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Lesson Thirteen: The Resurrection of Man in Both His Dimensions

Now let us see what the nature of life will be in the hereafter. Will resurrection be exclusively corporeal, so that man is restored to life in the material form that characterizes his body, or will his eternal life be exclusively in the realm of the spirit, without any kind of attachment to the material body? Or will his return to life have on the contrary both dimensions, spiritual and semi-corporeal?

Our use of the word “semi-corporeal” implies that what comes to life is a subtle body, one that may be regarded as the essence of his present form. Finally, since the nature of man is a compound of body and spirit, will man's life after resurrection embrace both these dimensions, so that neither will his body that element which gives rise to a whole series of physical and chemical reaction perish completely, nor will his spirit be the separated from his bodily form?

All these represent various theories put forward concerning the nature of resurrection; let us now examine each one in turn.

Some scholars espouse the first theory and say that when death overtakes the body and its physical and chemical reactions are brought to an end, everything reaches its point of termination. However, when resurrection takes place, the scattered form of man is reassembled out of the particles that have been buried in the earth, scattered in the air, or drowned in the ocean. When the body thus begins its new life, the spirit which counts as one of the properties of the mechanism of the body is bound also to come back to life.

The second theory has also been espoused by many philosophers. They believe that since the spirit represents both the source and the essence of human existence and its very structure predisposes it to continual life, it bids eternal farewell to the material body when death occurs for the structure of the body predisposes it to perishing. After enjoying for a brief time the life-giving rays of the spirit, the body finds that its role is at an end.

The compound nature of the body permitted it to house the abstract spirit only for a limited time, after which it inevitably fell prey to decay and death. The spirit, by contrast, being ultimately free of the body and its properties, remains eternal and immortal, and it is therefore the spirit alone which appears on the plain of resurrection. Were this not the case, resurrection would have no meaning. This theory implies, of course, that punishment and reward are exclusively moral or spiritual.

There is no firm evidence in support of this theory, but it used to have many supporters. Now it has very few followers, for the realistic theories put forward by scholars have thoroughly undermined it.

The third analysis of the question is that which was made by a number of ancient philosophers. They said that when we die, our body is indeed destroyed: its elemental and material elements are dissolved in such a way that they cannot be reassembled.

The spirit then remains, but not in a state of utter abstraction; it is lodged in a subtle body that is not capable of physical and chemical reactions but nonetheless resembles our present body. This subtle body, also known as the imaginal body, is extraordinarily active and has the ability to transcend all obstacles, and is able to live eternally.

There is yet a fourth theory, which is held by many theologians and philosophers both of the past and the present. It is based on the principle that resurrection represents a complete and comprehensive return to life for nothing that pertains to man can ever be fully destroyed. Man resumes his life in the next world with all his qualities and properties, the only difference being that his resurrectional life unfolds in a more elevated realm than this world. On that plane we will attain a state in which matter and spirit retain their separate essences but become so closely interrelated that their existence becomes manifest as a single unit.

The reality of resurrectional life must be envisaged, according to the view, as containing both dimensions of man, not separate but joined, just as was the case in this world.

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No intellectual argument can be advanced as evidence for the nature of life after death; it is only the necessity of resurrection and its simultaneously spiritual and physical nature that are topics for philosophical and rational analysis. Philosophy and the intellect have no key for unlocking the mystery of which, out of all possible forms, will definitely occur in the hereafter.

Nonetheless, when we look at the way in which the last of the theories outlined above seeks to answer this question, we see that it contains an element of truth, for it points in the same direction as the authoritative texts of Islam and is compatible with them.

The Qur'an which is the principal source for all such topics repeatedly states that resurrection will be bodily. It proclaims, clearly and unmistakably, that man will be resurrected with the body he has had in

this world. The verses in question are indeed so explicit as to leave no room for symbolic interpretation. Consider, for example, these verses:

“God begins creation, then He renews it, and after that causes it to return to Him” (30:11).

“Does man imagine that We will not gather together his bones? We are able to recreate even the tips of his fingers” (75:3-4).

The second of these two verses states that those who imagine the body to be incapable of renewed life, after the dissolution and scattering of its particles, are, in reality, unaware of God's infinite power; they do not understand that the reconstruction of human life out of the scattered particles of the body, even to the extent of reproducing the minutiae of the fingertips, represents a small and insignificant task for the boundless power of the Creator.

