

**A BRIEF INQUIRY
CONCERNING HUMAN
KNOWLEDGE & BELIEF**

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A brief inquiry concerning human knowledge & belief by James Hibbert

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JAMES HIBBERT

**A BRIEF INQUIRY
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A BRIEF INQUIRY
CONCERNING
HUMAN KNOWLEDGE & BELIEF;
WITH SOME REMARKS
UPON
THE BASIS OF PHYSICS:
BEING A SEQUEL
TO
"A GENERAL VIEW OF THE MATERIALISTIC
PHILOSOPHY."

EDITED BY JAMES HIBBERT.

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Human Knowledge and Belief.

"The seeing eye disturbs not the unseen; the hearing ear lists not the song of songs; the heart's conceptions are beggared by simple truth; and man, shrewd all revelations, must wait upon his God."—GARTH WILKINSON.

What are we human beings, is the first question that presents itself to us in thinking. What shall we become, if becoming there be, which some doubt, in the sense of the continuance of our distinct personalities? And whence, indeed, do we come? For if we arise out of no antecedent personal consciousness, it is at least possible that we may go back into the unconscious limbo of the unknown whence we came. Is Death something, or is it nothing to us? Does dissolution extinguish personal consciousness? If so, it is nothing to us. Or does it, on the other hand, set us free to an entrance into another and a higher life of personal being? Then does Death become the divine angel. Happy for us if we can so consider it.

There are indubitable perceptions in our minds of beings brighter and better than man. In the night season, in quiet reflection, these images visit us when we are unbesieged by the objects of sense. Whence can such images come? There is no place for them in the world, where is incessant mutation—one thing encroaching upon and impelling the other. They can only come from that spiritual world in which we ourselves obscurely have a share.

Whence come the ideas of Right and Wrong? Twist them about as you will, and tell me by which of the five senses the first elements of these notions come into the mind. Do you truly believe the assumption of our modern philosophers, that these ideas, now *a priori* in the man, are *a posteriori* in the race; from small rudimentary beginnings evolved in the course of the ages? If, indeed, they come from slow experience and reflection, from observing that one course of conduct produces painful effects, and another pleasing ones, then right and wrong do really become other terms for what are useful or injurious; virtue is another name for utility, justice for convenience, and conscience a balancing of advantage and disadvantage: a grave conclusion surely, and one that affects the foundation of our practical life.

If the history of the origin of these ideas be uncertain, there is no question of their existence as two fundamental notions, absolute in their nature, and imperative in their obligation. They are, moreover, accompanied with a moral emotion, which, in the exercise of the highest disinterestedness, gives the profoundest delight that human creatures can experience. These lofty moral feelings find their completest development in the sphere of religion, and point out to us the region of a class of duties extending prospectively beyond the sphere of our present life to a destiny into the immeasurable futurity.

The benefit that we owe to these feelings is that they recall our attention again and again to the spontaneous working of our highest faculties; that they make known to us the treasury of emotions to which this working often gives rise; that they withdraw us from absorbing our whole attention in logical forms and processes, and point out to us the real and veritable existence of a spiritual world with which we are closely connected, to whose laws we are all subjected, and without which our highest reason, our instinctive faith, and our fondest aspirations would be a mockery and a delusion.

There is in man a source of power—a secret spring of action, of which every one is conscious, and upon the consciousness of which every one acts, that we call Self. In whatever light we view our nature we find such an invisible energy, not to be accounted for on any mechanical principles, playing the most important part in the whole of our conscious existence.

The most purely abstract idea, perhaps, which we can take of man is, that he is a force—a power sent into the universe to act its part on the stage of being. The Materialist views him as a mechanical force, created by chance, seeking mainly the preservation of its own organism, and accomplishing the destiny of a nature, which, strange to say, never had an intelligent or conscious designer. Philosophy, more enlarged, views him as an intellectual and a moral being, formed by the Power who is the centre and source of all intelligence, and endowed for the present with an organisation adapted to the material world around him. The great aim of his being, in this view of it, is to develop more and more the intellectual and moral energy of which his real and essential nature consists; to defend and succour the body indeed, as the organ of its present manifestation, but as that dies away, to prepare for a higher manifestation of intelligence and virtue to which his aspirations had ever been tending, and where his highest desires will be ultimately fulfilled.

