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Contributors

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Royal College of Surgeons of England

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MATTER AND SPIRIT.

(*Read by MR. SERJEANT COX, the President,*
January 20th, 1876.)

THE very interesting discussion on Materialism, and some incidental remarks of the speakers who have taken part in other debates, have conspicuously shown that the terms "matter" and "spirit" do not carry with them to most minds definite and distinct conceptions of *the things* intended to be thereby expressed. It is apparent also that there prevails a very wide divergence of view even upon so much as is conceived of them. The very word "Materialism," as used in the debated paper by its distinguished author, had been manifestly read in almost as many senses as there were speakers, insomuch that some saw in it a recognition by Professor TYNDALL of the existence of *Soul*, while others could see a recognition of nothing but *matter*. Hence the assertion that in matter he finds "the promise and the potency of every form of being" has been construed as merely an assertion that everything that is is matter, therefore that "spirit" is only a form of matter, and therefore that the Professor is no more a Materialist than are we who claim for man a *Soul* as well as a body. If the terms had been first defined and that definition observed by the speakers, one half at least of the present discussion would have been avoided.

But the question is sure to recur continually in the papers and debates of the Society. *Matter* and *Spirit* are the bases of almost all psychological science. Controversy must be endless and worthless unless the disputants first agree upon some common meaning to be given to the terms used in their arguments. We shall have these questions presenting themselves again and again in this Society, and they will produce the same unsatisfactory waste of words unless once for all we assign to them a sense in which they are to be taken for the purposes of debate in this room and of use in our published papers.

But let it not go forth that what we propose is to dictate a definition, to be received as being in itself a perfect one. That would be an impertinence. Nothing more is designed than to indicate the sense in which the words should be taken in the discussions and papers of "The Psychological Society," with a view to keeping them more directly to the point at issue, and to prevent the loss of time and labour that must always result when disputants are without mutual knowledge of the fact that they are using the same words in different senses. This indeed is the source of nine-tenths of all the controversies that ever have been. If the same words were always used by all in the same sense, the majority of the disputes of the world would be instantly extinguished.

We cannot as a Society attempt to impose our own meaning of terms upon others. But we may well and worthily recognise it among ourselves. I know of nothing that would more promote the objects of such an association as this. There are many terms that must be of continual use in our science, by strictly defining which at the beginning we may immensely abbreviate our own researches. Remember that the special work of this Society—that indeed for which alone it exists—is to collect

reports of facts and phenomena, and to base science upon them by discussion. If two or more speakers submit to us their inferences from those facts, it will be impossible for the members to form a judgment of the relative nature of the views submitted to them if the words in the argument of one are employed in a different sense from the same words in the other argument. The Society may therefore properly say *to its own members*, "In our own proceedings these terms shall carry with them the meaning we assign to them. In that sense only you must use them here, and in that sense only will they be accepted and understood *by us*."

These doubtful terms are not very numerous. There will be no practical difficulty in resolving how they shall be used by the Society. Thus a list may gradually be formed, as experience discovers them, and circulated for common use. But there are two terms of immediate importance because of their daily recurrence.

"*Matter*" and "*Spirit*."

Already we have found some who say, in effect, "I mean by matter the same as you mean by spirit," and others who say, "I mean by spirit the same as you mean by matter." In the recent debates here on Materialism, speakers on one side contended that spirit was matter, and speakers on the other side that matter was spirit.

They may be so in fact—but certainly the terms as used, or as they are supposed to be used, do not intend the same thing, nor can it be reasonably supposed that they are designed to bear the same meaning.

At all events it must be the care of the Society, not only to see that in their proceedings these terms are not substituted one for the other, but to have it clearly understood that they are not synonymous, that they have essentially different meanings, and indicate different things,

as also what are the different things that are intended to be described when they are employed in the proceedings of the Society.

Some argue thus for *matter*: "All that is must be made of something—otherwise it would be a nothing, and that something, whatever it be, is what we call matter—therefore all that is is material, and that is all we design to express when we speak of *matter*, and call ourselves *materialists*. Even if there be what you call *soul* or *spirit*, it would be made of what we thus call matter. Therefore, you are materialists, like ourselves."

This is the popular form of the argument, and it is a very convenient one for those who want courage to avow their true opinions. In fact it is merely an evasion of the question. The term "*matter*" is always employed in a more restricted sense. No disputant intends to express by it all that is, for then there would be nothing to dispute about. All really mean, by *matter*, some part only of being, whatever that part may be. It is in that sense we distinguish what we call "*matter*" from what we call "*spirit*." What we choose to call matter may include the thing we call "*spirit*." Let it be so. But when you are contending that there is no such thing as "*spirit*," we cannot permit you to evade it by saying "*spirit* is matter."

Taking "*matter*" then to be only one of the forms of created being, it is not difficult to define it for practical use in psychological discussion. The basis of that definition is very intelligible, and may be briefly stated.