“Say: `He will give life to the bones Who created them for the first time; certainly He is aware of all His creation.” (36:79).

A Story from the Qur'an

The Noble Qur'an presents narratives concerning the prophets `Uzayr and Ibrahim, the Friend of God, each of which includes a living example of bodily resurrection. God clarifies the matter for each of these great prophets by placing before them a concrete example of dead forms being restored to life once the necessary circumstances come to obtain by divine order: the spirit becomes manifest anew in the body so that its life resumes.

We read in the story of `Uzayr that mounted on his donkey he once came across a ruin in the course of a journey. In that ruin he was confronted by the dreadful sight of the rotting bones of men who had long since died. He plunged deep into thought and asked himself, “How will God bring these back to life?”

At that very moment God took his soul, but one hundred years later He brought him back to life. He asked him, “How long have you been here?” He immediately answered, “One day or less.”

`Uzayr was then informed that he had been in that place for a hundred years, lying lifeless on the ground exactly where he had fallen. He was instructed to look at his donkey, and saw that its body was thoroughly decomposed: then God brought it back life.

In the story of `Uzayr, we also see that in order to demonstrate the limitlessness of His power God preserved water and foodstuffs intact for a hundred years, objects that decay or vaporize more quickly than living beings on account of their exposure to natural factors such as heat, sunlight, wind and dust. He addressed `Uzayr as follows:

“Look at your food and drink; it has not changed and it shows no sign of age. Look too at your

donkey, so that its story becomes apparent to you and We may make of you a proof for people so that they no longer deny resurrection. Look at the rotten bones, and see how We bring them together and make flesh grow on them. When all this was shown clearly to him (the verse continues), he said, 'I know now for certain that God is empowered over all things' (2:259).

The Qur'an depicts another concrete instance of bodily resurrection in one of the narratives concerning Ibrahim, upon whom be peace. It tells with the utmost clarity how Ibrahim witnessed with his own eyes the reassembling of the scattered particles of a body:

"When Ibrahim said: 'O God, show me how you bring the dead back to life, ' God responded, 'Do you not believe?' He said, 'I do, but I wish my heart to be reassured.' So God said, 'Choose four types of birds, and mix their flesh together, and place portions on the top of mountains. Then summon the birds, and they will come hastening to you. You will then know that God is empowered over all things and is aware of the truth of all things.'" (2:260).

Ibrahim was rationally and logically convinced of the truth of resurrection, but he wished also to witness it in sensory fashion. He posed the very wise question of how the dead are brought back to life.

One may believe in a variety of things without being aware of their precise nature, a simple example being that we believe in the reality of radio and television without knowing anything of how the sounds and images reach us.

Ibrahim believed in the principle of resurrection and the renewal of life, but he wished also to understand how the dead are brought back to life, to know it directly by means of a concrete example, and to satisfy his inner feelings by means of sensory experience.

After Ibrahim witnessed that remarkable scene, he was instructed to ponder upon it and to realize that God is capable of all things and that given His infinite knowledge and power it is a small matter for Him to identify and reassemble the scattered particles of the dead.

Imam al-Sajjad, upon whom be peace, said:

"At the time of resurrection men's bodies will grow out of the ground like plants. The particles that were transformed into earth will rejoin each other, through the will and the power of God, so that if even a thousand people should have been buried in the same grave and their flesh and their rotting bones intermingled, they will separate on the day of resurrection; the earthly remains of each dead person will be quite distinct." (Li'ali al-Akhbar, p. 456)

There are many clear verses in the Qur'an, additional to those we have cited, which point clearly to the nature of resurrection. They refute all restriction of renewed life to the spirit, Using such expressions such as

"God will certainly resurrect the dead from their tombs" (22:6).

In another verse we read,

“You will return to Him just as He created you” (7: 29).

In concise and eloquent fashion, this verse draws the attention of man to his original creation, reminding him how the form of his body was fashioned from the various solid elements of the earth and from water. The different elements which were compounded in him had first existed in the form of foodstuffs fruits and vegetables scattered over the face of the earth or drops of water taken from the depths of the ocean to be transformed into vapor and rain.

