CHAPTER 15

DISCOVERY OF THE SOUL IN MAN AND NATURE

from Gifford Lectures on Anthropological Religion (1891)

The Three Stages of Early Psychology

We saw in our last lecture how man came first to speak about a soul, or, more correctly, about a breath. We saw that there was nothing altogether unreasonable in such a name. In fact, whenever we examine that autobiography which man has left us in his language, we shall always find something reasonable, even in what seems at first sight most unreasonable or foolish.

If we only bear in mind, what is now a fact doubted by no one, that every word in every language had originally a material meaning, we shall easily understand why that which at the dissolution of the body seemed to have departed and which we consider the most immaterial of all things, should have been called at first by the name of something material, viz., the airy breath. This was the first step in human psychology.

The next step was to use that word breath, not only for the breath which had left the body, but likewise for all that formerly existed in the breathing body, the feelings, the perceptions, the conceptions, and that wonderful network of intellectual threads which constituted the man such as he was in life. All this depended on the breath. It certainly was seen to have departed at the same time as the breath.

The third step was equally natural, though it soon led into a wilderness of imaginations. If the breath, with all that belonged to it, had departed, then it must exist somewhere after its departure, and that somewhere, though utterly unknown and unknowable, was soon painted in all the colours that love, fear, and hope could supply.

These three consecutive steps are not mere theory; they have left their foot-prints in language, and even in our own language these foot-prints are not yet altogether effaced.

Let us look at Greek, as we find it in the Homeric poems. At present, I do not mean to speak of what the poet himself may have thought about the soul, about its work during life, and its fate after death. We shall have to speak of that hereafter. What we are now concerned with is what the language which Homer had inherited had to say to him on this subject.

The Original Meaning of Psyche

The most common word for soul in Greek is psyche (ψυχή). This psyche meant originally breath. When a man dies, his psyche, his very breath, is said to have passed.
through the bar of his teeth, the ἐρκος ὄδοντων. Here we see the first step. This word ψυχή, as you know, assumed afterwards every possible kind of meaning. Even in this passage we might translate it by life, or by soul, without destroying the sense. But we can clearly see that what passed through the ἐρκος ὄδοντων was originally meant for the actual breath.

The Psychological Terminology of Homer

Much has been written by Greek scholars about the exact meaning of psyche in every passage where that word occurs in Homer. I am not going to enter on that subject beyond stating my conviction that it is a mistake in poems, such as the Iliad and Odyssey, to look for a consistent use of words. It would be difficult even in modern poetry to find out what Shakespeare, for instance, thought about the soul, by collecting and comparing all the passages in his plays in which that word occurs. Poets are not bound by logical definitions, and if they used all their words with well-defined meanings, I doubt whether they could have written any poetry at all. They use the living language in which the most heterogeneous thoughts lie imbedded, and whatever word serves best for the moment to convey their thoughts and feelings, is welcome.

In the Homeric poems this difficulty is increased tenfold. Whatever may be thought about the final arrangement of these poems, no one can now hold that they were all originally the outcome of one mind. Nor must we forget that in epic poems different characters may be made to speak very different thoughts, and use the same words in very different meanings, as they best suit the circumstances in which they are uttered.

The Meaning of αὐτός

I shall give you one instance only to show what happens, if we try to interpret Homer as we should interpret Aristotle's treatise on the soul. You remember how it is said in the beginning of the Iliad, that Achilles sent the souls of the heroes to Hades, but he gave themselves, αὐτός, a prey to the dogs. It has been inferred from this and similar passages that Homer looked upon the body as constituting the true self of man. But this is to forget the requirements of poetry. Homer here wanted to bring out the contrast between the souls that went to Hades, and the corpses suffering the indignity of being devoured by dogs. "They themselves" means here no more than "they themselves, as we used to know them in life."

How free Homer feels in the use of such words, we can see from another passage. In the Odyssey, we read that Odysseus saw Herakles, or his εἴδωλον, that is, his psyche, in Hades, but he himself, αὐτός, he adds, rejoices among the immortal gods (xi. 601).

In one passage, therefore, αὐτός means the body, or even the corpse, in another, the soul, and to attempt to reconcile the two by any theory except a poet's freedom of expression, would lead, and has led, to mere confusion of thought.

I shall attempt no more than to give you the general impression which a study of the Homeric poems has left on my mind, as to what was thought about the soul, if not by Homer himself, at least by those whose language he used.