

# **Annihilationism**

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### **I. DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF THEORIES**

A term designating broadly a large body of theories which unite in contending that human beings pass, or are put, out of existence altogether. These theories fall logically into three classes, according as they hold that all souls, being mortal, actually cease to exist at death; or that, souls being naturally mortal, only those persist in life to which immortality is given by God; or that, though souls are naturally immortal and persist in existence unless destroyed by a force working upon them from without, wicked souls are actually thus destroyed. These three classes of theories may be conveniently called respectively, (1) pure mortalism, (2) conditional immortality, and (3) annihilationism proper.

### **II. PURE MORTALISM**

The common contention of the theories which form the first of these classes is that human life is bound up with the organism, and that therefore the entire man passes out of being with the dissolution of the organism. The usual basis of this contention is either materialistic or pantheistic or at least pantheizing (e.g. realistic); the soul being conceived in the former case as but a function of organized matter and necessarily ceasing to exist with the dissolution of the organism, in the latter case as but the individualized manifestation of a much more extensive entity, back into which it sinks with the dissolution of the organism in connection with which the individualization takes place. Rarely, however, the contention in question is based on the notion that the soul, although a spiritual entity distinct from the material body, is incapable of maintaining its existence separate from the body. The promise of eternal life is too essential an element of Christianity for theories like these to thrive in a Christian atmosphere. It is even admitted now by Stade, Oort, Schwally, and others that the Old Testament, even in its oldest strata, presupposes the persistence of life after death - which used to be very commonly denied. Nevertheless, the materialists (e.g. Feuerbach, Vogt, Moleschott, Büchner, Häckel) and pantheists (Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Strauss; cf. S. Davidson, "The Doctrine of Last Things," London, 1882, pp. 132-133) still deny the possibility of immortality; and in exceedingly wide circles, even among those who would not wholly break with Christianity, men permit themselves to cherish nothing more than a "hope" of it (S. Hoekstra, "De Hoop der Onsterfelijkheid," Amsterdam, 1867; L. W. E. Rauwenhoff, "Wijsbegeerte van den Godsdienst," Leiden, 1887, p. 811; cf. the "Ingersoll Lectures").

### **III. CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY**

The class of theories to which the designation of "conditional immortality" is most properly applicable, agree with the theories of pure mortalism in teaching the natural mortality of man in his entirety, but separate from them in maintaining that this mortal may, and in many cases does, put on immortality. Immortality in their view is a gift of God, conferred on those who have entered into living communion with Him. Many theorists of this

class adopt frankly the materialistic doctrine of the soul, and deny that it is a distinct entity; they therefore teach that the soul necessarily dies with the body, and identify life beyond death with the resurrection, conceived as essentially a recreation of the entire man. Whether all men are subjects of this recreative resurrection is a mooted question among themselves. Some deny it, and affirm therefore that the wicked perish finally at death, the children of God alone attaining to resurrection. The greater part, however, teach a resurrection for all, and a "second death," which is annihilation, for the wicked (e.g. Jacob Blain, "Death not Life," Buffalo, 1857, pp. 39-42; Aaron Ellis and Thomas Read, "Bible versus Tradition," New York, 1853, pp. 13-121; George Storrs, "Six Sermons," New York, 1856, pp. 29 ft.; Zenas Campbell, "The Age of Gospel Light," Hartford, 1854). There are many, on the other hand, who recognize that the soul is a spiritual entity, disparate to, though conjoined in personal union with, the body. In their view, however, ordinarily at least, the soul requires the body either for its existence, or certainly for its activity. C. F. Hudson, for example ("Debt and Grace," New York, 1861, pp. 263-264), teaches that the soul lies unconscious, or at least inactive, from death to the resurrection; then the just rise to an ecstasy of bliss; the unjust, however, start up at the voice of God to become extinct in the very act. Most, perhaps, prolong the second life of the wicked for the purpose of the infliction of their merited punishment; and some make their extinction a protracted process (e.g. H. L. Hastings, "Retribution or the Doom of the Ungodly," Providence, 1861, pp. 77, 153; cf. Horace Bushnell, "Forgiveness and Law," New York, 1874, p. 147, notes 5 and 6; James Martineau, "A Study of Religion," Oxford, 11888, p. 114). For further discussion of the theory of conditional immortality, see "Immortality."