Why then should man not believe that those same materials, separated from each other and scattered by wind and by storm, will be gathered together again and resume their previous shape and form? If the restoration of life is impossible, how is it that an exactly similar process took place at the beginning of creation?

From the moment that the spirit is connected to the human body, a special kind of union between the two comes into existence which becomes deeper and more complete with the passage of time. A precise and subtle affinity and harmony comes to prevail, as a result of which spirit and body fall under each other's influence; attributes of the spirit appear in the body, and attributes of the body appear in the spirit.

Even the occurrence of death and the separation of the spirit from the body combined with its transfer to another world do not bring this affinity to an end. The various changes that the spirit and the particles of the body separately undergo also fail to affect this affinity, and although the earthly particles of the body exist in different material circumstances from before, they retain their links with the spirit.

Thus the material body and the non-material spirit are linked through the very circumstances of their origin; acquiring a whole series of shared characteristics that further join them together, they retain their affinity throughout the changes and motions they separately undergo.

A corollary of this is that hidden within every drop of sperm are both spiritual characteristics and physical properties.

The affinity between body and spirit causes each spirit to incline in the direction of the body and its particles, by means of the appropriate motions that have come to adhere to the spirit, and also attracts each body towards the spirit, in accordance with a particular set of circumstances and a series of divinely decreed norms. After passing through various stages of change the body leaves its earthly form behind and by an act of God is transformed into a more perfect form, in which it resumes its close link and union with the spirit.

It is worth mentioning that the changes mentioned above are also repeated in the world of being. The earthly particles of our present body are the result of transformations that have taken place because of a

specific set of causes. Not only does the body take shape by means of those transformations; each body also is constantly renewed through the decay of the elements and particles that compose it and the replacement of those elements and particles by new ones.

The Noble Qur'an says the following about the comprehensive and all-embracing transformation by means of which the whole order of being will be changed into something other than itself:

“The day on which the heavens and earth will be changed into other than the heaven and earth, and all will be brought before God, the One and All-Powerful” (14:48).

The earthly particles of the human body follow therefore the general transformations that the whole order of being undergoes; they are transformed, in fact, in conjunction with the totality of that order, taking on a more complete aspect in which their true nature becomes apparent and man recovers his true being.

It must be remarked that although the body man will possess in the hereafter is fashioned from the particles of his present body and has the same shape, it will nonetheless have acquired new characteristics which are incompatible with the recognized criteria of this world and are inconceivable to our minds. Our body in the hereafter will be capable of new effects fully compatible with that realm, the comprehension of which, together its interrelations and the norms that govern it, requires a higher consciousness than we now possess.

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The Qur'an says the following, in expounding another matter concerning bodily resurrection;

“When they enter hellfire, their eyes and ears and the skins on their bodies shall give witness against them on account of the sins they have committed. They will address their skins asking them, ‘Why do you give witness against us?’ They will receive this answer: ‘The Lord Who gave speech to all things and Who first created you has given speech to us, too; certainly you will return to him.’” (41:20-21)

Here a remarkable, indeed shattering scene is described. No one expects the organs of his own body to rise up and bear witness against him in the tribunal of the hereafter. The skin of the body, which is closer to man than any other part of his physical being, has been chosen to testify concerning him.

Those who used to sin and do wrong in secret, because of their defective notions about the reach of God's knowledge, who strove to conceal the ugliness of their acts from the view of others, will see on that day that their eyes and the skin of their bodies, transformed into an organ of vision, have stood up to give testimony against them. In their astonishment they will therefore ask the organs of their bodies: “Why are you giving testimony against us?” They will receive a firm answer, delivered in tones of reproach by their bodily organs, “He is the Creator Who first brought you into existence and to Him you will return.”

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The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, said:

“Matters will succeed each other and ages will pass away, one after the other, until resurrection finally arrives. Then God will bring men forth from the pits of their tombs, from the nests of ravenous birds, from the lairs of wild animals, and from battlefields. They will hasten toward the divine presence, in obedience to God's command, to be sent on to their eternal abode. They will stand before Him, silent and in groups. Although their numbers will be vast, none of them will be hidden from God's limitless knowledge and penetrating vision.” (*Nahj al-Balagha*, ed. Subhi Salih, p. 108)

Certain verses also mention the body that man will have at resurrection as being similar to his body in this world. An example is:

“Although the skin on their body will burn, We will clothe them in new skins so they may taste the severity of our torment.” (4:56)

A terrifying panorama of prolonged sensory torment is conjured up here, showing that the painful punishment of the sinners will be constantly repeated.

