than that he asks such questions? Would a figure of clay ask whether it were the abode of a higher order of being? Dust asks no questions concerning personality; but intelligence can never be satisfied until it knows the causes of things.

What is the teaching of the New Testament concerning this subject? The attitude of Jesus toward all the great problems was the practical one. He attempted to shed no light on causes, but ever endeavored to show how to make the best of things as they are. Whence came the soul? we may ask of Him, but He will tell us that a far more important inquiry is, How may the soul be delivered from imperfection, suffering, and sin, and saved to its noblest uses and loftiest possibilities?

The reality of spirit is everywhere assumed in the teaching of Jesus, but nowhere does there appear any effort to throw light on the mystery of its genesis.

The distinction between spirit and body is indicated by the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, the narratives of the continued existence of Jesus after His Crucifixion, by many references to the heavenly life, and by the appeals and invitations of the Gospel which are all addressed to intelligence and will. The presence of Jesus in history is an assertion of the spiritual nature of man. Various philosophers have tried to satisfy the desire for light on the question of the origin of personality; but Jesus has told us how, being here, we may break our prison-houses and rise into the full freedom and glory of the children of God. While inquirers have been seeking light, Jesus has brought to them salvation; while they have fruitlessly asked whence they came, Jesus has told them whither they are going.

The real problem of human life is not one which has to do with our birth, but with our destiny. We know that we think, choose, love; we know that we are self-conscious; we feel that we have kinship with something higher than the ground on which we walk. The stars attract us because they are above and have motion, but the earth we tread upon has few fascinations.

Jesus has responded to the essential questions: For what have we been created? What is our true home? What is the goal of personality? By what path does man move from the bondage of his will, and the limitation of his animalism toward the glorious liberty of the children of God, and toward the fullness of his possible being?

We are thus brought face to face with other questions of deep importance. What part do weakness, limitation, suffering, sorrow, and even sin, play in the development of souls? Is it necessary that any should fall in order that they may rise? Did John Bunyan truly picture the ascent of the soul? Does its path, of necessity, lead through the Slough of Despond, through Vanity Fair, by Castle Dangerous, and into the realm of Giant Despair?

Must one pass through hell and purgatory before he may enjoy the "beatific vision?" Are temptation, sin, sorrow, and even death, angels of God sent forth to minister to the perfection of man? or are they fiends which, in some foul way, have invaded the otherwise fair regions in which we dwell?

These are some of the questions to which we are to seek answers in the pages which are to follow. I am persuaded that, as the result of our studies, we shall find that the same beneficent hand which led the "Cosmic process" for unnumbered ages, until the appearance of man, is leading it still, that far more wonderful disclosures are waiting for the children of men as they shall be prepared to receive them, and that the glory of the "Spiritual Universe," as it approaches its consummation, when compared with the finest growths of character yet seen, will transcend them as the ordered creation, with its countless stars, transcends the primeval chaos.

In the meantime it is well to remember a few very simple and self-evident facts. One of these is that human souls must vary, at least as much as the bodies in which they dwell. Individuality has to do with spirits. We think, love, and choose in ways that differ quite

as much as our bodily appearance. There is no uniformity in the spiritual sphere;—this we know from its manifestations in conduct and history. One man is heroic and another tender, one a reformer and another a recluse, one conservative and another radical. The same Bible has passages as widely contrasted as the twenty-third and the fifty-eighth Psalms, and characters as unlike as Jacob and Jesus. Indeed, may it not be assumed that physical differences are but expressions of still more clearly marked differences in spirits? If this is true it will follow that, as we move toward the goal of our being, while all will be under the same good care, we will move along different, though converging, paths. There are many roads to the "Celestial City" and, possibly, some of them do not lead through the Slough of Despond, or go very near to the realms of Giant Despair.

I cannot leave this part of my subject without dwelling for a moment upon two thoughts which to me seem to be full of significance.

This wonderfully complex nature of ours,—this power of thinking, choosing, loving, these mysterious inner depths out of which come strange suggestions, and within which, all the time, processes are carried on which may rise into consciousness and startle with their beauty or shame with their ugliness—does no suggestion come from it concerning its origin and destiny? Until they pass mid-life few men realize the terrible significance of the command of the oracle at Delphi, "Know Thyself." Who is not surprised every day at what he finds within himself? It sometimes seems as if two beings dwelt in every body, one in the region of consciousness, and one down below consciousness steadily forging the material which, sooner or later, must be forced up for the conscious man to think about.

In proportion as we know ourselves more accurately it becomes increasingly evident that as spirits we are allied to the great Spirit. Few who earnestly think can believe that their power of thought could have grown out of the earth; few when they love can believe that there is no fountain of love, unlimited and free; and few, when they choose one course and refuse another, would be willing to affirm that they are without the power of choice, and have no desti-

ny but the grave. In other words, is not the fact that we are spirits all the proof that we need to have of the Father of Spirits? Is not a single ray of light all the evidence which any one needs of the reality of the sun? Is not the presence of one spiritual being a demonstration of a greater Spirit somewhere? Every soul indicates that, whatever the process by which it has reached its present development, it came originally from God. "In the beginning God" is a phrase which applies to the spiritual as well as to the material universe.

The soul is not only a witness concerning its own origin, but it is also a prophecy concerning its destiny. The more thoroughly it is studied the more convincing becomes the evidence that it must some time reach its perfected state. The perfection of intelligence, love, and will require endless growth. The great words of Pascal can hardly be recalled too frequently:

"Man is but a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary that the entire universe arm itself to crush him. A breath of air, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But were the universe to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which kills him, because he knows that he dies; and the universe knows nothing of the advantage it has over him."

We can as yet hardly begin to comprehend that for which we were created;—now we see through a glass darkly. A caterpillar on the earth cannot appreciate a butterfly in the air. Jesus was the typical man, as well as the revelation of God. St. Paul has set our thoughts moving toward the "fullness of Christ" as the final goal of humanity. We may not, for many milleniums, know all that is contained in that phrase "the fullness of Christ;" but no one ever attentively listened to the voices which speak in his own soul, no one has even asked himself the meaning of the fact that nothing earthly ever completely satisfies, no one ever saw another in the ripeness of splendid powers growing more intelligent, loving, and spiritually beautiful, without feeling that if death were really the end no being is so much to be pitied as man, and no fate so much to be coveted as a short life in which the mockery may go on.

Our souls themselves assure us that they have come from a fountain of spiritual being—that is, from God; and they are also prophecies of a perfection which has never yet been realized on the earth