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Lesson Nine: The Sovereignty of the Spirit

We are aware of two realities in our being: one the external compound that is our body, fully accessible to empirical science, and the other, consisting of thought and perception, love and affection, hatred, and conscience. These cannot be considered as a mere series of sensory needs or bodily reactions; they are beyond the scope of empirical science and cannot be measured by material criteria.

They represent realities that are both different from the material body and superior to it, being capable of dominating it. For example, a person might be ready to die in the course of a hunger strike in order not to suffer the shame of servility at the very same time that biological forces are destroying his body and urging him to surrender and eat. In other circumstances, too, a person may be hungry, but he continues to fast.

Here we have a perfectly concrete and observable case of an iron will sacrificing the body for the sake of an idea, an abstract ideal. This is something that cannot be explained by the logic of materialism.

Those who claim that man is simply a collection of physiological and material functions have to provide a serious and logical explanation of cases such as this. If I am nothing more than my material form, how is it possible that I should command my body and make it obey me?

The answer, of course, is that there is a reality separate from the body and empowered over it. The fact that the will can issue commands and establish a kind of inner dominion over man's various instincts and bodily aspects is a clear proof for the existence in man of a sublime, supramaterial element from which his will draws its power.

The duality of these realities in man, and the dominance exercised by one of them over the other, points us to the existence of something higher than matter. The Noble Qur'an proclaims:

"*By the soul and the One Who created it in perfection and inspired in it knowledge of good and evil deeds*" (91:7-8).

This means that man has been adorned with an essence which possesses perception and motion: it has

perception because it has received inspiration, and it has motion because it is the origin of a series of deeds oriented either to piety and virtue or to corruption.

What is this essence that is qualified by awareness and ability?

None of the parts of man's earthly body possess these properties. There must therefore be an essence which is autonomous and separate from the body and yet accompanies it while possessing the attributes just mentioned.

Matter reacts in a uniform and predictable way to external stimuli. Water solidifies when confronted with extreme cold; metals expand when confronted with extreme heat these reactions are natural and unchanging. But man is capable of manifesting the most varied and even contradictory reactions, and this is in itself a proof that the powerful spirit and will of man are non-material, for they transcend the properties of matter.

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The process whereby perception takes place shows that there are two factors involved: the means of perception (the eye, for example) and the faculty of perception. It is a law of physics that you can never perceive a motion while you are yourself a part of that motion; the motion can be perceived only outside itself.

It is possible for you to perceive a moving object only when you stand, as it were, on a platform that is outside the sphere of the motion. This enables you to see the passage of things in front of you and to sense the motion of time. It is not possible for man to sit down on the ground and measure the rotation of the earth, nor can he stand on the moon and measure its rotation. Motion is visible only from outside itself.

So if our faculty of perception were not located outside the range of unceasing motion, we would never be able to perceive motion and the passage of time; the fact that we are able to perceive the passage of time is a clear proof that our faculty of perception is beyond the reach of time.

If, for example, our faculty of perception were to change and to move each instant, in keeping with the perpetual motion of time, we would be unable to perceive the passage of time, for our faculty of perception would be shattered into disconnected fragments.

So since we perceive time, our faculty of perception must exist outside the scope of time and transcend it.

This distinguishes our faculty of perception from our bodily form, and it might be said, indeed, that one half of the reality of man becomes worn out, old and exhausted, while the other half escapes dissolution in the whirlpool of time and pursues its own life.

The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, said:

"O people, we have been created to live eternally, not to perish. However, you will change your place of residence, and move forward from one stage to another. Make provision, then, for the world to which you will go after this transient abode and in which you will reside eternally." (*Bihar al-Anwar,* Vol. V, pt. 2, p. 182)

The Great Storehouse of Mental Images

The existence of a specific relationship between a container and a thing contained is one of the properties of matter; a larger thing can never be made to coincide entirely with a smaller one.

If for example we stand on some great elevation, and gaze over the vast plains that surround us, with all their trees, verdure, and birdlife, their hills and their vales, their great rocks piled up on top of each other, and if we then try to picture all these items in our minds, they will appear before our spirit, our inner vision, like a great picture, with all the attributes they possess.

Here we may ask whether all these varied images, with the extensiveness that they possess, both in the external world and in our minds, are stored up in our brains, with their very small and delicate cells?

Does such limited matter have the capacity to accommodate precisely and without any diminution so vast a series of images?

Without doubt, reason and logic compel us to answer in the negative, for anyone can understand that it is impossible to make a larger object conform while retaining its exact quantity to a smaller one. For is it not the case that the container must either be larger than the object contained or at least equal to it? It is impossible, for example, to typeset on a single small sheet all the contents of a thousand-page book.