It is true that there are differences—immense differences—in the single order of mankind. But in the greatest men we are able to celebrate, not especially dæmonic beings in whose presence we feel ourselves dependent and ashamed, but splendid flowers and

fruits of a tree of which we ourselves, too, are part. The bond which links the lowest and highest intelligence is only the nearest link of an infinite chain embracing all creatures. "From the rude Mongol to the starry Greek, who the fine link between the mortal made and Heaven's last Seraph?"

Were man, indeed, constituted as the lower animals, differing from them only in degree, not in kind, such a view but brings them nearer to him, not him to them. Of even the animal instincts of the brute, and of the lower forms of animal life, it cannot be affirmed, even less of them than of man, that they are acquired by experience, as that they are rooted in the organisation.

Consider the world of brute animals, to what startling reflections does it give rise! That we should have a race of beings round and about us, and know so little as we do of their state, their interests, and their destiny! They have passions, habits, and a certain accountableness; but whether they have any moral nature, whether they are under some punishment, or whether they are to live after this life, we do not know. We inflict great sufferings upon a portion of them; occasionally they retaliate. We use their labour; we eat their flesh. Is it not plain to our senses that we live in company with this world of inferior beings, without understanding what they are? We think that men are lords of them and of this earth. It is not so sure. This earth may have other lords than ourselves, with dominion even over us; nay, perhaps, it is the scene of a vaster conflict than we at present are capable of comprehending.

Traditions of such a conflict, reported from the most ancient histories, sacred and profane, and the theme of later fable and song—come down to us, singularly enough, side by side with the succeeding antagonistic doctrine of absorption in the universal spirit, accompanied by annihilation of personal being. But it is now known to us that the earliest writings of the Eastern peoples present Death as an immediate and happy re-union with those who had gone before.

Of the Origin of Religion, history tells us nothing. Except in the Mosaic narrative, there is no clear attempt at a theory of the origin of man. The origin of particular religions, however, lies within the domain of historic account. And it is remarkable that the testimony this affords is always to the same effect. It invariably shows a process of degradation. In religion, of all other things, the processes of evolution seem to work in that direction. Of no religion is this more true than of that which was associated with the oldest civilisation known to us—the civilisation of Egypt. The researches of the latest Egyptologists show that the earliest known forms of religion in that mystic land are the purest. So strange is the declension and subsequent combination here of simple and grand conceptions with grotesque symbols and with

degrading objects of immediate worship, that it has been the inexhaustible theme of curious explanations. Why a Snake or why a Dung-Beetle should have been taken to represent the Divine Being, and why in the most secret recesses of their solemn temples we discover enshrined as the object of adoration the image or the coffin of some bird, or beast, or reptile, is a question on which much learned ingenuity has been spent. Was it because there is an universal tendency in the human mind to developments in the lower direction, especially in its spiritual conceptions? "It is incontestably true," says M. Renouf (Hibbert Lectures, 1879), "that the sublimer portions of the Egyptian religion are not the comparatively late result of a process of development or elimination from the grosser. The sublimer portions are demonstrably ancient; and the last stage of the Egyptian religion, that known to the Greek and Latin writers, was by far the grossest and most corrupt."

So with the Hebrews. The Old Testament furnishes a continuous account of the lapses of the race from the teaching and influences of their Law-givers, Priests, and Prophets. Their very tradition of the Fall of Man from a higher estate is not without support in the present immediate consciousness of humanity, and in the physical facts of degradation, decay, and disintegration. And if we study what is now held by the disciples of Brahma, Buddha, Confucius, and Zoroaster, the same result is witnessed. In India, it has been one great business of Christian governors, in their endeavour to extinguish cruel and barbarous customs, to prove to the corrupt disciples of an ancient creed that its first teachers had never held the doctrines from which such customs arise, or that they are gross abuses of the doctrines really taught. That venerable hymnal of unknown antiquity, the Rig-Veda, which forms the great literary memorial of the early Aryans in India, presents to us a civilisation free from the degrading practices of later ages. Even the doctrine of transmigration was unknown to it. Nor was Death absorption into the universal whole, but an immediate transfer of personal life to a new and happier existence with the loved ones who had departed.

Whenever we can arrive at the original teaching of the known founders of religious systems, we find that teaching uniformly higher, more spiritual, than the teaching now. Christianity itself is no exception to this, but with the remarkable difference, that alone of all the historical religions of the world it has hitherto shown an unmistakable power of perennial revival and reform. We know that the processes of corruption had begun their work even in the life-time of the Apostles, and every existing Church in Christendom must equally admit the general fact, though each of them furnishes a somewhat different illustration of it. Mahomedanism, the latest of the great historical religions, shows a still

more remarkable phenomenon. The corruption in this case began not only in the life-time, but in the life itself of the prophet and founder of that religion. Mahomet was himself his own most corrupt disciple. Only when his voice was that of the solitary crying in the wilderness, before it was joined in chorus by the multitude, was his life comparatively pure and his doctrine spiritual.

