

## The Fable of the Four Preachers<sup>1</sup>

by  
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There was once a rather small town in Massachusetts that had four churches—far too many for the population, so that some sort of amalgamation was felt to be desirable. Repeated conferences succeeded in bringing about considerable agreement, but on one issue there was a deadlock, namely the nature of immortality. In what we may call Sect A, it was firmly believed that "death is not the end", and that when this life is over we go to another place, where our happiness or misery depend on whether we have behaved well or ill down here. It was also insisted by Sect A, however, that in the other world we have no memories at all of the present one. In Sect B, which was perhaps the most "advanced" or "modernistic" of the four, it was just as firmly believed that death is<sup>2</sup> the end, and that no one lives again. The adherents of Sect B, however, did not go so far as to say that there is no other world; on the contrary, they believed in its existence just as firmly as the adherents of Sect A. They believed, further, that as soon as anyone in our own world dies, another person – quite a different person – comes into being in the other world; and that Providence has so arranged it that the happiness or misery of this other person depends on whether the person who has just died has behaved well or ill during his life (his only life, of course).

Sects C and D we shall consider a little later. With regard to Sects A and B, there were some low sceptics in the town who held that the difference between these two was merely a verbal one; they just could not see any real difference, they maintained, between saying that the persons in the other world have no memories of a life in this one, and saying that they had never lived in this one at all (their detailed experience, in the other world, being agreed to be exactly the same in either case). The adherents of Sect B, however, would not accept this proposed manner of reconciliation with Sect A. There is all the difference in the world, they pointed out, between doing something simply because it is in your own interest to do it, and doing it out of completely disinterested compassion for someone else. The preacher in Sect A, they complained, was constantly appealing to, and encouraging, the basest selfishness in his hearers; their own preacher, on the other hand, was appealing to the nobler side of our nature. So there was no question of their merely presenting the same facts in different language – the issue between them was a moral one.

The adherents of Sect A also rejected the proffered olive-branch, but on different grounds. They too insisted that the issue between them and Sect B was a moral one, but contended<sup>3</sup> that it concerned not so much their own character as God's. The God of Sect B, they

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<sup>2</sup> All underlinings in the text are Prior's.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Synthese* edition this reads: but they contended.

said, was an unjust God, inflicting suffering on people who had done nothing whatever to deserve it, and putting the people of the other world wholly in the power of people in this world who had not the least incentive to consider the welfare of their unfortunate charges. But the people of Sect B, and also the sceptics, retorted that they could not see much in this one. Justice, surely, is only done if it is seen to be done, and it is precisely this of which we are going to be deprived in the other world as depicted in Sect A. Punishment for things which we have not the least memory of having done, indeed for things which were done at a time when we do not even remember having existed, is as unjust as punishment for what we have not done at all.

This was also the view of the adherents of Sects C and D, to whom we may now turn. Both these sects agreed in holding, not only that there is a life after death, but also that in the other world we do remember a great deal about what we did and experienced here below. But according to Sect C, the other world is a much vaster place than this one, with many wide open spaces to be filled up, so that God has decreed that when each person moves from this world to the next, he turns up there not as one person but as several, each of whom clearly remembers having been the person who died, and each of whom indeed was the person who died. And all of them suffer for his sins-and justly, for as they very well know, they were their sins. In Sect D it was argued, on the contrary, that this was a rather absurd supposition, and that in fact what the other world is bothered with is a population problem – generation after generation of people keep pouring into it, as they die, from here, and if steps were not taken it would soon be quite intolerably crowded. Steps are taken, however; what God has arranged is that when several people down here die simultaneously, they all become a single individual in the other world, who remembers perfectly well having been all of them, and who indeed was all of them. On the matter of how the denizens of the next world are rewarded and punished for what they did in this one, the members of Sect D for the most part preserved a decent agnostic silence, though their preacher occasionally had a word or two to say about the barbarousness of the retributive theory of punishment, and the need for cleansing our hearts of all vindictiveness, improving the common phrase "There, but for the grace of God, go I" to "There, unless God in His mercy prevents it, I may turn out to have gone".

The local sceptics did not have much to say about the tenets of Sects C and D, as they were inclined to regard them as propounding logical impossibilities. In charitable moods they sometimes suggested that the adherents of Sect C were merely putting forward in a misleading way the view that when we die we simply cease to exist, though simultaneously several other people start to exist, with the delusion that they existed, and did and experienced various things, before; or else the view that when we leave this world at death we do indeed continue our life elsewhere, and that when we turn up there God provides each of us with some newly created companions, suffering from certain delusions. But the sceptics were agreed that the truth of the matter cannot be as presented by the preacher of Sect C. Similarly, they said, the preacher of Sect D, if he was saying anything at all, must have been misleadingly presenting the view that when we die for at least some of us that must be the end, though the one who is chosen to continue his existence in the other world finds himself saddled with a distressingly peculiar set of memories,

and in fact is just not at all clear as to who he was when he was here. The sectarians of course retorted that they were not presenting the opinions just sketched, but certain perfectly clear alternatives to them – alternatives, moreover, which we shall quite clearly see to be the true<sup>4</sup> ones when we arrive at the other place.

There is not much more to<sup>5</sup> say about these disputes; they were of course not settled, and the four churches remained. I may report one other small point, namely that most of the sceptics, for reasons which they found it very difficult to make clear even to themselves, found the "fusion" doctrine of Sect D appreciably more impossible to stomach (if there can be degrees of impossibility) than the "fission" doctrine of Sect C.

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Synthese* edition this reads: be true.

<sup>5</sup> In the *Synthese* edition this reads: much to.