Verses such as this in no way contradict the verses previously quoted, because the constantly renewed skins are fashioned from the same original skin; it is there alone that change and increase or decrease may take place.

It will be fitting an explanation given by Imam as-Sadiq, on whom be peace, which clarifies the lack of contradiction involved.

Someone once asked Imam as-Sadiq what sin those various skins had committed to make them deserving of chastisement. He answered that from one point of view they are the same as the original skin and from another point of view different from them. The man then asked him to explain the matter further by means of a comparison. The Imam said:

“Have you ever seen someone break a brick, and then pour it in a mold and restore it to its original shape? From one point of view the second brick is identical with the first, and from another point of view it is different from it.” (*Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. VII, p. 38)

Once the Prophet of Islam was speaking about bodily resurrection, a subject that was baffling, inexplicable and even unacceptable for the polytheists. They reacted therefore with their customary stupidity.

In that milieu where obsolete criteria and destructive superstitions had taken the place of free thought and decay had spread like the plague destroying the fabric of society, it was the aim of the Qur'an to guide the ailing minds of men to a search for the truth. The Qur'an thus reproduces the words of those

foolish ones as follows:

“The unbelievers shall say: ‘Shall we show to you a man who says that after you die and the particles of your body are scattered, you will be brought back to life? Is such a person a liar against God or is it lunacy that impels him to utter such words?’ No, it is those who do not believe in resurrection who will suffer torment in the hereafter and here they are misguided, far distant from salvation.” (34:7-8)

All these clear and categorical verses, which leave no room for symbolic interpretation, speak unmistakably of bodily resurrection.

To approach the matter from a different point of view, certain deductions can be made that permit us to conclude that the body and the soul are two entities linked together the mutual inclination of which brings man into being: whatever motion or activity arises from man in this world bear within it a part of both elements.

If we view the matter in this way, not only is there no need to postulate a separation between body and soul; we are also provided with a realistic indication that the two must necessarily be compounded anew in life after death.

We know that neither body nor soul represents a complete entity in itself if isolated from the other. The body is an instrument of the soul, and the role it plays in assuring the continuous activity of the soul is crucial.

All legislators throughout history have regarded legal and penal provisions as being addressed to man in both the dimensions of which he is compounded, the bodily and the spiritual, so that neither of these dimensions is forced to bear the burden of responsibility alone. In similar fashion, both dimensions are called to account jointly for their deeds when the final reckoning is made on the plain of resurrection.

Is it, indeed, conceivable that man should be held as legally accountable in this world with both dimensions, but in the hereafter all responsibility should be placed on the fragile shoulders of his spirit?

The fundamental purpose of resurrection is that human beings should attain ultimate felicity and complete the final stages of their development, by virtue of the pure belief they have held and the good deeds they have performed. The attainment of such an aim requires careful and precise planning, and all divine religions have therefore laid down a series of precepts and commands the fulfillment of which will enable man to reach the lofty summit for which he is destined.

The most practical and effective method for the fulfillment of this plan consists of simultaneously encouraging man and inducing fear in him; on the one hand establishing reward and giving the glad tidings of the infinite blessings of paradise, and on the other hand threatening him with punishment and warning him of torment and unendurable pain. Both reward and punishment must be recognizable and

perceptible to ordinary human perception for the final outcome of good deeds and the abandonment of evil to become firmly rooted in man's inner being.

Purely spiritual rewards and punishments would not be comprehensible for the masses of humanity; it is corporeal enjoyment and torment that are capable of arousing their attention. They both encourage man to do good deeds, in obedience to the law, and inspire in him fear of the consequences of violating the law.

For most people, the concept of pleasure is simultaneously corporeal and spiritual; few indeed are those who could adequately grasp the notion of purely spiritual pleasure or punishment.

This being the case, to promise men infinite joys of a spiritual nature or to warn them of an exclusively spiritual torment would not work a transforming effect in the depths of men's soul; it would be unable to control the disparate tendencies at work within man or to prevent him from entering the forbidden zone of sin.

