

13

HAS MAN A SOUL?

BY

CHARLES BRADLAUGH.



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C. BRADLAUGH.

THE first step in this inquiry is to define what is meant by the word "soul," and the initial difficulty is that it is much easier to agree with theologians upon what is not meant than upon what is meant. Sometimes orthodox talkers seem to confuse "soul" with "life" and "mind," and they use "soul" or "spirit" as if expressing contrast with "matter." To at least prevent, as much as possible, misapprehension of our own meaning, we shall try to define each word.

Limiting here the use of the word "life" to the animal kingdom, it is defined to mean the total organic functional activity of each animal. Accepting this definition, "life" will express a variable result not only in each individual, but in the same individual in childhood, prime, or old age. Life is not an entity, it is the state of an organised body in which the organs perform their individual and collective functions. When all the organs do this efficiently we call this state health; when some of the organs fail or do too much we call this disease; when all the organs permanently cease to perform their functions, we call this death. Life, then, is a state of the body; health and disease are phases of life; death is the termination of life. Life is the word by which we describe the result of a certain collocation; but this does not imply that life can be predicated of any or all the components taken separately. By the life of an animal is meant the existence of that animal; when dead, the animal no longer exists; the substance of what was the animal thenceforth exists in other modes, but the organism has ceased. The life of each animal is as distinct from that of each other animal as is the weight or size of each animal distinct from the weight and size of any other animal; and the life of the animal no more exists after the animal has

ceased than does the weight or the size of the animal exist after its body is destroyed. The word "life" used of an oyster, a lobster, a sheep, a horse, or of a human being, expresses in each case a state distinguishable in significance. Life is the special activity of each organised being; the sum of the phenomena proper to organised bodies. George Henry Lewes says: "Life is the functional activity of an organism in relation to its medium. Every part of a living organism is vital as pertaining to life; but no part has this life when isolated; for life is the synthesis of all the parts." Theologians sometimes seek to make contrasts between living animals and what they are pleased to term dead matter. Life is not a contrast to nonliving substance, but a different condition of it.

By the word "matter," or "substance," or "nature," is intended the sum of all phenomena, actual, past, possible, and of all that is necessary for the happening of any and every phenomenon.

The word "force" includes every phase of activity. Force does not express an entity, but is the word by which we account for, or rather the word by the use of which we avoid explaining, the activity of matter, or, as G. H. Lewes would write it, the activity of the felt. He says: "All we know is feeling and changes of feeling. We class the felt apart from the changes, the one as matter, the other as force. The qualities of matter are our feelings; the properties of matter are its qualities, viewed in reference to the effects of one body on another, rather than their effects on us. Both qualities and properties are forces, when considered as effecting changes."

By the "mind" of any animal is meant the sum of the remembered perceptions of that animal, and its, his, or her, thinkings on such perceptions. Says Max Müller: "All consciousness begins with sensuous perception, with what we feel, and hear, and see." "Out of this we construct what may be called conceptual knowledge." "Thinking consists simply in addition and subtraction of percepts and concepts."

Those who maintain the doctrine of what is called the immortality of the soul, contend for the existence of a living thinking spirit, which, they say, is not the body, and which, they urge, will continue when the body has ceased. The burden of proving this "soul" rests on those who maintain and assert it. It is clear that there is no identity between life and "soul;" life commences, varies, and ceases, in accord-

ance with the growth, decay, and dissolution of the body. The orthodox contention for soul must be that its existence is independent of the body, and this shows that soul is not life. Nor is there any identity between mind and soul. All perception is dependent on the (bodily) perceptive ability and its exercise. All thought has some action of the bodily organism for its immediate antecedent and accompaniment. As the soul is not life, is not mind, and cannot be body, what is it? To call it spirit, and to leave the word spirit undefined is to do nothing. Religionists talk to me of my "soul;" that is, an individual soul continuing to exist, they say, with a continuing consciousness of personal identity after "I" am dead. But if a baby two months old dies, what consciousness of personal identity continues in such a case? Or, if an idiot from birth dies at the age of eighteen; or if a person, sane until twenty, becomes insane, lives insane until forty, and then dies: in either of these two cases what is it that is supposed to be the personal identity which continues after death? And what is meant by my "soul" living after "I" am dead? The word "I" to me represents the bodily organism, its vital and mental activities. To tell me that my body dies and that yet my life continues is a contradiction in terms. To declare that my life has ended, but that I continue to think is to affirm a like contradiction. Religionists seem to think that they avoid the difficulty, or turn it upon us, by propounding riddles. They analyse the body, and, giving a list of what they call elementary substances, they say: Can oxygen think? can carbon think? can nitrogen think? and when they have triumphantly gone through the list, they add, that as none of these by itself can think, thought is not a result of matter but is a quality of soul. This reasoning at best only amounts to declaring: "We know what body is, but we know nothing of soul; as we cannot understand how body which we do know can think, we therefore declare that it is soul which we do not know that does think." There is a still greater fault in this theological reasoning in favour of the soul, for it assumes, contrary to experience, that no quality or result can be found in a given combination which is not also discoverable in each or any of the modes, parts, atoms, or elements combined. Yet this is monstrously absurd. Sugar tastes sweet, but neither carbon, nor oxygen, nor hydrogen, separately tasted, exhibits sweetness; yet sugar is the word by which you describe a certain combination of

carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen. I contend that the word "soul," in relation to human, vital, and mental phenomena, occupies an analogous position to that which used to be occupied by such words as "demon," "genii," "gnome," "fairy," "gods," in relation to general physical phenomena.

The ability to think is never found except as an ability of animal organisation, and the ability is always found higher or lower as the organisation is higher or lower; the exercise of this ability varies in childhood, youth, prime, and old age, and is promoted or hindered by climate, food, and mode of life, yet the orthodox maintainers of soul require us to believe that the ability to think might be found without animal organisation, and might, nay will, exist independent of all vital conditions. They contend that what they call the soul will live when the human being has ceased to live; but they do not explain whether it did live before the human being began to live. The orthodox contend that as what they call the elementary substances, taken separately, do not think, therefore man without a soul cannot think, and that as man does think he must have a soul. This argument, if valid at all, goes much too far; a trout thinks, a carp thinks, a rat thinks, a dog thinks, a horse thinks, and, by parity of reasoning, all these animals should have immortal souls.

It is sometimes urged that, to deny the immortality of the soul, is to reduce man to the level of the beast, but it is forgotten that mankind are not quite on a level. Take the savage, with lower jaw projecting far in advance, and compare him with Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, or Voltaire. Take the Papuan and Plato; the Esquimaux and Confucius; and then ask whether it is possible to contend that all human beings have equal souls?

The orthodox man declares that my soul is spirit, that my body is matter, that my soul has nothing in common with my body, that it exists entirely independently of my body, that my soul lives after my body has ceased to live, that, after my body has decayed, is disintegrated, and become absorbed in, and commingled with, the elements, my soul still continues uncorrupted and unaffected. But not a shadow of proof, or even of reasonable explanation, is offered in support of any clause in this declaration. The word "spirit" is left utterly undefined. No sort of explanation is given of the *nexus* between the two alleged distinct existences, "body" and "soul." Not a trace is suggested

of "soul," otherwise than through what are admittedly material conditions. Those who allege that there is a distinct "soul" which is to live for ever should also explain whether or not this soul has always existed—*i.e.*, whether my soul existed prior to the commencement and clearly traceable growth of my body? And where? And for how long? If it did exist prior to my commencement in the womb, how was it then identifiable as my soul? If prior to my body it was not so identifiable, how will it be identifiable after my body has ceased. If the soul existed prior to my body, had it always existed? If yes, do you mean that each soul is eternal? That no soul has ever begun to be? If you argue for the eternity of the soul, you deny God as universal creator; if you contend that soul commenced or was commenced, you should also admit that it may finish or be finished. If the soul existed prior to my body, had it been waiting inactive, but ready to occupy my body? And if yes, when did the occupation commence? And was the soul always existing perfect and unimprovable? If after vitalisation the unborn child dies, what becomes of the soul? and what is it in such a case that evidences that the particular soul had ever existed? If after birth the baby dies before it thinks, though after it has breathed, where in this case is the trace of the soul? If it should be conceded that my soul only began with my body, why is it to be maintained that it will not cease with my body? If, as is pretended, my "soul" is not identifiable with my body, how is it that all intellectual manifestations are affected by my bodily condition, growth, health, decay? If the soul is immortal and immaterial, how is that temporary pressure on the brain may paralyse and prevent all mental manifestation, and that fracture by a poker or by a bullet may annihilate the possibility of any further mental activity? Henri Taine and Charles Darwin have very carefully noted for us the evidence of gradual growth of sensitive ability and of mind in children. Those who tell us of soul—which is, they say, not body, nor quality of body, nor result of body, nor influenced by body—should at least explain to us how it is that all manifestations which they say are peculiar to soul keep pace with, and are limited by, the development of body. What the orthodox claim under the word soul is really the totality of mental ability—founded in perception—and its exercise; dependent, first, on the perceptive ability of the perceiver, and, secondly, on the range of the activity of such ability. Even two individuals of similar perceptive

