Crabb Robinson and Questions of Pre-Existence and the Afterlife in the 1830s

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I

DURING HIS TIME AS A STUDENT AND TRAVELER in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century, Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867) found his initial introduction to various forms of the 'New Philosophy' a useful means for exploring the divide between what he believed to be the two competing foundations of religious knowledge – 'reason and sentiment', the mind and the heart.[2] By the time he returned to England in 1805, he had set aside his views on Godwinian scepticism and Priestleyan materialism for a more deistic belief in a moral universe governed by a benevolent Deity whose providence embraces both necessity and free will. Apart from his belief in the immortality of the soul, Robinson stood aloof at that time from most of the central doctrines of orthodox Christianity and any emphasis upon religious 'experience', prompting him to write in 1804, 'All the questions of religion & in particular concerning revelation appear to me so little & so low'.[3]

Not so 'low', however, as to relinquish altogether his alliance with Unitarianism that had begun in the early 1790s, but his attachment to the denomination would be more social than doctrinal for the next two decades. During the 1820s, however, his religious ambivalence began to unravel, resulting in a near two-decade long quest for a degree of religious certainty that would prove intellectually and emotionally satisfying to Robinson the rational Dissenter. He closed his diary for 1823 with the following confession: 'I have become more & more desirous to be religious, but seem to be further off than ever – Whenever I draw near – The negative side of the magnet works. And I am pushed back by an invisible power.'[4] Robinson would soon find a positive pole in the writings of the American Quaker John Woolman (1720-72), a man who possessed a 'beautiful soul' and whose *Journal* Robinson described as 'a perfect gem' of Christian benevolence, reminding Robinson of his earlier experience with the Moravians at Ebersdorf, Germany, in September 1801.[5] 'If one could venture to impute to his ~~faith~~ creed', Robinson adds, '& not to his

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[1] This is the revised text of the inaugural public lecture to launch the Henry Crabb Robinson Project, delivered by Timothy Whelan at Dr Williams's Library, London, on Wednesday 3 June 2015.

[2] James Vigus, *Henry Crabb Robinson: Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010), 31; for more on Robinson in Germany, see James Vigus, 'Henry Crabb Robinson's Initiation into the 'Mysteries of the New School': A Romantic Journey', in *Romantic Localities: Europe Writes Place*, ed. Christoph Bode and Jacqueline Labbe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 131-44; and Eugene Stelzig, 'A Cultural Tourist in Romantic Germany: Henry Crabb Robinson as Nineteenth-Century Life Writer', *Biography* 28 (2005), 515-33; and Stelzig, *Henry Crabb Robinson in Germany: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Life Writing* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2010).

[3] Vigus, *Henry Crabb Robinson* 58.

[4] Crabb Robinson Diary, 31 December 1823, 10: f. 81, Dr Williams's Library, London. All quotations from Robinson's Diary, Travel Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence are by permission of the Director and the Trustees of Dr Williams's Library [hereafter DWL].

[5] Robinson wrote to his brother Thomas of his experience with the Moravians: 'I have never seen a private body of people [not even the Quakers] … which seems to approach so near to my *Ideal* of Christianity as the Moravians'. Edith Morley, *Crabb Robinson in Germany, 1800-1805* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 82.

personal character the delightful frame of mind which he exhibited, one could not hesitate to be a convert[.] His Christianity is most inviting – It is fascinating."[6] Woolman's positive pole was soon countered by the sermons and writings of Edward Irving (1792-1834), the dynamic Scotsman whose charismatic style and strident evangelicalism intrigued Robinson in the mid-1820s. After reading his sermon, *For Judgment to Come, an Argument,* a work Robinson argues was 'written rather to alarm than persuade', Robinson was struck by the differences between the two religious figures. Whereas Irving's orthodoxy exuded a reasoned confidence in his understanding of divine judgment, Woolman's 'whole existence and all his passions were love!'[7] In November 1825, after hearing Irving preach on 'Justification by Faith', Robinson lamented, 'That which *he* [Irving] calls religion & the gospel is a something I have a repugnance to I must indeed be *new born* before I can accept it But his eloquence is captivating.'[8]