We can easily picture in our minds a big city with all of its buildings, streets, parks, cars and other vehicles, and population. But basing ourselves on the principle that "the large cannot be made to conform to the small," we must conclude that such extraordinarily large mental images cannot be accommodated in the minute cells of our brain; for it self-evident that such conformity can take place only when the object contained is equal in size to the container or smaller than it. In addition, our capacity of perception possesses attributes and properties that do not correspond to those of matter, and it cannot therefore be dependent simply on a series of physical relationships that accompany its functioning.

The only conclusion open to us is, then, that in the formation of mental images we possess a dimension of existence that is additional to certain physical and chemical prerequisites, a dimension that possesses, moreover, properties which transcend those of our material form. One of those properties is precisely the ability to accommodate vast images within itself, and another is the ability to preserve and maintain the images that are perceived.

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The materialists say: “These images are like a voluminous book stored up in our brain on microfilm; when necessary, the brain displays the contents of the book in reduced form, and if man wishes to obtain the true dimensions of the object in question, he magnifies the images to restore to them their true size. It is the reduced images that are present in the brain cells.”

However, one question remains: where in the brain or the nervous system do these magnified images come into being? Either one must negate the possibility of these large images occurring in the mind or one must find a suitable location for them there. Now no one can deny the existence of those images, and if what we call “the spirit” be purely material, with perception being synonymous to the activity of the brain and the nervous system, it is impossible for the small cells of the brain to accommodate such large images. They would need a location proportionate to their size, while all the microfilm is capable of doing is to accommodate small, reduced images.

In order to clarify the whole matter, one must therefore accept the existence of an element not susceptible to sense observation. It is this non-material entity that is capable of creating and observing large mental images, after the brain and the nervous system have accomplished certain preliminary functions. Once we accept this, the whole problem is solved and we have no need to resort to inadequate explanations.

Furthermore, when we compare mental to material phenomena, we must acknowledge that a significant difference exists between them; they have not the slightest resemblance to each other with respect to properties and qualities.

Matter is constantly accompanied by a series of general properties such as the assumption of different forms, something which is not true of mental images. This disparity of mental and material phenomena is another indication of the autonomy and non-material nature of the spirit.

The Bed of Memory

Another aspect of material existents is their subjection to gradual change within time and space, for anything subject to development and gradual change necessarily requires a certain space, and motion in itself creates time. The ineluctable fate of all material existents is therefore to waste away and perish in the course of time.

Again, it is not possible to think of a single material existent that is not capable of division into constituent parts, whether that division takes place by means of special instruments or by means of some other cause.

None of this holds true of the phenomena of the spirit.

We build vast structures in our minds without needing time. All kinds of faces, forms, colors, names, numbers, words, and indications are stored up in the storehouse of our minds without being confused with each other and without encroaching on each other.

The mind perceives and records all kinds of scenes and images, all kinds of events, great and small; it then records them and places them in its archive. Even things that we sometimes think we have forgotten are not in fact erased from our minds; they remain in place and come again to the fore through the action of certain factors.

What secret archive is hidden in the brain capable of storing all these figures, inscriptions and images, in such a way that they do not mingle with each other and can instantaneously leap forth in the mind like a flash of lightning?

Where is the reservoir of these mental images, which are like a bewildering riddle? Is the materialistic interpretation realistic; does it do justice to the facts of the matter? Are our memories material accidents, impressions made on our brain cells? Do the cells and arteries of the brain record events and occurrences, and when we remember something, does the mind simply hand over, carefully and faithfully, the images that it stores?

The Materialist Interpretation Contradicts Reality

When we perceive a certain image we compare it with images previously perceived and then judge whether or not it is identical to them. When we are engaged in this, is not some reality at work as other than the material reality of our body? How can the brain cells undertake the task of comparison? How can they decide that two images are identical, that the second one seen is the same as the first? If we locate judgement in the brain, how can we understand the matter correctly?

Were the brain to be the true location of memory, the memories that are dependent on the brain cells would disappear as the cells themselves decay and their content vanishes.

The material that makes up our brain cells changes numerous times in the course of a single lifetime, but the faces of friends and acquaintances from our childhood remain intact and unchanged in the storehouse of our mind.

If all the contents of our brain were to be changed, including knowledge acquired in the past, in conjunction with the replacement of old brain cells by new, all access to past knowledge would be impossible.

New perceptions could only be similar to past perceptions, not identical with them, whereas our perceptions of matters previously perceived constitutes only a renewal of memory, not a renewal of knowledge. To put it more generally, if our mental concepts were material in nature, it would be impossible to gain access by way of memory to knowledge previously acquired.

When we memorize a few lines of poetry or a page from a book, how does the memorization occur in our brain cells? By what method can we assume this process to take place? When we forget something we have memorized, is a certain imprint effaced from our brain cells?