ability may have a very varied store of perceptions, and later perceptions in each case, even of identical phenomena, may in consequence have different values. The memory of perception, comparison of and distinguishment between perceptions, thoughts upon and concepts as to perceptions, memory, comparison and distinguishment of all or any of these, the various mental processes included in doubting, believing, reasoning, willing, &c., all these—which I contend are the consequences of vital organisation commence with it, are strengthened and weakened, and, which I maintain, cease with it—are included by the orthodox under the word “soul.” None of the orthodox, and few of the spiritualists contend that the “memory” of the rat, the cow, or the horse is to survive the decease of rat, cow, and horse. Scarcely anyone is hardy enough to maintain that the ghost of the thinking sheep persists with active thought after the slaughter-house and dinner of roast mutton. Yet if one range of animal mental ability is to be classified as immortal, why not all? Why claim immortality for the “soul” of the idiot, and deny it to the thought, memory, reason, faith, doubt, and will of the retriever? None claim immortality for the brightness of the steel when oxidation has so disfigured the surface that rust has superseded all brilliance; none claim immortality for the sweet odour of the rose when the vegetable mass emits only unpleasant smells and exhibits unsightly rottenness; none claim immortality for the colour of the beautiful lily decayed and withered away. Those who claim immortality for what they call the “soul,” should first clearly define it, and then at least try to prove that the attributes they claim for soul are not the attributes of what we know as living body.

The word “mind” describes all the possible states of consciousness of each animal; but as after its death there is no longer in that case any continuing animal, so neither is there any possibly continuing mind. But it is only in connection with the mental and vital processes that there is any shadow of attempt by theologians to in any fashion identify soul, and therefore when life has ceased and consciousness is consequently no longer, there is not even the faintest trace of ought remaining to which the word “soul” can with any reasonableness be applied from the theological standpoint. Dr. John Drysdale says: “The mind, looked at in its complete state, in its unity, personality, obedience to laws of its own, apparent spontaneity of action and controlling

power over the body, and in the total dissimilarity of all its phenomena from all known bodily and material effects, has been almost universally ascribed to the working of an immaterial substance added to organised matter. But such a substance is quite as hypothetical as the potentiality of mind lying in matter, and hence it explains nothing; whereas, if we grant the possibility of consciousness as a concomitant of certain material changes, the peculiarities of mind as an action or function require no further explanation than the conditions of those changes;" and, he adds, "it may be held proved in physiology that for every feeling, every thought, and every volition, a correlative change takes place in the nerve-matter, and, given this special change in every respect identical, a similar state of circumstances will always arise; that this process occupies time, that it requires a due supply of oxygenated blood, that it is interrupted or destroyed by whatever impairs the integrity of the nerve-matter, and, lastly, it is exhausted by its own activity and requires rest."

"If," says the same writer, "the mind is merely a function of the material organism, it must necessarily perish with it. If mind and life are a compound of matter and some diffused ethereal spiritual substance, then at death a personal continuance is equally impossible. If mind is a spirit at all, it must be a definite, indivisible piece of spiritual substance; and if naturally indestructible and immortal as the personal human individual, it must be equally so in all individuals which display mind. Now, it is too late in the day to require a single sentence in proof of the existence of mind in animals; therefore, if the possession of mind naturally involves the immortality of the soul, the latter must be shared equally with the animals who certainly also possess the conscious Ego;" and Dr. J. Drysdale maintains that mind is essentially of the same nature in animals and in man, although of higher and wider scope in the latter, and that in all cases mind is a function of organised matter and necessarily perishes when that organisation ceases.

In all animals the living brain is essential to all phases of thought. The thought-ability of any animal is always in precise proportion to the perfection and activity of the brain. The power of developing thought grows, diminishes, and ceases, the cessation always being complete when the brain ceases to perform its vital functions. If the brain is injured the thought-ability is impaired, the thinking deranged. Yet who to-day would think it wise or necessary, with evi-

dence of aberration of thought resulting from local injury, to treat it as a case of demoniacal possession?