Between these extremes of Woolman's emphasis on sentiment and religious 'passions' and Irving's stress on doctrine and a proper knowledge of scripture, Robinson would discover two other religious writers in the 1820s and '30s who helped him mediate this divide between reason and sentiment, doctrine and practice, scriptural revelation and personal experience. One was Wilhelm Benecke (1776-1837), a German manufacturer who lived in London between 1813 and 1828 and whose friendship with Robinson flourished in the 1820s. Benecke's theological and philosophical opinions would challenge many of Robinson's accepted notions of rational Christianity. The other was Isaac Taylor (1787-1865), the son of an engraver and orthodox Dissenting minister at Colchester and Ongar and the brother of Jane and Ann Taylor, pioneers in the genre of children's literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both Benecke and Taylor argued for faith and Christian doctrine within a scheme that incorporated spirituality and rationality, but it was Benecke's position on pre-existence and Taylor's on post-existence that most enticed Robinson to these men. In the end, however, neither Benecke's idea of a rational *faith* nor Taylor's appeal to a rational *revelation* would satisfy Robinson's quest 'to be religious'.

II

Though Crabb Robinson viewed his friend primarily as a mystical theologian, Wilhelm Benecke spent most of his adult life in business, first as an early innovator in the field of insurance and later as a chemical manufacturer. In the late 1790s, while living in Hamburg, Benecke studied maritime insurance, eventually establishing his own company and publishing the first scientific work in that field in Hamburg in 1807, with an English edition appearing in

[6] Crabb Robinson Diary, 22 January 1824, vol. 10, f. 90.
[7] Crabb Robinson Diary, 22 January 1824, vol. 10, f. 90.
[8] Crabb Robinson Diary, 20 November 1825, 11: ff. 150-51.

1824.[9] A succession of French invasions destroyed his company, forcing Benecke to remove to England in 1813, where he began a second career, opening a chemical manufactory in Deptford. He regained his wealth and in 1828 returned to Heidelberg, Germany, devoting the final decade of his life to theological studies.[10]

Robinson and Benecke first met in August 1819, but Robinson did not provide a substantive diary entry on Benecke's religious views until 24 December 1826. Robinson had had several conversations that month with Benecke concerning his theology, which, though embracing orthodox terminology, was overtly heterodox in its insistence upon the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul, a belief Robinson had long contemplated. Benecke's son would later describe his father's belief in pre-existence as the master plan of an 'all-loving God, who by an immeasurable sacrifice of His own blissful existence, guides the spirits fallen through their own transgressions, through a series of different existences to perfection and happiness'.[11] According to Benecke, the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden should be read as an allegory of humanity's fall from a prior pristine existence into this current world of sin. Robinson attempted to summarize in his December 1826 diary entry the essence of Benecke's views on pre-existence and its ramifications for two other important doctrines, necessity and free will:

> The garden of Eden in which *Adam* is said to be placed intimates a prior & better state of existence in which *all men were* And in which they all sinned – All men come into this world with a character acquired in that prior state And every act which a man does springs out of that character – The doctrine of necessity therefore is true, in as much as that doctrine deduces all actions from the inevitable effect of external operations on the mind in a given state, that state having sprung necessarily out of the first state in which man came into this world – Christianity shews how man is to be redeemed from this fallen condition[.][12]

[9] See Wilhelm Benecke, *System des Assekuranz und Bodmereiwesens, aus den Gesetzen und Gebräuchen Hamburgs und der vorzüglichsten handelnden Nationen Europens so wie aus der Natur des Gegestandes*, 5 vols (Hamburg, 1807-21); English edition, *A Treatise on the Principles of Indemnity in Marine Insurance, Bottomry and Respondentia, and on their Practical Application* (London: Baldwin, Cradock & Joy, 1824). Robinson assisted Benecke in 1823 in his preparations for the English edition. For a more complete account of their friendship, see Timothy Whelan, 'Wilhelm Benecke, Crabb Robinson, and 'rational faith', 1819-1837', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* 26.1 (2015), 51-78.

