

The Vital Spark

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As he performed the autopsy, Edward Curtis removed Abraham Lincoln's brain. "We proceeded to remove the entire brain, when, as I was lifting the latter from the cavity of the skull, suddenly the bullet dropped out through my fingers and fell, breaking the solemn silence of the room with its clatter, into an empty basin that was standing beneath. There it lay upon the white china, a little black mass no bigger than the end of my finger—dull, motionless, and harmless, yet the cause of such mighty changes in the world's history as we may perhaps never realize."

In a letter to his mother, Curtis continues his description with this poignant passage: "As I looked at the mass of soft gray and white substance that I was carefully washing, it was impossible to realize that it was that mere clay upon whose workings, but the day before, rested the hopes of the nation. I felt more profoundly impressed than ever with the mystery of that unknown something which may be named 'vital spark' as well as anything else, whose absence or presence makes all the immeasurable difference between an inert mass of matter owing obedience to no laws but those covering the physical and chemical forces of the universe, and on the other hand, a living brain by whose silent, subtle machinery a world may be ruled."

Regardless of one's metaphysical perspective, whether religious, atheist, or mystic, the mystery and value of the "vital spark" and the hurt of its loss in someone dear is nearly universal. This sense of loss, this deep understanding that something overwhelmingly *valuable* is gone when someone dies, is a shared human experience. All agree there is an incalculable difference between the living and dead. Yet despite this similarity, each of these groups understands the nature of the "vital spark" within fundamentally different worldviews.

The goal here is to paint in broad strokes a feel for a *humanist* understanding of the extraordinary and wonderful phenomenon to which "vital spark" refers. The intent is not to define consciousness, life, or personhood, nor to advocate for any particular phrase. Rather, the aim is to characterize the humanist framework in which consciousness and the experience of living are understood and valued.

What, then, are the characteristics of a humanist understanding of this vital spark? First, the vital spark is fundamentally *personal*. It is experienced as a unique, individual, here-on-Earth phenomenon. It is not a manifestation of a universal consciousness and does not contain a supernatural core. The experience of life as understood by a humanist is as a unique, personal, and natural being. It is this unique subjective experience of life that gives it meaning and value. During Lincoln's autopsy, Mary Todd Lincoln sent a messenger in to request a lock of her husband's hair. A tuft was clipped from the slain president's head for her. A humanist appreciates both the scientific results of the autopsy *and* the personal, heart-wrenching, subjective meaning of Todd's request and Curtis's emotions. By recognizing this vital spark in others—by appreciating that others can feel, experience, and have conscious preferences—a sense of value for others emerges and a foundation for ethics can begin without any need for external supernatural justification.

Second, the vital spark is *natural*—that is, it is from and of nature, an emergent phenomenon from the staggering interaction of matter and energy in evolved minds. “Spark” in this sense is used as a poetic metaphor for the ineffable phenomenon of what it is like to be aware, be conscious, and have emotional, felt experiences. Awareness is a phenomenon of minds, which are phenomena of brains, which are phenomena of billions of years of evolution acting on life, which is a phenomenon of our natural universe. There is no literal, actual transcendent spark, substance, force, or intelligence detachable or separate from the complex emergent interactions of matter, energy, and natural phenomena.

A third characteristic is a profound sense of luck and thankfulness at being able to experience life at all. The odds of a “specific me” existing are so statistically and incalculably improbable, it is a deep wonder just to be alive. Not only is the vital spark of conscious experience rare in our known universe, an individual's vital spark is unique to oneself. The fact that it is *me* rather than some other consciousness is lucky for me beyond measure, a result of good fortune rather than ordained providence or plan.

Fourth, there is not a whiff of credible evidence that the unique vital spark that constitutes a particular person's consciousness continues after death. The vital spark cannot exist apart from the physical. This is the one chance we get. We are sole individuals, not individuals with souls. The influence, preciousness, and value of an individual's vital spark—a person's essence—is felt only among the living.

The vital spark is worthy of our wonder, since we recognize its unfathomable complexity and rarity. It is worthy of our value, since we recognize its unique, precious, personal quality. It is worthy of our morality, since we recognize its existence in others and our capacity to affect both our own and others' experiences.

In this way, the vital spark may be the most complex phenomenon in our known universe. Scientific language may not always be able to capture the fullness and wonder of being able to feel, experience, and be aware. But if expressive phrases such as “vital spark” are to be employed, secular humanists had best make explicitly clear their use and meaning within a naturalistic framework to avoid any misinterpretation, any veering into vitalism or

supernaturalism. One key difference is that a secular humanist understands a phrase like “vital spark” as a *description*, not an explanation.

The phrase “vital spark” is an example of a poetic, metaphoric way of expressing the felt conscious and emotional experience of living itself, with its joys, pains, strivings, and understandings. The humanist understanding of the vital spark embraces this personal, unique value while simultaneously placing this understanding in the context of modern scientific knowledge and a naturalistic worldview. Within this framework, the humanist stance strives to improve personal, individual lives by dealing with issues such as fulfillment, justice, freedom, society, relationships, and happiness.

The humanist understanding of the vital spark in its naturalist context can ignite a firestorm of passion, action, and meaning as flammable as the spark of any other worldview. The humanist, scientific understanding of the vital spark is not a chilled and sterile alternative to some warmer, harp-music-in-the-background vision. The humanist understanding of the vital spark, embracing science and reason as well the fullness of subjective experience, is as magnificent, inspiring, and meaningful as that of any worldview.

This naturalist understanding has the added power of being consistent with mountains of scientific evidence. True to this scientific character, our understanding of the vital spark can *change* as evidence changes. New findings in cognitive science, psychology, philosophy, and biology continue to enhance our understanding of our origins, our connections to all of life, our understandings of brain and mind, our dependence on our natural world, and our possible future. While human meaning and consequences are derived from a myriad of subjective sources and experiences, humanists also value science, reason, and evidence as guides to a more objective understanding. The felt *experience* of a person’s vital spark exists in its owner alone, but an *understanding* of it can be a shared scientific and philosophical enterprise. Modern science enhances our understanding but does not diminish the power or value of felt experience one bit.

Times have changed, and evolution, cosmology, and psychology have revolutionized our modern understanding of our connection to nature. As Lincoln himself wrote, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.”

According to a humanist understanding, a person’s vital spark is *of* the world. It is embodied, not incorporeal. It is emergent, not ethereal. It is natural, not supernatural. It is, as experienced, an individually unique phenomenon, not a component of any supernatural plan, mystical realm, or platonic ideal. It is valuable for itself. It is a source of love, conscious action, ethics, and personal meaning. It is a marvel.

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