

Ancient Opinions Upon Psychic Bodies

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[Page 15] It must be confessed that modern Spiritualism falls very short of the ideas formerly suggested by the sublime designation which it has assumed. Chiefly intent upon recognising and putting forward the phenomenal proofs of a future existence, it concerns itself little with speculations on the distinction between matter and spirit, and rather prides itself on having demolished Materialism without the aid of metaphysics. Perhaps a Platonist might say that the recognition of a future existence is consistent with a very practical and even dogmatic materialism, but it is rather to be feared that such a materialism as this would not greatly disturb the spiritual or intellectual repose of our modern phenomenalists. ["I am afraid", says Thomas Taylor, in his Introduction to the *Phaedo*, "there are scarcely any at the present day who know that it is one thing for the soul to be separated from the body, and another for the body to be separated from the soul, and that the former is by no means a necessary consequence of the latter"] Given the consciousness, with its sensibilities safely housed in the psychic body, which demonstrably survives the physical carcass, and we are like men saved from shipwreck, who are for the moment thankful and content, not giving thought whether they are landed on a hospitable shore, or a barren rock, or on an island of cannibals. It is not, of course, intended that this "hand to mouth" immortality is sufficient for the many thoughtful minds whose activity gives life and progress to the movement, but that it affords a relief which most people feel when in an age of doubt they make the discovery that they are undoubtedly to live again. To the question, "How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?" modern Spiritualism, with its empirical methods, is not adequate to reply. Yet, long before Paul suggested it, it had the attention of the most celebrated schools of philosophy, whose speculations on the subject, however little they may seem to be verified, ought not to be without interest to us, who, after all, are still in the infancy of a Spiritualist revival.

It would not be necessary to premise, but for the frequency with which the phrase occurs, that the "spiritual body" is a contradiction in terms. The office of body is to relate spirit to an objective world. By platonic writers it is usually termed *okhema* — "vehicle". It is the medium of [Page 16] action and also of sensibility. In this philosophy the conception of soul was not simply, as with us, the immaterial subject of consciousness. How warily the interpreter has to tread here, every one knows who has dipped even superficially into the controversies among the Platonists themselves. All admit the distinction between the rational and the irrational part or principle, the latter including, first, the sensibility, and, secondly, the plastic, or that power which in obedience to its sympathies enables the soul to attach itself to, and to organize into a suitable body, those substances of the universe to which it is most congruous. It is more difficult to determine whether Plato or his principal followers recognized in the rational soul or *nous* a distinct and separable entity — that which is sometimes discriminated as "the Spirit". Dr. Henry More, no mean authority, repudiates this interpretation. "There can be nothing more monstrous", he says, "than to