#### IV. ANNIHILATIONISM PROPER

Already, however, in speaking of extinction we are passing beyond the limits of "conditionalism" pure and simple and entering the region of annihilationism proper. Whether we think of this extinction as the result of the punishment or as the gradual dying out of the personality under the enfeebling effects of sin, we are no longer looking at the soul as naturally mortal and requiring a new gift of grace to keep it in existence, but as naturally immortal and suffering destruction at the hands of an inimical power. And this becomes even more apparent when the assumed mortalism of the soul is grounded not in its nature but in its sinfulness; so that the theory deals not with souls as such, but with sinful souls, and it is a question of salvation by a gift of grace to everlasting life or of being left to the disintegrating effects of sin. The point of distinction between theories of this class and "conditionalism" is that these theories with more or less consistency or heartiness recognize what is called the "natural immortality of the soul," and are not tempted therefore to think of the soul as by nature passing out of being at death (or at any time), and yet teach that the actual punishment inflicted upon or suffered by the wicked results in extinction of being. They may differ among themselves, as to the time when this extinction takes place - whether at death, or at the general judgment - or as to the more or less extended or intense punishment accorded to the varying guilt of each soul. They may differ also as to the means by which the annihilation of the wicked soul is accomplished - whether by a mere act of divine power, cutting off the sinful life, or by the destructive fury of the punishment inflicted, or by the gradual enervating and sapping working of sin itself on the personality. They retain their common character as theories of annihilation proper so long as they conceive the extinction of the soul as an effect wrought on it to which it succumbs, rather than as the natural exit of the soul from a life which could be continued to it only by some operation upon it raising it to a higher than its natural potency.

## V. MINGLING OF THEORIES

It must be borne in mind that the adherents of these two classes of theories are not very careful to keep strictly within the logical limits of one of the classes. Convenient as it is to approach their study with a definite schematization in hand, it is not always easy to assign individual writers with definiteness to one or the other of them. It has become usual, therefore, to speak of them all as annihilationists or of them all as conditionalists; annihilationists because they all agree that the souls of the wicked cease to exist; conditionalists because they all agree that therefore persistence in life is conditioned on a right relation to God. Perhaps the majority of those who call themselves conditionalists allow that the mortality of the soul, which is the prime postulate of the conditionalist theory, is in one way or another connected with sin; that the souls of the wicked persist in existence after death and even after the judgment, in order to receive the punishment due their sin; and that this punishment, whether it be conceived as infliction from without or as the simple consequence of sin, has much to do with their extinction. When so held, conditionalism certainly falls little short of annihilationism proper.