It is only those whom God has chosen as His friends and possess accordingly sublime minds in whose souls the anticipation of non-material rewards will arouse the desire to obey even to love God's commands.

In addition, God's abundant favor and wisdom necessitate that He bestows all conceivable material and non-material blessings on His pure, sincere, and devoted servants, and that He should punish bloodthirsty and bestial tyrants with a comprehensive punishment that is both material and non-material. The comprehensiveness both of blessedness in the hereafter and of requital can be assured only by man being resurrected in both his dimensions.

The Qur'an promises both material and spiritual blessings to the virtuous and the pious:

“God promises the believers, both women and men, that He will cause them to enter a paradise where rivers flow beneath the trees, and have them dwell in splendid palaces. He will also bestow on them His pleasure and satisfaction, which is greater and loftier than material bounties. This spiritual reward is, in truth, the supreme achievement for the pure” (9:72).

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The Limited Capacity of the Earth

Some people might voice the objection that the globe cannot possibly accommodate on the day of resurrection all the human beings who have lived upon it throughout time. This objection is, however, completely unfounded, because as the Qur'an makes entirely clear, the orderly rotation of the heavens will be thoroughly disrupted when the end of the world comes.

An awesome power will grind the mountains into dust and scatter them in every direction; the sun and the moon will lose their familiar splendor and light and grow dark; and the whole coherent order of the universe, formed of sublime phenomena that are fashioned from the crudest of materials, will utterly collapse. An entirely new order and structure of creation will come into being on the silent and dead ruins of the old.

It can, then, be easily understood that any objection based on an alleged lack of space on the globe is quite unwarranted.

Those whose system of thought is opposed to the view of believers in God and who are accustomed to raising all kinds of objections also raise another question. They point out that the cells in the human body are replaced annually so that every individual changes his physical form several times in the course of his life, gradually and imperceptibly.

Now it is obvious that every body performs acts, in the course of its specific lifespan, that deserve reward or punishment; which body will it be, however, that must ultimately held responsible for those deeds at the time of resurrection?

The answer to this objection is obvious. Given the fact that each new cell inherits the characteristics and attributes of its predecessor so that even the external appearance of the body is indistinguishable from the old, it is plain that the final body of man represents a compendium of the attributes of all the preceding bodies.

The resurrection of the last body which is visible to us is therefore tantamount to the resurrection of all its predecessors.

Scarcity of Matter and the Multitude of Men

Another objection which is raised is that of the limited nature of the earthly materials which contain in themselves the remains of countless men who have been turned into earth. It is said that the amount of earth presently available will not suffice for the fashioning anew of so many people.

The baselessness of this objection, which does not originate in any serious search for the truth, becomes obvious when we make the following calculations.

Every square kilometer of earth is enough for making a hundred million men. This amount occupies a very paltry portion of the earth's surface, but it would be enough for refashioning twenty times the present population of the world.

Based on this calculation, an extremely small plot of land would yield enough material for making anew the bodies of billions upon billions of men, so the objection that the raw materials needed for resurrecting so many people would be lacking turns out to be groundless.

Furthermore, one of the properties of matter is that it takes on different forms. If for example the atoms comprising one cubic meter of stone are split, they can occupy millions of cubic meters of space; their dimensions expand to an unimaginable degree.

The Qur'an proclaims:

“A day will come on which the earth will be transformed into other than itself” (14:48).

The Eater and the Eaten

There is a very ancient and interesting objection that we should not pass over in silence. This relates to the transformation of the particles of the bodies of the deceased into substances that are then consumed by others, causing those particles to become intermingled with the bodies of others.

It is true that not a single human body can be found which is entirely free of contamination by other elements. However, this intermingling with alien substances is so slight, in the circumstances of this world, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as to be imperceptible. However, it is conceivable that when bodies are reconstructed in the hereafter a kind of rivalry and struggle for the possession of certain materials may take place.

It is entirely possible that this struggle should not be confined to two individuals, taking place instead among a number of claimants each seeking possession of a certain particle as its true owner. Who should in fact take possession of it?

This then is the problem.

When we look back to the first sign of life, we see that we began as monocellular beings. Then our body took shape through the multiplication and growth of the different parts and limbs of our body. In the past, it was imagined that our personality and our physical characteristics were contained only in the mass of reproductive cells, but it is known now that they are present within each individual cell. Each cell acts separately as a mirror in which the whole appearance of man is reflected. This holds true not only of man but also of all other living creatures.

