

Life after Death

By
Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi

Is there any life for death; if so, what kind of life is it? This question lies far beyond the ken of our perception. We do not have the eyes with which we could see beyond the frontiers of worldly life and find out what lies on beyond it. We do not have the ears with which we could hear anything from beyond these frontiers. Nor do we have any instrument by which we could determine with certainty whether there is any life beyond death. Therefore, the question whether there is any life after death lies completely outside the province of scientific knowledge which is concerned with the classification and interpretation of sense data. Anyone who asserts in the name of science that there is no life after death, therefore, makes a very unscientific statement. Merely on the basis of scientific knowledge, we can neither affirm that there is a life after death nor deny it. Until we discover a dependable means of acquiring knowledge about this matter, the correct scientific attitude would be neither to affirm nor to deny the possibility of life after death. The question is beyond its jurisdiction.

But can we possibly maintain this attitude in life? Can we afford to adhere to this neutrality? Theoretically speaking, this may hold good, but looking to the hard realities of life which we have to face on every turn and pass, our answer would be: certainly not. If we do not have the means to know a thing directly, it is of course possible for us, from a purely rational point of view, to refrain from either affirming or denying it. But if the thing is directly concerned with our everyday life, we cannot maintain that attitude and must either affirm or deny its existence. In order to live a full life on the earth we must have a definite attitude towards such problems. These questions simply cannot be avoided. For instance, if you do not know a person with whom you do not have any dealings, you may refrain from forming an opinion about his integrity and trustworthiness; but if you have to deal with him, you must do so either on the assumption that he is an honest man or on the supposition that he is not. You may also proceed with the idea that, until his honesty is either proved or disproved in practice, you will deal with him on the assumption that his integrity is doubtful. But this manner of dealing with him would, in effect, be no different from the way you would deal with him if you were convinced of his dishonesty. Therefore, a state of doubt between affirmation and denial is possible only as an abstract idea; it cannot form the basis of practical dealings, which require a positive attitude of either affirmation or denial.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH:

A little reflection should help us to see that the question of life after death is not merely a philosophical question; it is deeply and intimately related to our everyday

life. In fact our moral attitude depends entirely upon this question. If a person is of the view that the life of this world is the only life and that there is no life of any kind after that, he must develop a particular type of moral attitude. A radically different kind of attitude and approach is bound to result if he believes that this life is to be followed by another life where one will have to render account of all one's acts in this world and, that one's ultimate fate in the Hereafter will depend upon one's conduct in worldly life. Let us try to understand this through a simple example. A person undertakes journey from Lahore to Karachi on the assumption that he is traveling to his final destination, where he will be beyond the reach of the police that could haul him up for an offence, and the jurisdiction of the courts of justice that could bring him to book. Another person undertakes the same journey knowing that it is only the first stage of a longer journey which will carry him, beyond Karachi, to a land overseas which is ruled by the same sovereign as that of Pakistan. He also knows that the court of that sovereign has complete secret dossiers of his activities in Pakistan and that this record will be fully examined there in order to decide what position and treatment he deserves by virtue of his past performance. Now, it should be easy to realize how different the conduct of these two travelers of the same train will be. The former will prepare himself only for the journey up to Karachi, whereas the latter will keep in view also the requirements of the further stages of the long journey. The former will assume that all the gains that he can possibly make, or all the losses or harms that he might suffer, will be confined to the journey up to Karachi, and that will be the end of it. The latter, on the other hand, will know that the real gains or losses of the journey will be realized in its last stages and not in the first. The former will keep in view only those results of his actions as are likely to manifest themselves up to the time that he reaches Karachi; the latter's visit will extend to the long term results likely to unfold themselves in the distant overseas lands where his journey will eventually take him.

Now it is obvious that this difference between the approaches and attitudes of the two travelers results directly from their view of the nature of their journey and its end. Similarly, a person's views in regard to life after death have a decisive influence upon his moral conduct in this world. The direction of every step that he takes in his practical life will depend upon whether he treats this worldly life as the first and last stage of life, or whether he also has in view the Hereafter and consequences of his conduct in this world or the next one. He will move in one direction in the first instance, and in exactly the opposite direction in the other instance.