One other difficulty in the discussion of this question is that new discoveries are not taken into account by our spiritual antagonists in estimating the value of old formulas. Two thousand three hundred years ago demonology had not yet passed into the region of fable. Socrates spoke of the soul as if it had been specially infused into the body by the gods, and declared "that the soul which resides in thy body can govern it at pleasure;" but such discoveries have since been made in physiology and psychology that were Socrates alive to-day Aristodemus might now well make answers to the old Greek sage which were then impossible. Plato, too, contended for the immortality of the human soul, but under cover of this line of reasoning he also offered proof that the world was an animal and had a like soul. Plato's orthodox admirers to-day carefully avoid Plato's presentation of the earth as an animal with an immortal soul. David Masson attributes to Auguste Comte the first open and clear adoption of a position on the soul question which rendered evasion difficult. "Previous physiological psychologists, including phrenologists, had generally shrunk from the extreme to which their opponents had said they were committed. They had kept up the time-honoured distinction between mind and body; they had used language implying a recognition of some unknown *anima*, or vital principle, concealed behind the animal organism; some of them had even been anxious to vindicate their belief in the immateriality or transcendental nature of this principle. But Comte ended all that shilly-shallying. Mind, he said, is the name for the functions of brain and nerve; mind *is* brain and nerve. This destroyed, that ceases."

In his "Enigmas of Life" William Rathbone Greg concedes that "visible and ascertainable phenomena give no countenance to the theory of a future or spiritual life." He urges that a sense of identity, a conscious continuity of the Ego, is an essential element of the doctrine, and Mr. Greg speaks of this as accounting for "the astonishing doctrine of the resurrection of the body which has so strangely and thoughtlessly found its way into the popular creed. The primitive parents or congealers of that creed—whoever they may have been—innocent of all science, and oddly muddled in their metaphysics, but resolute in their conviction that the same persons who died here should be, in very deed, the same who

should rise hereafter—systematised their anticipations into the notion that the grave should give up its actual inmates for their ordained transformation and their allotted fate. The current notion of the approaching end of the world, no doubt helped to blind them to the vulnerability, and indeed the fatal self-contradictions, of the form in which they had embodied their faith. Of course, if they had taken time to think, or if the Fathers of the Church had been more given to thinking in the rigid meaning of the word, they would have discovered that this special form rendered that faith absurd, indefensible, and virtually impossible. They did not know, or they never considered, that the buried body soon dissolves into its elements, which, in the course of generations and centuries, pass into other combinations, form part of other living creatures, feed and constitute countless organisations one after another; so that when the graves are summoned 'to give up the dead that are in them,' and the sea 'the dead that are in it,' they will be called on to surrender what they no longer possess, and what no supernatural power can give back to them. It never occurred to those creed makers, who thus took upon themselves to carnalise an idea into a fact, that for every atom that once went to make up the body they committed to the earth, there would be scores of claimants before the Great Day of Account; and that even Omnipotence could scarcely be expected to make the same component part be in two or ten places at once. The original human frames, therefore, *could not be had* when, as supposed, they would be wanted." And in his "Creed of Christendom" he writes: "Appearances all testify to the reality and permanence of death; a fearful onus of proof lies upon those who contend that these appearances are deceptive. When we interrogate the vast universe of organisation, we see not simply life and death, but gradually growing life and gradually approaching death. After death, all that we have ever *known* of man is gone; all we have ever *seen* of him is dissolved into its component elements; it does not *disappear* so as to leave us at liberty to imagine that it may have gone to exist elsewhere, but is actually used up as materials for other purposes." There is one alleged "indication of immortality" which Mr. Greg twice repeats, and to which we will offer a word of reply. His statement is as follows:

"I refer to that *spontaneous*, irresistible, and, perhaps, nearly universal, feeling we all experience on watching, just after

death, the body of someone we have intimately known ; the conviction, I mean (a sense, a consciousness, an impression *which you have to fight against if you wish to disbelieve or shake it off*) that the form lying there is *not* the Ego you have loved. It does not produce the effect of that person's personality. You miss the Ego though you have the frame. The visible Presence only makes more vivid the sense of actual Absence. Every feature, every substance, every phenomenon is there, and is unchanged. You have seen the eyes as firmly closed, the limbs as motionless, the breath almost as imperceptible, the face as fixed and expressionless, before, in sleep or in trance, without the same peculiar sensation. The impression made is indefinable, and is not the result of any conscious process of thought—that that body, quite unchanged to the eye, is not, and never was your friend—the Ego you were conversant with ; and that his or her individuality was not the garment before you *plus* a galvanic current ; that, in fact, the Ego you knew once and seek still, *was not that—is not there*. And if not *there*, it must be *elsewhere* or *nowhere* ; and 'nowhere,' I believe, modern science will not suffer us to predicate of either force or substance that once has been."

