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**LIFE, DEATH,  
AND  
IMMORTALITY.**

BY,  
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## LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

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OF all the questions which, throughout the centuries, have escaped from the lips of man, there is none which has been asked with such persistence, none which has possessed interest more perennial, than "Whence do I come? Whither shall I go?" Man's origin, man's hereafter, have ever been of intensest interest to man. When Paulinus stood before Eadwine of Northumbria and preached the faith of Christ, it is said that an aged ealderman of Eadwine's court cried out: "As a swallow's flight across a lighted hall, so seems the life of man. The swallow flieth in at one door, tarrieth awhile in the light, and thereafter flieth out again into the darkness. So for a moment is the life of man in our sight, but of what it was before and what it shall be after we know nought. If the message of the stranger tell of this, let us hear it." As the flight of the swallow, from darkness to darkness, man's life has been in the past. Out of the darkness of the womb, into the darkness of the grave, man passes across his narrow strip of life. Two vast eternities stretch ocean-like on either side of the island of individual existence, and through the darkness that enshrouds them no human eye, it has been thought, could ever pierce. On this mystery religions have claimed to cast light, but the darkness has only been as a screen, on which the magic-lantern of faith has thrown strange figures, fanciful resemblances of human life on earth. In later time the true light of science has rippled over the space where darkness had reigned, and human life is seen to be no isolated phænomenon, but a part of one great cycle, wherein that which we call death is as natural as that which we call life.

The answers of the various religions of the world are all of the nature of guesses, and are unsupported by proven fact. Hinduism says that all life is an emanation from the divine existence; the creative power is ever emitting, ever reabsorbing, individual lives; it alone is; all else is *māya*, illusion. Hence the reverence shown to all living things by the Brahmin; he will not slay the lowest creature, since it shares with him the divine essence, and all the forms with which the deity clothes itself are to him sacred.

Buddhism sees life as a state of unrest, each individual life passing through a circle of changes so long as it continues imperfect; the life rises through stage after stage, or if unworthy in one stage it is degraded to a lower for its next probation; at length, becoming perfect, it passes into Nirvana, is absorbed into the All. To escape from life's unrest, from the circle of existence, is the aim of the Buddhist philosopher; the unruffled serenity of unconsciousness is his goal; the loss of the One in the All is the hope on which his world-weary eyes are fixed.

These mystic Oriental religions are profoundly Pantheistic; one life pulsing through all living things; one existence bodying itself forth in all individual existences; such is the common ground of those mighty religions which number among their adherents the vast majority of human kind. And in this magnificent conception they are in accord with modern science; the philosopher and the poet, with the far-reaching glance of genius, caught sight of that unity of all things, "the One in the Many" of Plato, a belief which it is the glory of modern science to have placed upon the sure foundation of ascertained fact.

Hebraism, a growth so curiously crude when regarded in the light of the elaborated creeds of the surrounding cults, had no idea of this grandiose view of human life. To it the value of life lay in life's pleasures. The joy of a man in a woman, not in *the* woman but in the sex alone; the delight in wine and flesh, in overbrimming treasure-bin, in "basket and store"; the pride of laden orchard and golden heads of corn; the gladness in the autumn ripening, and in the gathering for the winepress, and in the foaming torrent of the trodden fruit; all these—glad and beautiful truly as they are, but not the greatest gladness or the fairest beauty of human life—were to the Hebrew the one thing needful, the sign of the favor of the Most

High. And it was not the sheer beauty of them all, not the radiance of the glad exuberance of Nature; but rather the physical comfort and the luxurious enjoyment which they promised; the rich flavor of the purple scented draught, rather than the gracious beauty of the vine-tendrils, and the exquisite contrast of color in the deep ruby of the grape-juice and the brown and creamy ancles around which it bubbled under the rays of the setting sun.

In horrible contrast with the scenes in which he delighted stood to the Hebrew—the grave. His sensuous, or rather his sensual, delight in life gave a vivid horror to his shrinking from death, from the worm and the corruption, the silence and the gloom. Therefore Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, weeping, when he was like to die, and on his recovery he cried: “The grave cannot praise thee; death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day” (Is. xxxviii., 18, 19).

The Hebrew, ere he came into contact with the more cultured Babylonians, had no idea of immortality. To him death was the end of the individual life. The blessings and the curses of his God applied only to human life. Nothing can be plainer than the declarations of Solomon, “the wisest of men”, regarding the end of personal consciousness. “The living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished: neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun. . . . Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Eccles. ix., 5, 6, 10). “That which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place: all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is

his portion : for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him ?" (Ibid, iii., 19—22). It would be impossible to put into words a more complete negation of immortality.