## VI. EARLY HISTORY OF ANNIHILATIONISTIC THEORIES

Some confusion has arisen, in tracing the history of the annihilationist theories, from confounding with them enunciations by the earlier Church Fathers of the essential Christian doctrine that the soul is not self-existent, but owes, as its existence, so its continuance in being, to the will of God. The earliest appearance of a genuinely annihilationist theory in extant Christian literature is to be found apparently in the African apologist Arnobius, at the opening of the fourth century (cf. Salmond, "The Christian Doctrine of Immortality," Edinburgh, 1901, pp. 473--474; Falke, "Die Lehre von der ewigen Verdammnis," Eisenach, 1892, pp. 27-28). It seemed to him impossible that beings such as men could either owe their being directly to God or persist in being without a special gift of God; the unrighteous must therefore be gradually consumed in the fires of Gehenna. A somewhat similar idea was announced by the Socinians in the sixteenth century (O. Fock, "Der Socinianismus," Kiel, 1847, pp. 714 ff.). On the positive side, Faustus Socinus himself thought that man is mortal by nature and attains immortality only by grace. On the negative side, his followers (Crell, Schwartz, and especially Ernst Sohner) taught explicitly that the second death consists in annihilation, which takes place, however, only after the general resurrection, at the final judgment. From the Socinians this general view passed over to England where it was adopted, not merely, as might have been anticipated, by men like Locke ("Reasonableness of Christianity," § 1), Hobbes ("Leviathan"), and Whiston, but also by Churchmen like Hammond and Warburton, and was at least played with by non-conformist leaders like Isaac Watts. The most remarkable example of its utilization in this age, however, is supplied by the non-juror Henry Dodwell (1706). Insisting that the "soul is a principle naturally mortal," Dodwell refused to allow the benefit of this mortality to any but those who lived and died without the limits of the proclamation of the gospel; no "adult person whatever," he insisted, "living where Christianity is professed, and the motives of its credibility are sufficiently proposed, can hope for the benefit of actual mortality." Those living in Christian lands are therefore all immortalized, but in two classes: some "by the pleasure of God to punishment," some "to reward by their union with the divine baptismal Spirit." It was part of his contention that "none have the power of giving this divine immortalizing Spirit since the apostles but the bishops only," so that his book was rather a blast against the antiprelatists than a plea for annihilationism; and it was replied to as such by Samuel Clarke (1706), Richard Baxter (1707),

and Daniel Whitby (1707). During the eighteenth century the theory was advocated also on the continent of Europe (e.g. E. J. K. Walter, "Prüfung wichtiger Lehren theologischen und philosophischen Inhalts," Berlin, 1782), and almost found a martyr in the Neuchâtel pastor, Ferdinand Olivier Petitpierre, commonly spoken of by the nickname of "No Eternity" (cf. C. Berthoud, "Les quatre Petitpierres," Neuchâtel, 1875). In the first half of the nineteenth century also it found sporadic adherents, as e.g. C. H. Weisse in Germany (*Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, ix. 1836, pp. 271-340) and H. H. Dobney in England ("Notes of Lectures on Future Punishment," London, 1844; new edition, "On the Scripture Doctrine of Future Punishment," 1846).

## VII. NINETEENTH CENTURY THEORIES

The real extension of the theory belongs, however, only to the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period it attained, chiefly through the able advocacy of it by C. F. Hudson and E. White, something like a popular vogue in English-speaking lands. In French-speaking countries, while never becoming really popular, it has commanded the attention of an influential circle of theologians and philosophers (as J. Rognon, "L'Immortalité native et l'enseignement biblique," Montauban, 1894, p. 7; but cf. A. Gretillat, "Exposé de théologie systématique," Paris, iv. 1890, p. 602). In Germany, on the other hand, it has met with less acceptance, although it is precisely there that it has been most scientifically developed, and has received the adherence of the most outstanding names. Before the opening of this half century, in fact, it had gained the great support of Richard Rothe's advocacy ("Theologische Ethik," 3 vols., Wittenberg, 1845-1848; ed. 2, 5 vols., 1867-1871, §§ 470-472; "Dogmatik," Heidelberg, II. ii. 1870, §§ 47-48, especially p. 158), and never since has it ceased to find adherents of mark, who base their acceptance of it sometimes on general grounds, but increasingly on the view that the Scriptures teach, not a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, but a reanimation by resurrection of God's people. The chief names in this series are C. H. Weisse ("Philosophische Dogmatik," Leipzig, 1855-1862, § 970); Hermann Schultz ("Voraussetzungen der christlichen Lehre von der Unsterblichkeit," Göttingen, 1861, p. 155; cf. "Grundriss der evangelischen Dogmatik," 1892, p. 154: "This condemnation of the second death may in itself, according to the Bible, be thought of as existence in torment, or as painful cessation of existence. Dogmatics without venturing to decide, will find the second conception the more probable, biblically and dogmatically"); H. Plitt ("Evangelische Glaubenslehre," Gotha, 1863); F. Brandes (*Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1872, pp. 545, 550); A. Schäffer ("Auf der Neige des Lebens," Gotha, 1884; "Was ist Glück?" 1891, pp. 290-294); G. Runze ("Unsterblichkeit und Auferstehung," Berlin, i. 1894, pp. 167, 204: "Christian Eschatology teaches not a natural immortality for the soul, but a reanimation by God's almighty power. . . . The Christian hope of reanimation makes the actualization of a future blessed existence depend entirely on faith in God"); L. Lemme ("Endlosigkeit der Verdammnis," Berlin, 1899, pp. 31-32, 60-61); cf. R. Kabisch ("Die Eschatologie des Paulus," Göttingen, 1893).