From this I should be clear that the question of life after death is not merely a fruitless intellectual or philosophical exercise but a question that intimately concerns and vitally affects our everyday life. There is, therefore no justification for any skepticism in this matter. Any attitude that is determined by skepticism in regard to the Hereafter could not in effect be any different from the one based on a definite rejection of the idea of a life after death. We are, therefore, obliged to make up our minds whether there is a

life after death or not. If science can not help us here, we must seek the aid of rational thinking and logical reasoning.

Where Reason Leads to?

But what is the material upon which we could base this logical reasoning?

There is, first, man himself, and then the system of the Universe. We shall, therefore, try to study man against the background of the Universe and see whether all his requirements are fulfilled within this system or whether some of them remain unsatisfied and need some other kind of system for their satisfaction.

Now man has various aspects. First of all, he has a body, which is composed of various minerals, salt, gases and water. The Universe is a vast system containing, from tiny specks of dust to the large planets moving in their orbits. We find ourselves dazzled with the spectacle of a plethora of things: the earth, stones, metals, salts, gases, rivers, oceans, and an unending array of things of the kind. These things need a set of laws to govern their existence and operation, and all these laws are at work within the Universe. They provide a free opportunity for the various elements and forces of nature to play their part in the Universe; similarly the human body has a full and free opportunity to live and work under these laws. Secondly, man is a being who has grown through nourishment derive from the things around himself. Similarly, there are various kinds of trees, plants and herbs in the Universe which are governed by the laws that are essential for growing bodies.

Moreover, man is a living being who moves and acts of his own free will; he procures food for himself, protects himself and ensures the preservation of the species. Again, there are various other beings of this kind in the Universe: on land, in water and in the air, there are myriads of animals whose lives and functions are governed completely by the laws what are sufficient to cover the whole gamut of their activities.

Above all, there is the moral aspect of man's being, which is endowed with the consciousness of good and evil, the faculty to discriminate between the two, and the power to do good as well as evil. Man's nature demands that good deeds should have good results and evil deeds should lead to evil consequences. He can discriminate justice from tyranny, truth from falsehood, right from wrong mercy from cruelty, kindness from arrogance, generosity from meanness, trustworthiness from breach of trust and so on and so forth. These qualities are not abstract ideas but are actually experienced in human life and have a deep and far- reaching effect on human culture. Therefore, the nature with which man is endowed strongly demands that his acts should lead inexorably to their moral consequences; in the same way as they lead

to their physical effects.

But let us look around and reflect a little deeply upon the system of the Universe. Can the moral consequences of human actions fully unfold themselves in the system? On the basis of the body of knowledge that we possess we can confidently assert that this is not possible, because, for all that we know, there is no other creature in the Universe which is endowed with moral consciousness. The whole system is governed by the physical laws of the Universe, and the moral laws of the human realm are not at work anywhere in their full measure. For instance, money carries both value and weight in human affairs but truth often lacks both. The mango seed always ultimately yields mangoes; the devotee of truth, on the other hand, sometimes receives bouquets but sometimes, rather often, brickbats. The material objects in the world are governed by laws which always lead to certain pre-determined results, but within the dynamics of the working of these laws the operation of the moral forces in the human world is not so manifest. The laws of nature often fail to ensure; and even where we find such consequences they occur only to the extent the law of nature permit. It is a physical world that we live in. And it often happens that the actual consequences of an act under the laws of nature are simply contrary to what the law of ethics demands. Through cultured and civilized life and political organization, man has no doubt striven to some extent to ensure that the acts of man lead to set and pre-ordained moral consequences according to a code of ethics. But these efforts have been on to a code of ethics. But these efforts have been on a very limited scale and extremely deficient. They have been vitiated, on the one hand, by the operation of natural laws, and on the other by man's own weaknesses and shortcomings.

Let us try to understand this with the help of a few examples. If a person sets fire to the house of an enemy, the house will be gutted; this will be the natural result of the act. The moral consequence of the act should be the punishment of the criminal commensurate with the damage that he has caused to the family whose home he has burnt. But this consequence can come about only if the culprit can be traced and apprehended by the police, the charge against him is proved, the court can estimate fully the loss that his offence has caused to the affected family and its future generations, and then awards to the offender a punishment commensurate with his crime. If any of these conditions is not duly fulfilled, the moral consequence will either not manifest itself at all or will unfold itself only partially; nay, it is quite possible that the culprit may go scot-free and even remain happy and become prosperous after having ruined his enemy.