After the Babylonian captivity, the books of the Hebrews change their tone, and a life after death becomes a definite object of belief. "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die ; and their departure is taken for misery, and their going from us to be utter destruction : but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded : for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself" (Wisdom iii., 1—5).

Christianity inherited this idea of personal immortality, and adding thereto the asceticism of the Essenes, it described this world as a state of probation and death as a release, as the gate of everlasting joy. "Having a desire to depart and to be with Christ ; which is far better" (Phil. i., 23). "Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God" (2 Peter iii., 12). To the true Christian life is only valuable as a preparation for death, and before the vast range of eternity human life shrivels to a span.

From these manifold religions, with their unproven assertions, their dogmatic spurious revelations, let us turn to Science, in whose "light we shall see light".

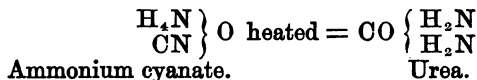
Scientifically regarded, life is not an entity, but a property ; it is not a mode of existence, but a characteristic of certain modes. Life is the result of an arrangement of matter, and when re-arrangement occurs the former result can no longer be present ; we call the result of the changed arrangement death. Life and death are two convenient words for expressing the general outcome of two arrangements of matter, one of which is always found to succeed the other.

The difficulty found in defining life is due to this fact ; properties are far harder to define than things ; thus it is harder to define color than to define rose. And the difficulty is increased when the property varies much in different cases, and all the varieties are called by the same name : the activities of the oyster and the man, of the elephant and of the rotifer, differ considerably, yet we call

the totality of these activities in each case "life". On this Dr. Maudsley well says: "It is desirable to examine into that which is generally deemed to constitute the specialty of life. Now it is certain, when we consider the vast range of vitality, from the simple life of a molecule or cell to the complex life of man, that valid objections may be made to any definition of life. If it be wide enough to comprise all forms, it will be too vague to have any value; if narrow enough to be exact, it will exclude the most lowly forms. The problem is, to investigate the conditions of the manifestation of life. A great fault in many attempted definitions has been the description of life as a resistance or complete contrast to the rest of nature, which was supposed to be continually striving to destroy it. But the elements of organic matter are not different from those of the inorganic, whence they are derived and to which they return; and the chemical and mechanical forces of these elements cannot be suspended or removed within the organism. What is special is the manner of composition of the elements; there is a concurrence of manifold substances, and they are combined or grouped together in a very complex way. Such union or grouping is, however, only a further advance upon, and by no means a contrast to, the kind of combination which is met with in inorganic bodies. Life is not a contrast to non-living nature, but a further development of it. The more knowledge advances the more plainly is it shown that there are physical and chemical processes upon which life depends. Heat is produced by combustion in the organism, as it is in the fire; starch is converted into sugar there, as it is in the chemical laboratory; urea, which is so constant a product of the body's chemistry, can be formed artificially by the chemist; and the process of excitation in a nerve, on the closure of a constant stream, appears to be analogous to the process of electrolysis, in which hydrogen is given off at the negative pole. The peculiarity of life is the complexity of combination in so small a space, the intimate operation of many simultaneously acting forces in the microcosm of the organic cell." ("Body and Mind", p. 162.)

It is perhaps a little difficult for the non-chemical reader to appreciate the extreme difference of results that may flow from mere re-arrangement of the atoms forming a substance. Even in the case of a single element, we may

have very different bodies consisting of it alone, different because of some differences of combination of its atoms; thus a lump of the element carbon may be lampblack, or graphite, or diamond, according to whether it is amorphous (without form, *i.e.* non-crystalline), or is a rhombohedral or an octohedral crystal. Yet a non-chemist would scarcely identify the carbon which sparkles on his finger in a diamond, with that in the pencil with which he writes, or that which floats down on his paper from a smoky chimney. It has been found, also, that the mere action of heat will suffice to turn into a product characteristic of animal bodies, urea, a body that can be built up from its elements. If ammonium cyanate, thus obtained, be heated, a change of arrangement of its atoms takes place, and urea is formed.



The reactions given by these bodies are quite different, yet each is composed of four atoms of hydrogen (H), one of carbon (C), one of oxygen (O), two of nitrogen (N). It is the *grouping* which causes the difference of the results. Such bodies as these are called isomerides (or sometimes metameres), and these isomerides become more numerous as the compounds forming them become more complex. Now organic compounds are, as a rule, far more complex than inorganic, and this complexity has probably, as Maudsley suggests, much to do with life. The more complex a compound is the more unstable it is, the readier to break up and recombine into new forms; in a living body this disassociation and re-association are ceaselessly going on; these rapid constant chemical changes are one of the conditions of life.