make two souls in man, the one sensitive, the other rational, really distinct from one another, and to give the name of Astral Spirit to the former; when there is in man no astral spirit save the plastic of the soul itself, which is always inseparable from the rational. Nor upon any other account can it be called astral, but as it is liable to that corporeal temperament which proceeds from the stars, or rather from any material causes in general, as not being yet sufficiently united with the divine body — that vehicle of divine virtue or power". So he maintains that the Kabalistic three souls — *Nephesh, Ruach, Neshama* — originate in a misunderstanding of the true Platonic doctrine, which is that of a threefold "vital congruity". These correspond to the three degrees of bodily existence, or to the three *vehicles*, the terrestrial, the aerial, and the ethereal. The latter is the *augoeides* — the luciform vehicle of the purified soul whose irrational part has been brought under complete subjection to the rational. The aerial is that in which the great majority of mankind find themselves at the dissolution of the terrestrial body, and in which the incomplete process of purification has to be undergone during long ages of preparation for the soul's return to its primitive ethereal state. For it must be remembered that the pre-existence of souls is a distinguishing tenet of this philosophy, as of the Kabala. The soul has "sunk into matter". From its highest original state the revolt of its irrational nature has awakened and developed successively its *vital congruities* with the regions below passing, by means of its Plastic, first into the aerial and afterwards into the terrestrial condition. Each of these regions teems also with an appropriate population which never passes, like the human soul, from one to the other — "gods", "demons", and, "animals". [The allusion here is to those beings of the several kingdoms of the elements which we Theosophists, following after the Kabalists, have called the "Elementals"] As to the duration, "the shortest of all is that of the terrestrial vehicle. In the aerial, the soul may inhabit, as they define, many ages, and in the ethereal forever". Speaking [Page 17] of the second body, Henry More says: "The soul's astral vehicle is of that tenuity that itself can as easily pass the smallest pores of the body as the light does glass, or the lightning the scabbard of a sword without tearing or scorching of it". And again: "I shall make bold to assert that the soul may live in an aerial vehicle as well as in the ethereal, and that there are very few that arrive to that high happiness as to acquire a celestial vehicle immediately upon their quitting the terrestrial one, that heavenly chariot necessarily carrying us in triumph to the greatest happiness the soul of man is capable of, which would arrive to all men indifferently, good or bad, if the parting with this earthly body would suddenly mount us into the heavenly, when by a just Nemesis the souls of men that are not heroically virtuous will find themselves restrained within the compass of this caliginous air, as both reason itself suggests, and the Platonists have unanimously determined". Thus, also, the most thorough-going and probably the most deeply versed in the doctrines of the master among modern Platonists, Thomas Taylor (Introduction, *Phaedo*). "After this our divine philosopher informs that the pure soul will after death return to pure and eternal natures; but that the impure soul, in consequence of being imbued with terrene affections, will be drawn down to a kindred nature, and be invested with a gross vehicle capable of being seen by the corporeal eye. [This is the Hindu theory of nearly every one of the Aryan philosophies] For while a propensity to body remains in the soul, it causes her to attract a certain vehicle to herself, either of an aerial nature or composed from the vapours and spirit of her terrestrial body, or which is recently collected from the surrounding air; for, according to the arcana of the Platonic philosophy, between an ethereal body which is simple and immaterial, and is the eternal connate vehicle of the soul, and a terrene body which is material and composite, and of short duration, there is an aerial body which is material indeed, but simple and of a more extended duration; and in this body the unpurified soul dwells for a long while after its exit from hence, till this pneumatic vehicle being dissolved, it is again invested with a composite body; while, on the contrary, the purified soul immediately ascends to the celestial regions with its ethereal vehicle alone." "Always it is the disposition of the soul that determines the quality of its body. "However the soul be affected", says Porphyry (translated by Cudworth), "so does it always find a body suitable and agreeable to its present disposition, and therefore to the purged soul does naturally accrue a body that comes next to immateriality, that is, an ethereal one". And the same author: "The soul is never quite naked of all body, but has always some body or other joined with it, suitable and agreeable to its

present disposition (either a purer or impurer one). But that at its first quitting this gross earthly body, the spirituous body which accompanieth it (as its vehicle) must needs go away fouled and incrassated with the vapours and steams thereof, till the soul afterwards by degrees purifying itself, this becometh at length a dry [Page 18] splendour, which hath no misty obscurity nor casteth any shadow". Here, it will be seen, we lose sight of the specific difference of the two future vehicles: the ethereal is regarded as a sublimation of the aerial. This, however, is opposed to the general consensus of Plato's commentators. Sometimes the ethereal body, or *augoeides*, is appropriated to the rational soul, or spirit, which must then be considered as a distinct entity, separable from the lower soul. Philoponus, a Christian writer, says "that the rational soul, as to its energy, is separable from all body; but the irrational part, or life thereof, is separable only from this gross body, and not from all body whatsoever, but hath, after death, a spirituous or airy body, in which it acteth — this I say, is a true opinion which shall afterwards be proved by us The irrational life of the soul hath not all its being in this gross earthly body, but remaineth after the soul's departure out of it, having for its vehicle and subject the spirituous body, which itself is also compounded out of the four elements, but receiveth its denomination from the predominant part, to wit, air, as this gross body of ours is called earthy from what is most predominant therein" (Cudworth, *Intell. Syst.*). From the same source we extract the following: "Wherefore these ancients say that impure souls, after their departure out of this body, wander here up and down for a certain space in their spirituous, vaporous and airy body, appearing about sepulchers and haunting their former habitation. For which cause there is great reason that we should take care of living well, as also of abstaining from a fouler and grosser diet; these ancients telling us likewise that this spirituous body of ours, being fouled and incrassated by evil diet, is apt to render the soul in this life also more obnoxious to the disturbances of passion. They further add that there is something of the plantal or plastic life, also exercised by the soul, in those spirituous or airy bodies after death; they being nourished, too, though not after the same manner as those gross earthy bodies of ours are here, but by vapours, and that not by parts or organs, but throughout the whole of them (as sponges), they imbibing everywhere those vapours. For which cause those who are wise will in this life also take care of using a thinner and dryer diet, that so that spirituous body (which we have also at this present time within our proper body) may not be clogged and incrassated, but attenuated. Over and above which, those ancients made use of catharms, or purgations, to the same end and purpose also. For as this earthy body is washed by water, so is that spirituous body cleansed by cathartic vapours — some of these vapours being nutritive, others purgative. Moreover, these ancients further declared concerning this spirituous body that it was not organized, but did the whole of it in every part exercise all the functions of sense, the soul hearing, seeing, and perceiving all sensibles by it everywhere. For which cause Aristotle himself affirmeth in his *Metaphysics* that there is properly but one sense and one sensory. He by this one sensory meaneth the spirit, in subtle airy body, in which the sensitive power doth all of it, through the [Page 19] whole, immediately apprehend all variety of sensibles. And if it be demanded to how it comes to pass that this spirit becomes organized in sepulchers, and most commonly of human form, but sometimes in the forms of other animals, to this these ancients replied that their appearing so frequently in human form proceeded from their being incrassated with evil diet, and then, as it were, stamped upon with the form of this exterior ambient body in which they are, as crystal is formed and coloured like to those things which it is fastened in, or reflects the image of them. And their having sometimes other different forms proceedeth from the phantastic power of the soul itself, which can at pleasure transform the spirituous body into any shape. For being airy, when it is condensed and fixed, it becometh visible, and again invisible and vanishing out of sight when it is expanded and rarified". (Proem in Aristotle, "De Anima".)