Let us take another example. We often find that a few people manage, by hook or by crook, to acquire a strong hold over a whole community, which begins to follow him. Taking advantage of this position these leaders bamboozle their people into following their jingoism and militant imperialism. They lead their people into war with their neighbours. Several countries are ruined in these wars, millions of men are killed, and many more are forced to live in misery and degradation. Their misdeeds have far-reaching effects on human history for countless generations, even many long centuries. Now is it possible for such criminal manages to be punished sufficiently for

their crimes and follies in this life? Indeed, they would not be adequately punished even if they were all literally thrown to the wolves, or burnt alive, or subjected to any other torture of which man is capable. No conceivable punishment could possibly be measured against the grave harm caused by them to millions of men for countless generations. Under the natural laws that govern the system of the Universe they could not possibly be awarded punishment, commensurate with their crimes and follies. Even if a Chinghiz or a Hitler is torn to pieces, this punishment stands with no comparison to the wrongs they penetrated on humanity.

Or, on the other hand take the example of the great prophets, the sages and the pious and virtuous men who called mankind to the truth and the right path and guided them out of darkness into light, and whose ideas and teachings and practical examples have benefited millions and men for centuries. And they did all this good to mankind, bracing all the tempests of adversity that came in their way and suffering miserably at the hands of the vested interests. It is possible to reward such men adequately in this short span of life within the limits of the physical laws that govern the world?

As we have urged above, *the laws that govern the present system of the Universe do not allow an opportunity for the full unfolding of the moral consequences of human actions.* Secondly, the actions of men during their short span of life on earth often have reactions and effects so widespread and lasting that their full consequences must take thousands of years to unfold and manifest themselves fully; and it is obviously impossible for any person, under the present laws of nature, to attain such a long career on earth. From this it logically follows that while the present physical world and its natural laws are enough for the material and animal constituents of man, they are utterly inadequate for the moral element of his being. This component calls for another world where the law of ethics is the governing law and the laws of nature are subservient, to it; where life is unlimited; where all the moral consequences of human actions in the material world that could not manifest themselves there, should manifest themselves fully and in the proper form. It demands a world where truth and righteousness, and not gold and silver, carry weight; where fire burns only such things as deserve to be burned according to the moral law; where happiness and the lot of the virtuous and plain and misery the plight of the wicked. Both nature and reason demand such an order.

The light of the Qur'an

So far as logical reasoning is concerned, it only indicates that such a world 'ought to be'. But as to the question whether such a world does in fact exist, neither reason nor knowledge can give us a categorical answer. And it is here that the Qur'an helps us. It assures us that the world that our nature as well as our reason demand shall be a reality one day. The present system of the Universe, which was created in accordance with physical laws, will be demolished at one stroke; and it will be replaced by another world where the earth, the heavens and all other things will be essentially different from what they are here. God Almighty will then resurrect all the men who were born

from the beginning of creation down to its end, and will make all of them appear before Himself at one time. The records of all the deeds of individuals, communities, and mankind at large, will be there without the slightest error or omission. Also there will be complete reports of the effects and consequences of all human actions in the material world; and all the generations of men affected by them will be present in the witness box. Every particle affected in any way by the deeds or words of men will tell its own story. And the limbs, the ears, the eyes and all other parts of the human body will stand witness how they were used or abused in life. On the basis of this unimpeachable evidence and those complete records. Allah, the Supreme Sovereign of the Universe, will decide each case with perfect justice and pronounce the reward or penalty as the case may be. The reward as well as the punishment will be of a magnitude that cannot even be estimated by the limited standards of the material world. The standards of time and space, and weights and measurements, and the natural laws, will be essentially different from those prevailing in the present world. The virtues whose beneficent effect extend over several centuries in this world will be fully rewarded there, and neither death nor illness nor old age will be able to cut short the enjoyments of the reward. On the other hand, the evil deeds whose effects and consequences blight the lives of millions in this world for hundreds of years will be punished fully, and neither death nor coma will be able to relieve the pain and distress of the sufferer.

If the existing system of the Universe with its present natural laws is a possibility and a reality, why should another world with a different set of natural laws be regarded as an impossibility?