We may borrow an illustration from another science to show how result depends upon arrangement of matter. Everyone knows the exquisite iridescence of mother-of-pearl, the tender delicate hues which melt into each other, glowing with soft radiance. How different is the dull dead surface of a piece of wax. Yet take that dull black wax and mould it so closely to the surface of the mother-of-pearl that it shall take every delicate marking of the shell, and when you raise it the seven-hued glory shall smile at you from the erstwhile colorless surface. For



though it be to the naked eye imperceptible, all the surface of the mother-of-pearl is in delicate ridges and furrows, like the surface of a newly ploughed field; and when the waves of light come dashing up against the ridged surface they are broken like the waves on a shingly shore, and are flung backwards, so that they cross each other and the on-coming waves; and as every ray of white light is made up of waves of seven colors, and these waves differ in length each from the others, the fairy ridges fling them backward separately and each ray reaches the eye by itself; so that the color of the mother-of-pearl is really the spray of the lightwaves, and comes from arrangement of matter once again. Give the dull black wax the same ridges and furrows, and its glory shall differ in nothing from that of the beautiful shell.

To apply our illustration: as the color belongs to one arrangement of matter and the dead surface to another, so life belongs to some arrangements of matter, and is their resultant, while the resultant of other arrangements is death.

Once grasp this view of life, and the question "Where does the life go to at death?" becomes meaningless. A result "goes" nowhere when its cause is no longer present; it simply ceases. Raise a gas to incandescence, and the result is light; shut the gas off, and the light goes out; it does not go somewhere else, and continue as light in some other sphere; you have removed the cause, and the effect ceases. When the combinations and disassociations of compounds in the body cease to go on within certain limits, life ceases, and other phenomena set in which we class together as death.

Further, the degree of life varies with the complexity of the combination and the co-ordination of many diverse organs. The life of the vegetable differs in much from the life of the animal, when we compare together the complex organisms of the vegetable and animal kingdoms. The simple organisms of each are almost indistinguishable, and the simplest organisms which exist form the common stem of the two diverging branches of living things. The life of the single cell consists in very limited activities; how far it is "conscious" who shall say? the organism moves, feeds, and reproduces itself; it has no senses, no nerves, no muscles, no digestive or respiratory or circulatory system;

yet it lives. Stage by stage the simple is succeeded by the complex; cells unite to form tissues, first of similar cells; then differences arise in the cells from differences of external conditions; pressure, contact, action of heat and light, all help to modify the various cells, and differentiated tissues are gradually formed. These differentiated tissues perform different works, and the activities of the body increase—the life increases. Yet another complexity arises; these differentiating tissues become co-ordinated in their growth; integration proceeds step by step with differentiation; until, in the most highly evolved organism, we have the greatest complex of activities working in perfect harmony, and the totality of these forms the life of the human being. He shares “life” with the *Amæba*, but what definition can adequately include the twain?

If life be thus analysed, what is to be said of death? Death is re-arrangement; it is the disassociation of the compounds whose resultant was life; the breaking up of the complex organic products, and their gradual resolution into the simpler inorganic forms; until the living body, with its compounds of wonderful variety and intricacy, is resolved through stage after stage of ever-increasing simplicity into those ultimate fates of all living things, carbon dioxide, water, and ammonia; and then these recommence the upward building once more.

Nor are the changes we call death simultaneous over the whole body; the body does not die at once; it dies gradually, tissue after tissue. The muscles die when their semi-fluid substance begins to coagulate, and the *rigor mortis* sets in; the glandular tissues die later, and they work (and are therefore living), as every nurse knows, for some little time after “death”; hair and nails grow in similar fashion; the brain is sometimes dead ere the body is regarded as a corpse. It is the death of the heart and lungs only that is recognised as “death”; when the pulse ceases, and when the mirror held to the lips is not dulled by a breath, then the bystanders say: “He is gone”. And in this there is some truth, since with the ceasing of the circulation and with the non-supply of oxygen to the tissues chemical changes must set in in them all, which tend to disintegration. And though some few tissues may for a brief while continue to live, yet their life must needs be very limited; the nervous system cannot work without the

gaseous and solid materials brought to it by the blood, and when the nervous stimulus is withdrawn life must cease, even in the lowest tissues. But it is interesting to note that the tissues in which life persists the longest are those whose cells most resemble the lower cellular forms of living things. Retaining more independence, they do not at once die with the death of the higher tissues.