Undoubtedly the dead body is not the living human being you loved. It has ceased to live. Every phenomenon is not there unchanged, the whole of the vital phenomena are wanting ; there is a complete change so far as organic functional activity is concerned. Even the body itself is not quite unchanged to the eye. There is in most cases, and especially to skilled vision, an easily detectible difference between a living man and a corpse. To say that the Ego is not there, and if not there must be elsewhere, is to use an absurd phrase. Take an ordinary drinking-glass and crush it into powder, or shatter it into fragments, the drinking-glass is not there, nor is it elsewhere ; the combination which made up drinking-glass no longer exists. Ego does not denote body only, it denotes living body with personal characteristics. Take a bright steel blade, let the surface be oxidised, and the brightness is no longer there, nor is it elsewhere ; it is only that the conditions which were resultant in brightness no longer exist.

It used to be the fashion to argue at one time as if the majority of, if not the whole of, the human race accepted, without doubt, the dogma of the immortality of the soul ; but such a contention is to-day utterly impossible. Strauss

Büchner, Haeckel, Clifford, and a host of others, take ground as representatives of thousands of heterodox Europeans, and even in the pulpit itself orthodoxy is suspect. The Reverend Edward White declares the "natural eternity of souls as a positive dogma to be destitute of all evidence from nature or revelation," and he refers to "scientific biologists of the first rank, who, after careful study of the phenomena of brain-production and mind-evolution throughout living nature, and of the phenomena of waste and destruction in unfinished organisms, declare it to be the height of absurdity to maintain" this immortality doctrine; and Mr. White reminds us that 480 millions of Buddhists on the continent of Asia all believe in the "extinction of individual being." It is only fair, however, to add here that scholars still dispute as to whether or not "nirvana" should be read as meaning annihilation.

A quotation from Dr. Henry Maudsley may fitly terminate this brief essay: "To those who cannot conceive that any organisation of matter, however complete, should be capable of such exalted functions as those which are called mental, is it really more conceivable that any organisation of matter can be the mechanical instrument of the complex manifestations of an immaterial mind? It is strangely overlooked by many who write on this matter, that the brain is not a dead instrument, but a living organ, with functions of a higher kind than those of any other bodily organ, insomuch as its organic nature and structure far surpass those of any other organs. What, then, are those functions if they are not mental? No one thinks it necessary to assume an immaterial liver behind the hepatic structure, in order to account for its functions. But so far as the nature of nerve and the complex structure of the cerebral convolutions exceed in dignity the hepatic elements and structure, so far must the material functions of the brain exceed those of the liver. Men are not sufficiently careful to ponder the wonderful operations of which matter is capable, or to reflect on the changes effected by it which are continually before their eyes. Are the properties of a chemical compound less mysterious essentially because of the familiarity with which we handle them? Consider the seed dropped into the ground; it swells with germinating energy, bursts its integuments, sends upwards a delicate shoot, which grows into a stem, putting forth in due season its leaves and flowers. And yet all these processes are operations of matter, for it is not thought

necessary to assume an immaterial or spiritual plant which effects its purposes through the agency of the material structure which we observe. Surely there are here exhibited properties of matter wonderful enough to satisfy anyone of the powers that may be inherent in it. Are we, then, to believe that the highest and most complex development of organic structure is not capable of even more wonderful operations? Would you have the human body, which is a microcosm containing all the forms and powers of matter, organised in the most delicate and complex manner, to possess lower powers than those forms of matter exhibit separately in nature? Trace the gradual development of the nervous system through the animal series, from its first germ to its most complex evolution, and let it be declared at what point it suddenly loses all its inherent properties as living structure, and becomes the mere mechanical instrument of a spiritual entity. In what animal, or in what class of animals, does the immaterial principle abruptly intervene, and supersede the agency of matter, becoming the entirely distinct cause of a similar, though more exalted, order of phenomena? The burden of proving that the *deus ex machinâ* 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 a 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."

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