The same general standpoint has been occupied in Holland, for example, by Jonker (*Theologische Studiën*, i.). The first advocate of conditionalism in French was the Swiss pastor, E. Pétavel-Olliff, whose first book, "La Fin du mal," appeared in 1872 (Paris), followed by many articles in the French theological journals and by "Le Problème de l'immortalité" (1891; E. T. London, 1892), and "The Extinction of Evil" (E. T. 1889). In 1880 C. Byse issued a translation of E. White's chief book. The theory not only had already been presented by A. Bost ("Le Sort des méchants," 1861), but had been taken up by philosophers of such standing as C. Lambert ("Le Système du monde moral," 1862), P. Janet (*Revue des deux mondes*,

1863), and C. Renouvier ("La Critique philosophique," 1878) ; and soon afterward Charles Secretan and C. Ribot (*Revue theologique*, 1885, No. 1) expressed their general adherence to it. Perhaps the more distinguished advocacy of it on French ground has come, however, from the two professors Sabatier, Auguste and Armand, the one from the point of view of exegetical, the other from that of natural science. Says the one ("L'Origine du péché dans le système théologique de Paul," Paris, 1887, p. 38): "The impenitent sinner never emerges from the fleshly state, and consequently remains subject to the law of corruption and destruction, which rules fleshly beings; they perish and are as if they had never been." Says the other ("Essai sur l'immortalité au point de vue du naturalisme évolutioniste," ed. 2, Paris, 1895, pp. 198, 229): "The immortality of man is not universal and necessary; it is subject to certain conditions, it is conditional, to use an established expression." "Ultraterrestrial immortality will be the exclusive lot of souls which have arrived at a sufficient degree of integrity and cohesion to escape absorption or disintegration."

### VIII. ENGLISH ADVOCATES

The chief English advocate of conditional immortality has undoubtedly been Edward White whose "Life in Christ" was published first in 1846 (London), rewritten in 1875 (ed. 3, 1878). His labors were seconded, however, not only by older works of similar tendency such as George Storrs's "Are the Wicked Immortal?" (ed. 21, New York, 1852), but by later teaching from men of the standing of Archbishop Whately ("Scripture Revelations concerning a Future State," ed. 8, London, 1859), Bishop Hampden, J. B. Heard ("The Tripartite Nature of Man," ed. 4, Edinburgh, 1875), Prebendary Constable ("The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment," London, 1868), Prebendary Row ("Future Retribution," London, 1887), J. M. Denniston ("The Perishing Soul," ed. 2, London, 1874), S. Minton ("The Glory of Christ," London, 1868), J. W. Barlow ("Eternal Punishment," Cambridge, 1865), and T. Davis ("Endless Suffering not the Doctrine of Scripture," London, 1866). Less decisive but not less influential advocacy has been given to the theory also by men like Joseph Parker, R. W. Dale, and J. A. Beet ("The Last Things," London, 1897). Mr. Beet (who quotes Clemence, "Future Punishment," London, 1880, as much of his way of thinking) occupies essentially the position of Schultz. "The sacred writers," he says, "while apparently inclining sometimes to one and sometimes to the other, do not pronounce decisive judgment" between eternal punishment and annihilation (p. 216), while annihilation is free from speculative objections. In America C. F. Hudson's initial efforts ("Debt and Grace," Boston, 1857, ed. 5, 1859; "Christ Our Life," 1860) were ably seconded by W. R. Huntington ("Conditional Immortality," New York, 1878) and J. H. Pettingell ("The Life Everlasting," Philadelphia, 1882, combining two previously published tractates; "The Unspeakable Gift," Yarmouth, Me., 1884). Views of much the same character have been expressed also by Horace Bushnell, L. W. Bacon, L. C. Baker, Lyman Abbott, and without much insistence on them by Henry C. Sheldon ("System of Christian Doctrine," Cincinnati, 1903, pp. 573 ff.).