It is obvious that if the reasoning applied to life and death in the preceding pages be accepted, the word "immortality" is not predicable of any of the material arrangements there spoken of. Nor, indeed, do the believers in immortality now claim it for what they call the "perishable body". It is true that in the Apostles' Creed, accepted by the whole Catholic Church, Christians constantly repeat their belief in "the resurrection of the body", as well as in "the life everlasting". It is true that in the Visitation of the Sick, in the authorised Book of Common Prayer, the priest is directed to examine the sick person as to his belief, and to ask: "Dost thou believe in . . . the resurrection of the flesh; and everlasting life after death?" And to this the sick person answers: "All this I stedfastly believe". But it is very generally understood that these words must be taken in a non-natural sense, and that while they may have, and indeed did, represent the belief of the very ignorant primitive Christians, they are absolutely meaningless at the present day. Knowing, as we now do, what becomes of "the body", "the flesh"; knowing that it passes through various stages of "decay", that is, of disassociation and recombination into simpler and simpler forms, until water, ammonia, and carbon dioxide are all that remains; knowing that many of the intermediate products have been taken up by the roots of plants, and have been broken up and recombined in the wonderful chemical laboratory of the vegetable cells, and that these ultimate products will have the same fate; knowing that many of the vegetables thus built up have supplied food to animals—is not the churchyard a favorite pasture-ground for sheep in many country districts?—and that these animals have in their turn formed food for man, and have thus built the materials of past generations into the living tissues of the present: knowing all this, how can the Christian say with full faith: "I believe in the resurrection of the flesh"?

That some curious heredity of faith does act on the nineteenth century Christian mind—at least when that mind is episcopal—may be surmised from the ground set forth by Dr. Wordsworth, late Bishop of Lincoln, as that on which he founded his antagonism to the wholesome and decent disposal of the bodies of the dead by cremation. The Bishop alleged that the destruction of the body by fire would tend to produce doubt in the minds of the faithful touching the resurrection of the flesh; and he certainly thereby showed some obscure idea that the very body placed in the grave had some future resurrection in store for it. Yet he must most surely have known that the work wrought swiftly by the flames in the crematorium is slowly, but no less completely, wrought on the buried corpse beneath the ground; and that while the one is more manifest to the eye than is the other, the ultimate result differs not.

The later Jews and the Egyptians—from both of which nations Christianity took much of its creed—were firm believers in the absolute resurrection of the body. The curious vision of the valley of dry bones, narrated in Ezekiel xxxvii., may be taken as a partial rehearsal of the expected resurrection drama. And the Jews held the curious fancy that one very hard bone in the human skeleton—named from this belief the *os sacrum*, or holy bone—never suffered decay, but remained as a nucleus for the resurrection body; which would be formed therefrom, I presume, as Eve was formed from out a rib. The Egyptians did not trust to a single bone; they preferred to ensure the continuance of the whole body. Hence their custom of embalming the dead, so that the spirit on the resurrection morning might not fail of lodgment in its own dwelling-place. And I cannot help thinking that if there is really to be a resurrection of the flesh, the Egyptians were far more rational than modern-day Christians. For under the present plan, we use up our ancestors' bodies for the building of our own frames, as countrymen use the stones from ruined castles to make walls for their fields; and it will be no more possible for everyone to reclaim the materials which erstwhile formed his body, than it would be to build up both castle and walls at the same moment out of the same stones.

Apart, however, from any of these fables of the resurrec-

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tion of the flesh, there exists a widespread belief in the prolongation of the individual consciousness after death. Man is regarded as consisting of two things, a body and a spirit; the body is considered to be dead *per se*, and the spirit is the living agent which animates the body, inhabiting it and using it as an instrument, as a man goes into an animal in a pantomime, and gives to the inanimate piece of mechanism the gestures of the living creature. It is this spirit for which immortality is now alone claimed by the educated; it is this which "leaves the body" at death, and which, "freed from the burden of the flesh", continues to exist while its former body decays, and will, it is alleged, continue to exist for ever.

Now to this claim it might be sufficient to say, "Not proven"; for the duty of proving an allegation lies on the person who makes it, not on the one who declines to accept it without some demonstration being brought forward in its support. On this, again, Dr. Maudsley speaks with admirable sense and clearness: "The burden of proving that the *Deus ex machina* of a spiritual entity intervenes somewhere, and where it intervenes, clearly lies upon those who make the assertion, or who need the hypothesis. They are not justified in arbitrarily fabricating an hypothesis entirely inconsistent with experience of the orderly development of nature, which even postulates a domain of nature that human senses cannot take any cognisance of, and in then calling upon those who reject their assumption to disprove it" (Body and Mind, p. 162).

