

# Meaning of Death

## Part 1 of 3

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There is another subject on which I would like to produce some comment. This is the subject of the meaning of death and the process considered both as a physical one and a psychical one.

A human being, as we know him or her, upon this plane of being is classified as a primate and defined as “a plantigrade featherless biped mammal of the genus *Homo*.”<sup>1</sup> This entity is sensuously determinate, can be seen and heard, felt, and otherwise cognized. When death supervenes, this animate being ceases to be animate. The life-sustaining functions cease—there is no more breath and the heart ceases to beat. Also, there is none of the electrical impulses present which constitute the evidence of life in the brain, and this can be determined by an electroencephalograph. What we see is an inanimate body which proceeds to disintegrate, and will ultimately, if left to itself, disintegrate and leave only a skeletal remains which ultimately disintegrates more slowly.

But the entity that we knew is not only a sensuously apparent physical body. It is also a psychical entity; in other words, an entity that has volitions, feelings, and thoughts. What we ordinarily know in this world about death is that which happens to the physical body. We know that we have lost contact with the intelligence of the former friend or associate. We can no longer communicate with it. But what has happened to the psychical entity, the being that had volitions, feelings, and thoughts, and which had communicated with us during lifetime? This is the other side of death. Thus, we may speak of death as a double event: death in the physical sense and death in the psychical sense. The physical side of death is all that, ordinarily, we know about death. What happens in the psychical sense? That is the question of greatest importance to us.

As a basic orientation to the problem of death, we should first repudiate the popular view that death is the opposite of life. On the contrary, death is the opposite of birth. This shift in point of view changes the whole meaning of the transformation which is called death. Whenever there is a birth, there is also a death. This is illustrated by the process which we ordinarily call birth. It is birth with respect to a certain order of experience upon this particular plane on which we now live, but at the same time it is a death to the intrauterine state inside the mother’s womb. In other words, there is no birth without a corresponding death, and we may further infer that there is no death without a corresponding birth. Birth and death, thus, are two modes in the total meaning of life. Life and death are not opposites; birth and death are opposite phases in the total process of life.

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<sup>1</sup> William Dwight Whitney, ed., *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, vol. 5 (New York: Century Co., 1911), 3601: “. . . a featherless plantigrade biped mammal of the genus *Homo*.”

In certain forms of Oriental thought on the subject of life, the total process is viewed as consisting of two types of movement: one is called *pranic* and the other *upadanic*. The *pranic* force is one that tends to make life more abundant—a tendency for life to grow. The *upadanic* force is that which tends to tear down, to disintegrate. In Western science there are terms that have a corresponding meaning, namely, that of an *anabolic* process and a *catabolic* process. These processes continue in the life of any organism. In a newborn infant, not only is the anabolic process active, but the catabolic process is also present. However, the anabolic process is much the stronger; the catabolic process the weaker. In fact, the newborn infant is dying as well as living more abundantly, but the anabolic process is at this stage the stronger of the two. The catabolic process is weak at this stage. But as time passes in the history of any organism, the catabolic process tends to become stronger and stronger, while the anabolic process tends to become weaker and weaker until finally at the end of a cycle, which is the normal one for any particular organism, the catabolic process is dominant and the organism ceases to function. There is, thus, a certain truth in the statement uttered by St. Paul, namely, “I die daily.”<sup>2</sup> We are dying from the time we are born, but we are also growing in life—growing in life on this plane. But in time the catabolic process is the stronger and leads to what we commonly call death. Growing stronger in life, or in objective functioning, and the tearing down process, which becomes a kind of weakening in the process of life, are both phases of the total meaning of life. Death is, thus, just as normal as birth.

How long should a human life exist? In the Judaic Bible, it is stated that it is on the order of threescore and ten, or 70 years. This would be the least common multiple of two forms of cycle connected with the numbers 7 and 10—the least common multiple of these two cycles. But in certain Oriental literature, it is stated that the normal cycle of life should be on the order of 200 years. Probably, exactly, it should be 210 years—the least common multiple of three cycles connected with the numbers 10, 7, and 3. So far as Western science is concerned, it has not yet been able to maintain life to this larger cycle. It does appear that the points where two cycles represented by the numbers 10 and 7, finding their least common multiple in 70, represents a critical point which we in the West have not proven able to transcend. Now, this applies to what might be called the normal life cycle. It can be undercut by tragic circumstance such an accident or a disease, so that in practical fact, the length of the actual life may be of very much reduced duration. But if there were no intervention of disease or accident, the normal death would take place as a result of the action of cycles, not by accident or the action of disease.