This being the case, if even a single cell from man's body, with the entirety of his personality inscribed within it, is placed in suitable circumstances, it is capable of undertaking by itself the entire task of reconstructing the body, through dividing and giving birth to new cells.

Now if particles of the body become absorbed into the structure of another, the particles belonging to that individual will return to their original locus. By thus returning the particles it had borrowed from a stranger, the second body will in fact be preserving its own original being. It should also be stressed that since each of the two bodies retains its respective characteristics even though their constituent elements become intermingled, there is nothing to prevent each of them from displaying anew its respective

identity. Even if the original particles left over from each body be exceedingly few even if, for example, only a single cell survives it will still be possible for that body to reconstruct itself, and nothing can prevent it from doing so.

In any event, irrespective of whether the work of repair and reconstruction be completed swiftly or gradually, every particle retains the capacity of building anew the original body, just as that body once emerged from a single drop of sperm.

The same problem can be solved in another way.

As we know, the body is engaged in constant dissolution and replacement. The entire bodily frame changes once every few years, gradually and imperceptibly. If a person appropriates elements of the being of another, directly or indirectly, using them to nurture himself, it is obvious that only a part of that stranger becomes intermingled with him, for he is, after all, a complete person in his own right. Out of all the nutrition that a person consumes, only three percent is absorbed into his body. Why then should the remaining ninety seven percent which is not absorbed into the body, not be available for the resurrection of the individual with whom they originated?

Apart from this, in accordance with the laws of physics, all forms of energy in the world may be transformed into each other, given the appropriate conditions. Man is himself a source for the production of energy and even after his death his body is transformed from one form of energy into another. At the time of resurrection, all the energies of living beings will exist in utter freedom, and they will be able to return to their original form by means of a kind of inverted reaction. The mere fact that we do not know precisely how this change will take place does not give us the right to dismiss it as impossible.

As for punishment in the hereafter, it should be realized that what causes pain and torment has a connection to the spirit, so that if part of the body of a believer become attached to that of an unbeliever, it is the unbeliever that will suffer the pain of torment not the believer.

In addition to all the foregoing, it must be stated that it is entirely possible for God to restore life to a body that has changed, gradually and imperceptibly, the cells composing its brain, nerves and bones, as much as ten times in the course of a lifetime. Any individual today is different from what he was ten years ago. It is a matter of indifference to which of those versions of the body the spirit be rejoined at resurrection, for that upon which the humanity of an individual depends and which serves as the guarantor of the uniqueness of his personality, is the non-material spirit, which is charged with the administration and governance of his body from its first appearance until death.

From the first beginning of creation down to the present, billions of human beings have come into existence, and even if they now lie intermingled with each other, the spiritual characteristics of each of them remain utterly distinct. If a person committed a crime ten years ago, it cannot be said that since his physical form has changed, he should not be tried in place of that person who committed the crime ten years ago.

If we offset a book, the new printing will be exactly the same as the old, although the paper and binding may be different.

Since man needs matter as the means whereby he manifests his existence, he must necessarily be resurrected with his body. However, it is not at all necessary that an individual come back to life at resurrection with all the forms his body has had from birth to death; it can be said that they all appear together in a single form at the time of resurrection.

If this be true, it completely disposes of the objection that particles which have transferred from one body to another cannot be simultaneously present in two persons at the time of resurrection.

Furthermore, the real dimensions of the body are composed of a single insignificant atom; the rest is made up of empty space. If some powerful form of pressure were brought to bear on the body, making it compact and eliminating the spaces between its electrons, the basic matter of the body would be seen to be a minute atom visible only to a microscope.

It is therefore not at all necessary for the spaces between the particles of the body to be recreated at resurrection; it will be quite sufficient for the particles themselves (either some of them or all of them) to return.

None of the possibilities mentioned above should be regarded as categorical answers to the problems posed by the restoration of life to man; they are merely avenues to understanding that lie within our reach. We cannot restrict our reflections on this subject to the arguments set out above. Our aim has been only to prove that doubts and objections such as those we have reviewed should not be allowed to affect our basic belief in resurrection and the restoration of life to the body which is so strongly emphasized by the revealed religions, especially, the Qur'an.

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