A belief in the persistence of life after death, and the observation of religious practices founded upon this belief, may be discovered in every part of the world, in every age, and among men representing every degree and variety of culture. The habits of savages without a history are not in themselves evidence which can in any way be depended upon. To take for granted that what the savages now are, perhaps after millenniums of degradation, all other people must have been, and that modes of thought through which they are now passing, have been passed through normally by all the race, is a most unscientific assumption.

Of the Egyptians, their hopes and fears with reference to the world beyond the grave are revealed to us in various books or collections of writings which have been preserved to us by the tombs. From the very earliest times to which it is possible to go back, the Egyptians were acquainted with the use of the pen and of papyrus as a material for writing upon. There is probably not a Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament which is a thousand years old. The oldest existing Sanscrit manuscripts were written only a few centuries ago. Some of our Egyptian papyri are not less than four thousand years old. The Egyptian manuscripts which we now possess, have been preserved by being kept from the air and damp in a perfectly dry climate. The literature which has thus been preserved and recovered is naturally for the most part of a religious character. The majority of the manuscripts which have been found in the tombs contain chapters of the collection generally known under the title of the Book of the Dead. It is not only in papyrus rolls that the Book of the Dead has been preserved. Many of the chapters are inscribed on coffins, mummies, sepulchral wrappings, statues, and the walls of tombs. The Beatification of the Dead is the main subject of every chapter. The everlasting life is represented as a renewed existence as upon Earth, but with the range of the entire universe in every desired shape and form. There is no trace to be found of the notion of an intermediate state of purification between death and final bliss. There is no indication of anything of an expiatory nature. There is a nether world which has to be traversed, full of terrible and hostile forces, but if the judgment which the departed has to undergo is favourable, he goes forth triumphant as a god whom nothing can harm. But the nature of the fearful

beings who preside over the terrors of the Egyptian nether world is not evil. Even these are ministers and angels of the divine justice. Sufficient is shown of the fate the wicked must expect. This fate is called "The Second Death."

As the Book of the Dead is the most ancient, so it is undoubtedly the most important of the sacred books of the Egyptians. In the later periods, another work, partly abridged from the Book of the Dead, was buried with their dead and placed under the left arm near the heart. This was called the "Book of the Breaths of Life." It contained precepts for giving new life to the soul and body. Another compendium of the Book of the Dead gives a sort of definition of the gods, in the following words: "The Becoming which is in the Becoming of all things when they become. . . . The cause of change in every thing that changes. . . . The mighty ones, the powerful ones, the beneficent, who test by their level the words of men, the Lords of Law, *who are without body*, who rule that which is born from the earth and that which is produced from the house of your cradles in heaven. . . . Ye prototypes of the image of all that exists, ye fathers and mothers of the solar orb, ye forms. . . . who generated men and shaped the form of every form, ye Lords of all things: hail to you, ye Lords of eternity and everlasting." Thus are the gods of Egypt described as the forces acting through the universe, in heaven and on earth, according to fixed and unchangeable law, for ever and ever.

A large number of hymns, beginning with the earliest days of the eighteenth dynasty (n.c. 1638, Bunsen), have come down to us. In these, while referring to a plurality of gods, the gods recognise the universal Lord. He gave birth to the gods. All things proceed from Him. In a papyrus at Turin, he is "the Almighty God, the self-existent, who made heaven and earth, the waters, the breath of life, fire, the gods, animals, cattle, reptiles, birds, fishes, kings, men and gods"—and who declares—"I am the maker of heaven and earth. I raise its mountains and the creatures which are upon it, I make the waters. . . . I am the maker of heaven. . . . It is I who have given to all the gods the soul which is in them." Another text says: "I am yesterday, I am to-day, I am to-morrow."

But the magnificent predicates of the one and only God, however recognised by the later Egyptian orthodoxy, never in fact led to actual Monotheism. They stopped short in Pantheism, or the doctrine that all individual things are nothing but modifications, affections of the One and All, the eternal and infinite God-world; that there is but one universal force in nature under different forms, in itself eternal and unchangeable.

The editor of the Litanyes of the date of the nineteenth dynasty remarks of them that the pantheistic influence has told upon the