If the memory in question is indeed destined to vanish and disappear, how is it that we can recall it by means of careful reflection? If, on the contrary, the imprint left on our brain cells is immune to destruction, why can we not find it in our minds?

How can we explain the fact that after forgetting something we have memorized, we sometimes hear a sentence from the book or a line from the poem in question, and then the remaining sentences or the rest of the poem spring back to mind. If the imprint left by the book or the poem had been completely effaced from the tablet of our brain, how can it suffice to hear part of what we have memorized for the rest to come back to our mind? But, on the other hand, if the imprint left by memory is not effaced and remains secure in its place, what is the meaning of forgetting?

The celebrated scholar Henri Bergson has the following to say:

"When we examine the observations we make it becomes clear to us that physiological explanations of memory are inadequate; we cannot possibly attribute memorization to the brain.

"Our observations also make it plain that it is quite possible to discern the traces of the continuous expansion of memory, beginning from the point at which the memory mobilizes itself to put forth the effort needed for its function at that instant and ending when the memory lays out the past in the mind in imperishable form.

"We can compare the memory to a pyramid; we begin our examination of its functioning at its apex and work our way down to its base. We must be aware that only the apex of the pyramid is located in matter; as soon as we move away from the apex, in the direction of the base, we begin to enter a different realm.

"What is this realm? We can call it that of the reflective or meditative spirit, for we can clearly sense the existence in this world of a subtle essence or spirit that is independent of the body. Given the fact that an important part of the functions of the spirit are independent of the body even in this world, it is definite that the spirit as such must enjoy permanence after death." (*Du Sarchishma-yi Akhlaq va Din,* pp. 388-389)

No equation can be established between damage to the brain on the one hand and the phenomenon of forgetting on the other hand. If there were such an equation, every lessening or defect in a given memory would bring about a corresponding lessening or defect in the brain cell to which it is connected.

If certain brain cells are damaged, a person begins to experience difficulty in speaking, but his memories are preserved intact. When the brain suffers serious damage as the result of infection, the equilibrium

between memory and the brain is disrupted. Once forgetting sets in, it follows a fixed and regular pattern; the patient forgets first the names of his friends and those around him and then, in later stages, the words used to designate various activities.

Here no relationship is to be seen between damage to the brain on the one hand, and the decline over time in clarity and quantity of memory on the other. According to the logic and analysis of the materialists, there ought to be a direct and proportional relationship between the lessening of memory and the damage suffered by the brain.

All of this shows that the brain is only a means and an instrument for the retention of memories, and that the function of the brain with respect to memory is restricted to the transfer of mental images to verbal form. In other words, it establishes a link between the world of the spirit and the world of matter.

In the acquisition of memories and mental images we need therefore something more elevated than our brain cells, which is none other than our spirit, which is non-material, independent of matter, and our thoughts, images, and memories are all governed by its laws.

Professor Gayton, says in his book on physiology, which is regarded as a reliable source on the subject:

“The most complex problem that confronts us in our study of awareness, thought, memory and retention is that we do not know the nervous mechanism of a single thought.”

The Indivisibility of the Acts of the Spirit

Judgements and affirmations are indivisible. They do not have any location within the cells of the brain, nor can they be divided in either primary or secondary manner. This is because our perceptions and affirmations are dependent on a non-material entity.

For example, when we say that such-and-such a bird is green, the bird itself is certainly divisible, and likewise its greenness with respect to its locus in the bird. But our affirmation of the greenness of the bird is indivisible.

If we regard thought and reflection as the exclusive product of matter, affirmation together with the other acts of the spirit ought to be capable of division, whereas we clearly see that this is not the case. The conclusion can therefore be drawn that since one of the functions of the spirit thought and reflection does not possess the material attribute of divisibility and is therefore non-material, so too the spirit, the organ from which thought arises, must also necessarily also be non-material. The non-materiality of thought thus serves as an indication of the non-materiality of the spirit.

Materialists are submerged in their illusory deductions and take delight in denying all belief in the existence of supranatural entities. All their arguments for such vital phenomena of life, awareness and perception are based on unprovable hypotheses, and they can, in any event be refuted with firm and

convincing arguments.

Theories such as those they advance cannot remove the veil from the mysteries of life, nor can they solve the knotty problems we confront. Empirical science has in fact demonstrated its inability to explain the nature of the phenomena we have been discussing.

The whole philosophical scheme of materialism, with its inability to answer the questions we have raised, ought to be jettisoned just like coins that have lost their currency. As human thought and awareness progress and man frees himself from narrow and mono-dimensional thinking, materialism will in fact be cast on the refuse heap which is the final destination of all obsolete and discredited beliefs.

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