I have already noted the fact that the side of death which most concerns us is the psychical side. The big question here is: does consciousness continue after the event of physical death? This is dependent upon what the true relationship between the psyche and the soma may be. There are different theories as to this relationship. I shall consider these different theories, which are six in number.

First, there is the view of certain very materialistic thinkers to the effect that consciousness is something that was brought out more or less accidentally in the process of evolution, that fundamentally the processes of existence and evolution in this world was a non-conscious process, but it so happened that at a certain point in that evolution,

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<sup>2</sup> The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians 15:31.

creatures became conscious. One writer has even said that consciousness is a bump on the log of evolution and is quite irrelevant to the total process. If this were the correct view, death of the physical organism would imply, inevitably, the cessation of consciousness. It would imply the death of the psyche.

A second view is that associated with the name of Aristotle. In his *De Anima*, Aristotle advanced the theory that the relationship between the psyche and the soma was this: that the psyche and the soma are not separate and not separable. This is a little different from the first view in that the total entity is viewed as a psychosomatic entity, a compound, not simply a physical entity that happened to bring consciousness to birth, perhaps as a mere accident, that the physical entity was essentially the whole. The Aristotelian position is more sophisticated in that it views the total entity as psychosomatic. But if the psyche and the soma are not separate and not separable, then death of the soma would seem to imply the inevitable death of the psyche. The death of the psyche would mean the discontinuance of consciousness—not simply a transformation in the form of the consciousness, but the complete termination of it.

There is an important portion of theological theory in connection with the Christian religion connected with this theory of Aristotle. There was a time, way back in the earlier history of Christian thought, when an orientation was made to the philosophy of Plato, but this was a brief period. Later the orientation was made to the philosophic position of Aristotle. There was an important difference between the standpoint of Plato concerning the relationship of the soma and the psyche, and that which was maintained by his pupil, Aristotle. It was on this point that there was a divergence between the two men. The effect of the orientation to Aristotle and his psychosomatic theory was that it became very doubtful that there could be a continuation of organized consciousness after the event called physical death. Christian theology handled the problem in this way: Christ through his miraculous power was able to transcend death by his resurrection. Because of this development, it became possible for the followers of the Christ also to attain resurrection if they oriented themselves in the appropriate way to the Christ. But the position that consciousness required correlation with a soma in order to continue was maintained; hence, we have the view that if there is to be a continuance of conscious existence after death there must be a resurrection of the gross physical body. Early in my life I came upon this doctrine and challenged it on the ground that we know that a disintegrated body can have its matter taken up in plant life or insect life, and that it was possible that atoms that had been in the physical body of a given individual could be consumed, ultimately, by another human being and that such atoms could be in his body at the time of his death. I put the question to a clergyman of that time, to which of these two individuals would these atoms belong at the time of the resurrection. The only answer he could give was, "Leave it to the Lord, my son." I found this quite unacceptable.

There is an important question here which requires some further discussion. Does consciousness require a relationship to matter or body in order to exist? I would refer you at this time to the discussion which follows the first fundamental in *The Secret Doctrine*. There's a statement there to this effect, that consciousness requires an

*upadhi* in order that the sense of “I am I” may exist.<sup>3</sup> In other words, this would imply that the sense of individual consciousness, my consciousness as distinct from the consciousness of other entities, does require the presence of an *upadhi*, or vehicle, which implies substance. It does not mean that consciousness in the sense of an universal consciousness, which does not have the sense of “I am I” requires such an *upadhi*. In connection with the subject of death, we are first of all concerned with the question of a continuation of an individual self-identity that survives. We’re not here concerned with a universal consciousness, and we may grant that for a consciousness to be individualized and have the sense of “I am I” as distinct from other selves, may well require an *upadhi*—the word *upadhi* meaning a vehicle, or that which the Greeks called the soma, in some sense. But, this vehicle may be, and is, viewed as subtle, not gross—that the continuation of consciousness is not dependent upon a gross physical body, but that individual consciousness may continue by association with a subtle form of matter. This is a different matter. The Aristotelian view does not seem to take into account this possibility. There can be a state of matter which—or a state of substance—which is not available to the cognition of the gross physical senses, but which nonetheless exists. Matter is not always visible, as in the case of air, if it is pure. We thus can very well imagine that there could be entities connected with a somatic principle which is subtle, that may exist even all about us without our being cognizant of their presence. Thus, death does not necessarily imply the discontinuance of the sense of “I am I” as a distinct individual which is in some measure or some degree differentiated from the universal consciousness in which there would not be the sense of “I am I.”