The ultimate particle of which all things are constructed is "*the atom*." Atoms combine in various proportions, probably innumerable. Of these atomic structures, we know but one, because the human senses are constructed to have perception but of one, namely, that par-

particular combination of atoms which composes molecules—which molecules are the ultimate form of being that is perceptible to the human senses.

One only of what is doubtless an infinite variety of atomic combinations in creation being perceptible to us—that is to say, our senses being constructed to perceive but that one particular combination of atoms that forms what Science calls molecules, these are in fact the ultimate particles of all that can be seen, felt, heard, tasted by us. The entire of that small fraction of creation that is perceptible to our senses is composed of molecules, and molecular structure is controlled by a certain class of laws we term the physical or natural laws, and are moved by certain physical forces whose existence is only known to us by their action upon molecular structure.

This, then, is “matter,” or what alone we call “matter.” Whatever is of molecular structure is “matter,” and therefore “*matter*” is *whatever is perceptible to the human senses.* There might be about us a whole Universe of things constructed of some other combination of atoms than that we call molecular, and they would be wholly unseen, unfelt, unknown to us. We should be in absolute ignorance of their presence.

“Matter,” then, for the purposes of Psychological science, and as it is desired to be understood within the Psychological Society, and in which sense only it will be recognised in their proceedings, is *that combination of atoms which alone is perceptible to the human senses.* Whatever any human sense, unaided or aided, can perceive, is “matter.” All things perceptible to any human sense are *material.* Nothing that is not made of molecules can affect any human sense, which is excited only by the impinging upon it of something that is material—that is, of molecular structure. We do not feel the physical

forces themselves ; we feel only the impact of the molecules they move.

This is a simple, clear, and very definite conception of *matter*, and if the term were always used in this sense, what a world of worthless controversy would be swept away !

What, then, in Psychological Science, is *spirit* ? As distinguished from *matter*, it is simply non-molecular structure, that is to say, some one, or more, possibly all, of the many combinations of atoms other than the molecular, but which combinations are imperceptible to our senses. *Spirit is all of being that our senses are not constructed to perceive.*

It may well be—perhaps it is—that *matter* and *spirit* are distinctions that are more in ourselves than in themselves. The seeming difference between them may be the result of our own limited powers of perception. It is certain that, if we had one sense more, we should perceive much that now is imperceptible to us, and in such case that which now is *spirit* to us would be *matter* to us. On the other hand, if we had been gifted with one sense the less, much that is now *matter* to us would be *spirit* to us. But the distinction is not the less real to us in our present condition of existence, nor the less to be recognized by Science.

It is the province of Physicists to deal only with perceptible matter, and to trace the forces by which it is moved and the laws by which it is governed. They rightly recognise this as their special work.

But not content with their own domain, they travel out of it to assert, without examination or evidence of any kind, that there is *no* atomic combination other than molecular, or that if there be, as it is imperceptible by the senses, it is unknowable, even unthinkable ; that inasmuch as we cannot seize and submit it to the scalpel and the crucible, we are unable even to prove its existence, much less to

learn its nature and qualities, and, consequently, that Psychology is no science.

But Psychologists contend that they can learn the presence and character of things which are imperceptible to the senses by precisely the same process as the Physicists learn the qualities of the imperceptible forces of magnetism, that is to say by observing the operations of such imperceptible being upon the molecular structure that is perceptible.

Spirit, then, in the scientific sense in which it is recognised and used by the Psychological Society, is not used in the popular sense of the term, *Spirits*, *Ghosts*, and *Hobgoblins*; but in the contemplation of Psychologists *Spirit* is whatever existence there may be in the world or elsewhere that is imperceptible to our senses, but as real and substantial as ourselves.

"*Matter*," then, is the structure which alone our senses are constructed to perceive.

When we say that a thing is *material*, we mean only that it is made of that which is perceptible to us.

When we speak of *spirit*, we mean anything formed of some other than a combination of atoms which alone is perceptible to us.

When we speak of a *Spirit*, we mean any intelligent being formed of some such non-material structure, and consequently imperceptible to us.

When we use the term *Materialism*, we mean the doctrine that Man is made of *matter* only, that is, of molecules, and that his material mechanism is not associated with any non-material intelligent being other than the material body.

When we speak of a *Materialist*, we mean nothing more than one whose doctrine is that Man is wholly material; that there is of him nothing but the body, which dies

and is dissipated, and that there is not in that body or associated with it anything in the nature of *Soul* or *Spirit*, or by whatever name we may be pleased to call it.

I hope that the Society will be enabled to define other disputable terms, not, of course, presuming to do so with any design to impose its own definitions upon the public out of doors, but for the special purpose of securing something approaching to common thought and speech among ourselves in the pursuit of the Science to which the Society is devoted.

For the special feature of this Society is that, departing from established methods, it proposes to pursue the Science of Psychology as all other Science is now pursued, by the collection of facts and the observation of phenomena.