And Cudworth says, "Though those spirits or ghosts had certain supple bodies which they could so far condense as to make them sometimes visible to men, yet is it reasonable enough to think that they could not constipate or fix them into such a firmness, grossness, and solidity as that of flesh and bone as to

continue therein, or at least not without such difficulty and pain as would hinder them from attempting the same. Notwithstanding which it is not denied that they may possibly sometimes make use of other solid bodies, moving and acting them, as in that famous story of Phlegon's, when the body vanished not as other ghosts used to do, but was left a dead carcase behind".

In all these speculations the *Anima Mundi* plays a conspicuous part. It is the source and principle of all animal souls, including the irrational soul of man. But in man, who would otherwise be merely analogous to other terrestrial animals, this soul participates in a higher principle, which tends to raise and convert it to itself. To comprehend the nature of this union, or hypostasis, it would be necessary to have mastered the whole of Plato's philosophy as comprised in the "Parmenides" and the "Timaeus" ; and he would dogmatize rashly who without this arduous preparation should claim Plato as the champion of an unconditional immortality. Certainly in the "Phaedo", the dialogue popularly supposed to contain all Plato's teaching on the subject, the immortality allotted to the impure soul is of a very questionable character, and we should rather infer from the account there given that the human personality, at all events, is lost by successive immersions "into matter". The following passage from Plutarch will at least demonstrate the antiquity of notions which have recently been mistaken for fanciful novelties: " Every soul hath some portion of *nous* — reason, — a man cannot be a man without it; but as much of each soul as is mixed with flesh and appetite is changed, and through pain and pleasure becomes irrational. Every soul does not mix herself after one sort: some plunge themselves into the body, and so in this life their whole frame is corrupted by appetite and passion; others are mixed as to some part, but the purer part still remains without the body. It is not drawn down into the body [Page 20] but it swims above, and touches the extremest part of the man's head; it is like a cord to hold up and direct the subsiding part of the soul, as long as it proves obedient and is not overcome by the appetites or the flesh. The part that is plunged into the body is called the soul; but the incorruptible part is called the *nous*, and the vulgar think it is within them, as they likewise imagine the image reflected from a glass to be in that glass. But the more intelligent, who know it to be without, call it a Daemon". And in that learned work, "Isis Unveiled", we have two Christian authorities, Irenaeus and Origen, cited for a like distinction between spirit and soul in such a manner as to show that the former must necessarily be regarded as separable from the latter. In the distinction itself there is of course no novelty for the most moderately well-informed. It is insisted upon in many modern works, among which maybe mentioned Heard's "Tricotomy of Man" and Green's "Spiritual Philosophy" ; the latter being an exposition of Coleridge's opinion on this and cognate subjects. But the difficulty of regarding the two principles as separable in fact as well as in logic arises from the sense, if it is not the illusion, of personal identity. That we are partible, and that one part only is immortal, the non-metaphysical mind rejects with the indignation which is always encountered by a proposition which is at once distasteful and unintelligible. Yet, perhaps, it is not a greater difficulty (if, indeed, it is not the very same) than that hard saying which troubled Nicodemus and which yet has been the key-note of the mystical religious consciousness ever since. This, however, is too extensive and deep a question to be treated in this article, which has for its object chiefly to call attention to the distinctions introduced by ancient thought into the conceptions of body as the instrument or "vehicle" of soul. That there is a correspondence between the spiritual condition of man and the medium of his objective activity every spiritualist will admit to be probable, and it may well be that some light is thrown on future states by the possibility or the manner of spirit-communication with this one.