I am not here concerned with developing the arguments for and against each of these interpretive views of the nature of the relationship between the soma and the psyche as would be required if I were dealing with a complete philosophic dissertation. We are concerned only with the effect upon the continuance of individual consciousness after death in the light of these different theories.

The third theory is that which has been known in philosophy as *Parallelism*. This theory was developed by Leibniz in his *Monadology*. It was long ago recognized that there is a difference between conscious process and the apparent material universe. The two orders seem to be so different that it was hardly conceivable that an intercausal relationship existed between these two orders. Causality in the material sense produced material effects, and causality in the psychical sense produced psychical effects. What then was the relationship between these two? Leibniz offered the view that they ran parallel to each other; that there was not intercausal connection such that conscious states produced material effects and material conditions produced psychical effects. In his theory every individual was a Monad, but the Monad had no doors or windows. But the

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<sup>3</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Adyar: The Theosophy Company, 1893), 43-44:

Hence it will be apparent that the contrast of these two aspects of the Absolute is essential to the existence of the Manifested Universe. Apart from Cosmic Substance, Cosmic Ideation could not manifest as individual Consciousness, since it is only through a vehicle (*upadhi*) of matter that consciousness wells up as “I am I,” a physical basis being necessary to focus a ray of the Universal Mind at a certain stage of complexity. Again, apart from Cosmic Ideation, Cosmic Substance would remain an empty abstraction, and no emergence of Consciousness could ensue.

processes in the consciousness of the individual Monad paralleled the processes of external reality. How was this established? By a pre-established harmony, as Leibniz thought. There are, of course, problems here. How in the first place, if we are locked into windowless Monads, can we derive the idea that there is an external universe? But in any case, this is the position Leibniz offered. What effect does it have upon the possibilities beyond the grave? If parallelism, or *synchronicity*, to use Dr. Jung's term, is the truth of the matter, then it would seem that the processes in the soma, or the body, that take place with death are also reproduced in the psyche. Now, we know that the body which has died proceeds normally through a process of disintegration, a breaking down into the elements that had formed parts of the organized whole. Parallelism would seem, then, to suggest that a similar process takes place on the level of the psyche, and that, then, we would have the psyche disintegrating into its elements. In neither case is there complete destruction. The body breaks down into its elements, but the elements continue; the psyche, thus, if running in a parallel pattern, would breakdown into its elements and they would continue. But this would leave no assurance or reasonable base to suppose that an entity would continue in an integrated consciousness after death.

These first three theories, in every case, give us no positive assurance, or even reasonable way of conceiving, that there is continuation of integrated, individual consciousness which can say that "I am I," I am this entity that was named thus and so, will in any sense continue after death. There are three remaining hypotheses that may offer us a different possibility.

The fourth hypothesis or view is the one that is known as *Interactionism*. This was maintained by William James, among others. It is the view that psychical states or attitudes can produce somatic effects, and, vice versa, somatic conditions, such as that of disease or other factors, can produce psychical effects. There is much empiric evidence to support this view. We know that there is a difference reflected in the physical organism by an optimistic attitude on the level of the psyche, what is commonly called a positive attitude, and that conditions of the body such as an illness can produce psychical effects such as a depression. This is very evident on the empiric level. But there are certain consequences that follow from this. If somatic conditions are affected by psychical states, such as thoughts and feelings, the question arises, how determinant are the laws of nature? What can the psyche do to modify the effects that the laws of nature seem to propound? How reliable, then, are our calculations based upon the laws of nature? And as to the bearing of this theory upon after-death states, it does not seem to give us any positive assurance one way or the other. If there is something of interdependence such as that of interactionism, does the fact of death of the soma have a depressant effect upon the life of the psyche, or is there a sufficient independence so that the psyche can continue apart from the soma? The picture here is one that is uncertain. Unlike the case of the three first hypotheses, there is no definite denial of the possibility of continuance after death, but, on the other hand, there is no positive assurance that the psychic life continues. That is enough, I think, for our purposes concerning this particular hypothesis. As we come into the fifth and sixth hypotheses, we come to a position where the prospect for a continuation of consciousness after death is much more positive.

The fifth hypothesis, for a first approximation, may be stated quite simply. It is the view that the relationship of the psyche to the soma is that of an inhabitant to a

habitation. Thus, it may be likened to the relationship that a dweller in a house has to his house, or a rider on a steed has to his steed, or the rider in a vehicle, such as an automobile, whether a driver or a passenger, has to that vehicle. The house may be destroyed and yet the dweller in the house survive; the steed may die, but that does not imply that the rider also dies; and the automobile may fail, but that does not mean that the driver or passenger also have failed. The conception is basically simple in its first approximation. This position was held, essentially, by Plato, very explicitly by Sri Aurobindo, is generally a part of the Theosophical eschatology, and is very evident in the *raja yoga* of Patanjali with its doctrine of the five *koshas* and the true entity that dwells within these five sheaths.

