
Is Death Merely the Ultimate Void?

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Many people think that the ultimate void is death. But is it? To many, the concept of the void is as dead as the dodo.

There was a time, not so long ago, when it was generally agreed that vacuum was the ultimate nothing - the absence of all matter, devoid of everything. But as new and new instruments made it possible to get greater and greater degrees of vacuum, some doubts began to emerge on this theory.

Could one ever achieve complete vacuum? No matter how much complete the vacuum is, one can always make it more complete. And then the exploration of space brought to fore the conception of vacuum that scientists could never have dreamed of earlier. It was many many times more complete than scientists could ever dream of achieving in their labs. And, as we could visibly make out, even that was not complete: there were massive amounts of matter there...in fact a full 10 followed by 69 zeros of grams i.e. thousand million million million million million million million million million million tonnes of matter!

But in this debris of voids there is still one great void that, though it has never been explored, is still accepted by scientists as complete and totally irreversible.

That great void is DEATH. In many respects it is the ultimate void.

One moment you are: the next you are not. It's as complete as that. In the thousands of years of collective memory that survives, there has not been one verified case of a person who has returned from this void. At least not in body and soul still intact and as it was before.

There are no parallels to the phenomenon of death amongst all the phenomena studied so far by science. When you mix, let us say, milk and water, it is not the case of the water disappearing into the great void: actually it remains intact in the milk and by suitable physical means can still be separated.

When wood or coal burns, it is merely a case of chemical transformation: the carbon in the wood combines with the oxygen of the air and combines to form carbon dioxide. None of them really disappears into the void: both oxygen and carbon remain embedded in the gas.

Similarly, when an atom splits, as in the atomic bomb, it is still not a phenomenon similar to death: it is now merely a case of nuclear transformation. The atom of plutonium or uranium, as the case may be, gets 'fissioned' into atoms of smaller atomic number: there is no getting into a void. Similar has been the case with any number of these transformations that scientists have been able to study so far.

An important matter like death is not an area scientists like to study: since they confine their studies to areas that are amenable to experimental study which, for obvious reasons, issues like 'after death what?' are not, scientists are not likely to engage themselves in trying to find answers to such questions. Which is a shame since scientists could otherwise have at least endeavored to find an answer.

One remembers the story of the scientist who was trying to find out the taste of potassium cyanide. It is said that he could only write the letter S before he collapsed. It didn't give us much information, though, since it could be sweet or sour;

or even saline!

But any experimental study on 'after death what?' may not yield even this much information. But it still does not preclude theoretical studies. Or speculations.

Is death too a transformation, a mere change of phase or of structure? Whatever scientists believe, religious leaders and savants do believe this to be true.

Most religions and philosophies refuse to believe that man is only flesh, blood and bone: they believe that there is a soul too and it is that that gives life and the *elan vital*. Death for them is merely a phase change for the soul though it may mean the end of the body.

The Bhagvat Gita states that it is like one person changing one set of clothes for another: the soul remains imperishable and unchanging while the body is changed from time to time.

Death for them is no more important event than the sunrise or the sunset. It merely marks the milestones in the journey of the soul from one phase to another; just as water becomes ice and vice versa depending upon the existence of certain factors.

The Christian belief, though it seems different, is on the same track. Death may not be the changing of clothes but still is the end of one phase and the beginning of another in the 'hereafter' after the Day of Judgment.

Nowhere do the differences between religion and philosophy on the one hand and science on the other come out so sharply as on the question of death. But should the divergence really be there? Is there any chance for the differences to be reconciled?

As we noted, death really means that at one moment one is there and the next he is not. Whether it is the soul that leaves him or something else happens, the result is the same: man is thrust into the great void. We had earlier noted that this was nowhere near what happened in all transformations that science had studied so far.

It was no doubt true of all transformations studied so far. Well, nearly all but not quite all.

In the last three or four decades scientists have been talking of the existence of anti-matter: matter which in all respects is symmetrical with matter but is the mirror image of it. The existence of anti-matter has now been proved in the lab too. The beauty is that were matter and anti-matter to come together, both would be annihilated: that is in place of the two of them there would be a great void, a void which is even more absolute and complete than space. A void which can only be compared to Death.

Can the study of particle-anti particle interactions give us any clue to the phenomenon that they resemble so closely i.e. to Death? Well, it seems we will have to wait for the scientists to make further findings before they tell us.