### IX. MODIFICATIONS OF THE THEORY

There is a particular form of conditionalism requiring special mention which seeks to avoid the difficulties of annihilationism, by teaching, not the total extinction of the souls of the wicked, but rather, as it is commonly phrased, their "transformation" into impersonal beings incapable of moral action, or indeed of any feeling. This is the form of conditionalism which is suggested by James Martineau ("A Study of Religion," Oxford, ii. 1888, p. 114) and by Horace Bushnell ("Forgiveness and Law," New York, 1874, p. 147, notes 5 and 6). It is also hinted by

Henry Drummond ("Natural Law in the Spiritual World," London, 1884), when he supposes the lost soul to lose not salvation merely but the capacity for it and for God; so that what is left is no longer fit to be called a soul, but is a shrunken, useless organ ready to fall away like a rotten twig. The Alsatian theologian A. Schaffer ("Was ist Glück?" Gotha, 1891, pp. 290-294) similarly speaks of the wicked soul losing the light from heaven, the divine spark which gave it its value, and the human personality thereby becoming obliterated. "The forces out of which it arises break up and become at last again impersonal. They do not pass away, but they are transformed." One sees the conception here put forward at its highest level in such a view as that presented by Professor O. A. Curtis ("The Christian Faith," New York, 1905, p. 467), which thinks of the lost not, to be sure, as "crushed into mere thinghood" but as sunk into a condition "below the possibility of any moral action, or moral concern . . . like persons in this life when personality is entirely overwhelmed by the base sense of what we call physical fear." There is no annihilation in Professor Curtis' view; not even relief for the lost from suffering; but it may perhaps be looked at as marking the point where the theories of annihilationism reach up to and melt at last into the doctrine of eternal punishment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: An exhaustive bibliography of the subject up to 1862 is given in Ezra Abbot's Appendix to W. R. Alger's "Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life," also published separately, New York, 1871; consult also W. Reid, "Everlasting Punishment and Modern Speculation," Edinburgh, 1874, pp. 311-313. Special works on annihilationism are J. C. Killam, "Annihilationism Examined," Syracuse, 1859; I. P. Warren, "The Wicked not Annihilated," New York, 1867; N. D. George, "Annihilationism not of the Bible," Boston, 1870; J. B. Brown, "The Doctrine of Annihilation in the Light of the Gospel of Love," London, 1875; S. C. Bartlett, "Life and Death Eternal: A Refutation of the Theory of Annihilation," Boston, 1878. The subject is treated in S. D. F. Salmond, "The Christian Doctrine of Immortality," Edinburgh, 1901, pp. 473-499; R. W. Landis, "The Immortality of the Soul," New York, 1868, pp. 422 ff.; A. Hovey, "The State of the Impenitent Dead," Boston, 1859, pp. 93 ff.; C. M. Mead, "The Soul Here and Hereafter," Boston, 1879; G. Godet, in *Chrétien évangélique*, 1881-1882; F. Godet, in *Revue théologique*, 1886; J. Fyfe, "The Hereafter," Edinburgh, 1890; R. Falke, "Die Lehre von der ewigen Verdammnis," Eisenach, 1892, pp. 25-38. On conditional immortality, consult W. R. Huntington, "Conditional Immortality," New York, 1878; J. H. Pettingell, "The Theological Tri-lemma," New York, 1878; *idem*, "The Life Everlasting: What is it? Whence is it? Whose is it? A Symposium," Philadelphia, 1882; E. White, "Life and Death: A Reply to J. B. Brown's Lectures on Conditional Immortality," London, 1877; *idem*, "Life in Christ: A Study of the Scripture Doctrine on ... the Conditions of Human Immortality," London, 1878. Further discussions may be found in the appropriate sections of most works on systematic theology and also in works on eschatology and future punishment. See, besides the works mentioned in the text, the literature under "Immortality."