There is a point to be made here that applies to all analogical thinking. Analogies are not logical determinants. They are suggestions for presenting particular ideas and should not be crowded too closely; and as an example of this, I will discuss certain possibilities that grow from these analogies. Thus, the individual who dwells in a house and has the experience of the house burning may not escape, and he would die along with the house; the same with the rider on the steed, if the steed fails and in falling the driver is thrown with his head against a rock, he also may die; and the same in the case of an automobile that has been wrecked. In this total situation, the important point is that the failure of the habitation or vehicle does not imply the fall of the inhabitant or the rider. The case of the individual who perishes along with the habitation or vehicle may be likened to something that has been said of the individual who dies with a strong materialistic bias such as the conviction that when he dies he goes six feet underground and that is the end of the matter. I, at one time, came across a document that dealt with just this situation, and it stated that in that case the individual would have the experience of apparently going six feet underground and abiding there until the force of the suggestion was exhausted. And the same would apply to the individuals who die with a strong conviction of the truth of the eschatology of the religion to which they had been dedicated. They would tend to experience after-death states of the type which had been impressed upon their minds until the force of the suggestion had been exhausted. This then suggests that one should face death without too strong conviction as to what the after death process would be like, since he could by the force of suggestion cause himself to experience precisely the content of that suggestion until its energy had been exhausted.

Let us first consider what would happen in death on the basis of the theory of the five *koshas*.<sup>4</sup> These *koshas* I shall briefly describe. The lowest is the gross physical body; the next one is the principle of life and its vehicle, commonly called the astral body. Above that there is the *Manomaya kosha* which is the sheath of the sense-mind with all the senses. And above that, still, there is the sheath of the intellectual mind or the *Buddhi*. And still above that there is the sheath of bliss, the *Anandamaya kosha*. And on its throne behind all these sheaths dwells the true Self, that which I truly am, the *Atman*. Now, in ordinary death, the first thing that happens is the dropping of the lowest sheath—the gross physical body. The true dweller, the true entity, abides then in four sheaths for a time, it is said, and then there is the dropping of the *Pranamaya kosha*, or sheath.<sup>5</sup> This seems to

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, 181, for the schema to which Wolff is referring.

<sup>5</sup> In the schema referred to above, the *Pranamaya kosha* is “. . . the principle of life and its vehicle, commonly called the astral body.”

be all that's involved in ordinary death from the teachings upon the subject. One dwells then with his three remaining sheaths in a deeply subjective realm. The question naturally comes to one, "Is there such a thing as the dropping of the three remaining sheaths?" The answer is yes; but this is not a part of ordinary death. It is involved in the process that leads to fundamental yogic Realization or Enlightenment, where the final step involves the transcendence of all sheaths, including the sheath of bliss, in a state that transcends all the coloring that is given to the consciousness by the sheaths. We are not here concerned with the deeper meaning of death in this ultimate yogic sense, but only with ordinary death. We may possibly return later to consider this profounder aspect.

In the Theosophic eschatology the physical death is viewed as only preliminary to a deeper kind of death, namely, the dropping of the *Pranamaya kosha*. Thus, ordinary death leads into a realm which we might call intermediate. It appears that there is a normal time cycle which the life of the individual should have been. Physical death generally takes place before this cycle is completed. If the death is not from accident, or disease, or any other untoward circumstance, but simply from old age, the interval between the first and second death may be very brief or conceivably might be wiped out completely. This would be the most desirable kind of death. But, apparently in this world, the normal death from old age is very much the exception rather than the rule. What happens is that the individual enters a sort of betwixt and between realm. There is here a certain purging, so it is said, of the elements that are not fit to be carried up into a much deeper and more desirable state. Elements that are sodden, or actively bad, or utterly trivial are generally purged away, so it is said, in this particular intermediate zone, and that what continues is those elements that have more persistent value, that have, what we might call, an authentic spiritual coloring. Then after the second death, it is said, the entity enters into a realm which has a consciousness analogous to that of the *Devas*, namely, very lofty entities, and it is called, generally, *Devachan*.