Let us see how far mental activity, which is the supposed domain of the "spirit", is dependent on the bodily organisation. When the babe is born, it shows no sign of mind. For a brief space hunger and repletion, cold and warmth, are its only sensations. Slowly the specialised senses begin to function; still more slowly muscular movements, at first aimless and reflex, become co-ordinated and consciously directed. There is no sign here of an intelligent spirit controlling a mechanism; there is every sign of a learning and developing intelligence, developing *pari passu* with the organism of which it is a function. As the body grows the mind grows with it, and the childish mind of the child develops into the hasty, quickly-judging, half-informed, unbalanced youthful mind of the youth; with maturity of years comes maturity of mind, and body and

mind are vigorous and in their prime; as old age comes on, and the bodily functions decay, the mind decays also, until age passes into senility, and body and mind sink into second childhood. Has the immortal spirit decayed with the organisation, or is it dwelling in sorrow bound in its "house of clay"? If this be so, the spirit must be unconscious, or else separate from the very individual whose essence it is supposed to be; for the old man does not suffer when his mind is senile, but is contented as a little child. And not only is this constant simultaneous growth and decay of body and mind to be observed, but we know that mental functions are disordered and suspended by various physical conditions. Alcohol, many drugs, fever, disorder the mind; a blow on the cranium suspends its functions, and the "spirit" returns with the surgeon's trepanning. Does the "spirit" take part in dreams? Is it absent from the idiot, from the lunatic? Is it guilty of manslaughter when the madman murders, or does it helplessly watch its own instrument performing actions at which it shudders? If it can only work here through an organism, is its nature changed in its independent life, severed from all with which it was identified? Can it, in its "disembodied state", have anything in common with its past?

Professor Clifford, in his essay on the "Unseen Universe" criticises the notion of a supposed ether which prepares for the life immortal. "Far greater, indeed, is the work which the second ether has to perform: nothing less than the fashioning of a 'spiritual body'. While our consciousness proceeds *pari passu* with molecular disturbance in our brains, this molecular disturbance agitates the first ether, which transfers a part of its energy to the second. Thus is gradually elaborated an organism in that second or unseen universe, with whose motions our consciousness is as much connected as it is with our material bodies. When the marvellous structure of the brain decays, and it can no more receive or send messages, then the spiritual body is replete with energy, and starts off through the unseen, taking consciousness with it, but leaving its molecules behind. Having grown with the growth of our mortal frame, and preserving in its structure a record of all that has befallen us, it becomes an organ of memory, linking the future with the past, and securing a personal

immortality. Can another body, then, avail to stay the hand of death, and shall man by a second nervous system escape scot free from the ruin of the first? We think not. The laws connecting consciousness with changes in the brain are very definite and precise, and their necessary consequences are not to be evaded by any such means. Consciousness is a complex thing made up of elements, a stream of feelings. The action of the brain is also a complex thing made up of elements, a stream of nerve-messages. For every feeling in consciousness there is at the same time a nerve-message in the brain. This correspondence of feeling to nerve-message does not depend on the feeling being part of a consciousness, and the nerve-message part of the action of a brain. How do we know this? Because the nervous system of animals grows more and more simple as we go down the scale, and yet there is no break that we can point to and say, 'above this there is consciousness or something like it; below there is nothing like it'. Even to those nerve-messages which do not form part of the continuous action of our brains, there must be simultaneous feelings which do not form part of our consciousness. Here, then, is a law which is true throughout the animal kingdom; nerve-message exists at the same time with feeling. Consciousness is not a simple thing, but a complex; it is the combination of feelings into a stream. It exists at the same time with the combination of nerve-messages into a stream. If individual feeling always goes with stream of nerve-messages, does it not follow that when the stream of nerve-messages is broken up, the stream of feelings will be broken up also, will no longer form a consciousness? does it not follow that when the messages themselves are broken up, the individual feelings will be resolved into still simpler elements? The force of this evidence is not to be weakened by any number of spiritual bodies. Inexorable facts connect our consciousness with this body that we know; and that not merely as a whole, but the parts of it are connected severally with parts of our brain-action. If there is any similar connexion with a spiritual body, it only follows that the spiritual body must die at the same time with the natural one. Consider a mountain rill. It runs down in the sunshine, and its water evaporates; yet it is fed by thousands of tiny tributaries, and the stream flows on. The water may

be changed again and again, yet still there is the same stream. It widens over plains, or is prisoned and fouled by towns; always the same stream; but at last

'even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere safe to sea!' X

When that happens, no drop of the water is lost, but the stream is dead."

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