We might picture what life would be here. One has sown during his outer embodied life many causes, or perhaps not so many in some cases but usually many, and the fruit of these causes is experienced upon this realm—not all the causes, for those that are dark and more or less evil or wholly trivial are not carried so far, but the nobler impulses in the individual, the more lofty thoughts and feelings, the attitudes that are compassionate or well-meaning tend to be carried on—and the realm he lives in is really his own unconscious projection. I might suggest a kind of existence in this realm. The individual finds himself in a beautiful forested area up in a mountain range. There is a mountain meadow before his dwelling. The animals that normally dwell in such a setting are there—the deer, the cats, the wolves—but they harm not each other, and they're not at all afraid of man; they are companions. A little stream runs through the realm. The grass grows beautiful, and flowers are blooming everywhere. Within his dwelling are his old companions. He dines upon the foods which he loves best. And if he has been of a thoughtful turn of mind, he may have a most voluminous and adequate library. His walls may be adorned with the superlative works of art; and he knows music whenever he wishes to turn to it. And not far away, along a walk in the woods, he comes to a tall bluff and there before him spreads the ever restless sea as a thing of transcendent beauty. Clouds there may be; the sun shines, never with a fierce intensity, but with a gentle warmth; and the breezes come, never too cold; and rain refreshes the atmosphere. And so he dwells in a state of unbroken bliss not knowing how long it may be, for there is no

such thing as a dragging of time. Only when there is suffering does time go slowly. And so he completes those thoughts, those acts which he had sown as seed in his outer life, completed their fulfillment. Perhaps he studied in a certain field and sowed that seed and would here complete it. He might produce literary works or make scientific determinations. This is just an imagined picture of a *Devachanic* experience. But, the friends and relatives that were near him were projections of his ideas, not the reality of those friends and relatives. He is completing the values that he sowed in life. In a deep sense, he's living alone. This is a desirable state and necessary for the inner entity until a certain stage of maturity is attained. There will come the time when he will want to know the reality of things and not only experience the beauty, delight, and rapture.

There is another picture which comes down to us from the stories of the Norsemen. Here there is a conception of the after-death life that runs this way: that this life consists of arising each morning—it being assumed that the periodicity of day and night continues—the men arise to draw up in lines of combat and fight all day; that at the end of the day, all those who were killed in the battle come back to life and all the wounded are healed; they then have a gargantuan feast—the table o'erflowing with all kinds of food and drink; they eat to repletion and drink to full drunkenness. There might be added another feature which is characteristic of the warrior's life, and that is forcible rape. And here we would have the indulgence of the four most obnoxious lusts of man: the lust of killing, the lust of gorging with food, the lust of drunkenness, and the lust of sexual indulgence. This I would say is not a domain that lies in *Devachan*, rather in *kamaloka* where desire, in the invidious sense, rules supreme. It is rather the picture of a hell world, but a world that was enjoyed by those who dwelled within it. It is said that when Swedenborg made a search on the psychical level of various zones and departments, he found that those who dwelt in all these zones, even though they were the hells of life, liked the kind of life in which they dwelt. It is a case of every man to his taste, but this level represents a kind of human being that is on a very low scale of existence. Yet, it implies that for every type there is a domain beyond death which fits his inclination.

There is one thing in common with respect to these two portraits of an after-death state, and that is that they are predominantly sensuous states. The one exception is that of the individual who had the library and laboratory, which I forgot to mention, where he continued an intellectual life, a life devoted to the search of truth; but otherwise the two pictures are predominantly sensuous in their nature. In one case a sensuality that is very coarse, in the other case, a sensuality that is refined. Elsewhere I have noted the fact that man is primarily a triune being. In his outermost and grossest aspect he is an animal, in his middle status he is a thinker—a man, and beyond that he is a spiritual entity—a knower. What is pictured here is a conceived heaven world that is mostly of a purely sensuous type. There are, no doubt, higher zones where the intellectual being has a predominant place and is engaged in the search for truth; but what of the highest aspect of man, that which I have called *introceptual*, or the spiritual part? This transcends the domain of *Devachan* and even transcends the relativity of birth and death.

As a final summing up statement concerning the fifth hypothesis, it may be said that it gives maximum assurance of a continuation of individual consciousness after the transition known as physical death. Second, it does not deny that in a certain sense a



correlation between the psyche and the soma is necessary if there is to be an individual consciousness, a sense of “I am I” and that I am different from other centers of consciousness. But it differs from the Aristotelian position in that it introduces the conception of a subtle *upadhi* consisting of subtle substance which is not involved in the physical death and not even involved in the second or subsequent death. And third, this view comes from men who have broken through to a higher consciousness, namely, men like Plato, and Aurobindo, and the Buddha, and Shankara—thus, men who are able to trace something, at least, of the processes that take place after what we know of physical death. It is therefore the most probably true hypothesis of all, and certainly is one which I fully espouse.