[10] Two books emerged from his labors: *Der Brief Pauli an die Römer* (Heidelberg, 1831), translated into English and published as *An Exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* in 1854 by his son, Friedrich Wilhelm Benecke; and *Grundzüge der Wahrheit*, published posthumously in Berlin in 1838 by his other son, Victor, and never translated into English. Another publication worth noting concerning Benecke is *Wilhelm Benecke's Lebensskizze und Briefe. Als Manuskript gedruckt*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Benecke, 2 vols (Dresden: Druck der Teubnerschen Offizin, 1850).

[11] Benecke, *Exposition* xii-xiii. The early Christian theologian Origen posited the pre-existence of souls in the third century in Alexandria, and Benecke is clearly indebted to him (Origen relies heavily on the book of Romans in his discussion of pre-existence in *De Principiis*, Book I, ch. 9), though historically the Christian church has considered such opinions heretical. Origen's notion of a 'spiritual body', taken from the Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians and also discussed in *De Principiis*, Book II, ch. 10), likewise connects him with Isaac Taylor. See Origen, *De Principiis*, in *Anti-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 10: *The Writings of Origen*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 126-44.

[12] Crabb Robinson Diary, 12: f. 105.

The 'rationality' of pre-existence was a position Robinson first embraced during his time as a student in Jena *c.* 1802-03 through his reading of Kant, Schelling, Goethe, and the poetry of Wordsworth, who after 1808 would become one of his closest friends and his literary idol. Writing to Benecke on 26 January 1834, Robinson related how he

> very early indeed came to the conclusion that it is irrational to suppose a being created with a new immortal Soul. That which an act of generation has produced, must like all generated things be compounded of perishable substance. If there be an eternity a parte post – there must be an eternity a parte ante – This I thought at a time when I had no clear notion or distinct belief in any immortality at all.[13]

Robinson was merely paraphrasing what he had written two decades earlier in his fourth letter on Kant (composed in May 1803, though never published): 'It is impossible to think consistently an eternity before us without thinking also an eternity behind us: Or rather the true idea of eternity is, that it has no connection whatever with time & by no means synonym with endless duration'.[14]

James Vigus posits that the impetus for Robinson's interest in pre-existence most likely came from his reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* which cautiously raises the possibility of a Platonic 'transcendental' hypothesis regarding the eternality of the soul. 'All life is really only intelligible', Kant suggests,

> not subject to temporal alterations at all, and has neither begun at birth nor will be ended through death; … if we could intuit the things and ourselves as they are we would see ourselves in a world of spiritual natures with which our only true community had not begun with birth nor would not cease with bodily death (as mere appearances), etc.[15]

Robinson also found pre-existence in Goethe's *Tasso*, in Wordsworth's famous 'Intimations' Ode, and in the writings of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617-88) and the Latitudinarian Joseph Glanvill (1636-80), especially the latter's *Lux Orientalis: or, An Enquiry into the Opinion of the Eastern Sages concerning the Praeexistence of Souls* (1662) (a copy of which Robinson received from his friend John Towill Rutt and which he would loan to Benecke in 1834). Robinson told Benecke on 27 April 1835 that he (Benecke) would have found Cudworth belonging to a 'fit audience' of seventeenth-century divines suitable to his own opinions.[16] It was the common

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[13] Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-35, letter 3.
[14] Vigus, *Henry Crabb Robinson*, 47.
[15] Ch. 1, Sec. 3, B808, in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 664.
[16] Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-35, letter 101.

sympathy Robinson and Benecke shared concerning this doctrine, Robinson contends in his Reminiscences, that first led Benecke 'to think well of me by hearing me observe what I saw without any notion of his opinions'.[17]

Benecke's position on pre-existence also governed his handling of two seemingly contradictory doctrines, free will and necessity. To Benecke, 'moral liberty & philosophical necessity are not exclusive of each other', a position, Robinson writes in his diary, 'quite in harmony with that of the English necessarians' and, for that matter, orthodox Calvinists. His conclusions, however, were not so orthodox, nor did they comport with Wordsworth's view of the Fall of Man, despite Wordsworth's leanings toward pre-existence:

> It follows from this and from the doctrine that God is love and cannot be the author of sin, that the moral evil in men is to be ascribed to an abuse of their liberty in a former state of existence, and that men bring with them a fixed character – I should have rather said, that the fact that men do come with a fixed character proves the prior existence.[18]

To Benecke, the soul in its original state possessed a free will, and, as an act of freedom, chose evil, subjecting itself thereafter to a world ruled by God's providential wisdom. Once the soul, through a series of progressive states, has been purified and perfected, the will once again becomes free.[19] To Robinson, however,

> the difficulties of the necessarian doctrine are only pushed back, not removed by this point of view – That in that prior state as well as in the present there is this inextricable dilemma – If this *free will* were in quality and in quantity *the same* in all beings then it is incomprehensible how *the same* cause should produce different effects If this freewill be different either in quality or quantity, then the diversity of the act may be ascribed to the primitive diversity in the attribute or power – but in that case the individual is not responsible, for he did not create himself or give himself that power or attribute of free will.[20]

Robinson hoped Benecke's forthcoming book on Romans would solve these 'difficulties', but he would be disappointed.

Benecke's seminal work, *Der Brief Pauli an die Römer*, was published in Heidelberg in 1831 (an English version translated by Benecke's son appeared in London in 1854). Robinson received his copy in early January 1833. Benecke's Preface delineates the core of his theology (or philosophy, for Robinson read it both ways), and it makes no attempt to hide his mystical side. Christianity, Benecke argues, is neither a 'body of knowledge' nor a 'science'

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[17] Crabb Robinson Reminiscences, 1819, 2: f. 242.
[18] Crabb Robinson Diary, 13: f. 76.
[19] Benecke, *Exposition* 276.
[20] Crabb Robinson Diary, 12: f. 105.

that we appropriate or study as a means of achieving salvation, but rather a 'spiritual power . . . intended to penetrate and regenerate the whole man in his innermost being'.[21] For Benecke, it was this 'spiritual power' that activates human faith, with reason and the understanding reinforcing one's faith *after* regeneration, not before. This spiritual principle, he continues, 'furnish[es] us with an opportunity for ascertaining the legitimate use to be made of the understanding in examining truths of a higher order'.[22] Both assertions created enormous difficulties for Robinson; his form of Unitarianism exalted the primacy of reason both *before* and *after* an individual's intellectual assent to certain core truths of Christianity (Robinson's substitute for 'faith'). To Robinson, the reason and the will were the sufficient means, apart from any supernatural interference, for an individual to embrace and exemplify *practical*, rather than doctrinal, Christianity. Benecke, on the other hand, argued, much like orthodox Evangelicals, that our 'dim and imperfect faculties' of reason and understanding, though receptacles and conduits of knowledge, could never generate an 'inward or a living conviction'.[23] 'All therefore must proceed from the Spirit', Benecke declares in a bold Neoplatonic flourish.[24]

Robinson finished Benecke's study of Romans on 10 January 1834 and wrote to Benecke two weeks later, confessing that he was still (at least since the end of 1823) 'what the Quakers call, a seeker' and fully aware that his 'ignorance' of theology demanded that he continue to commit himself 'to a favorable study of religious doctrines'.[25] Thoroughly provoked by Benecke's exposition of certain orthodox Christian doctrines, Robinson confesses that in times past 'it might possibly be that certain notions which I had rejected as absolute falsehoods were rather ill-stated, erroneously stated & misunderstood truths than falsehoods. Or rather that possibly there might be most important truths hidden, as it were, behind these misrepresentations.'[26] Despite his misgivings, he informed Benecke that he planned to visit Heidelberg the following summer, hoping to gain some certainty regarding his friend's theology. Just prior to his departure, Robinson's uncertainty was evident in his diary entry on 26 June 1834: 'I every day feel more and more strongly the desire if possible to make up my mind on the most momentous of concerns!!!'[27] Robinson discussed religion with Benecke on 20 September, but their conversation did little to alleviate his uncertainty, leaving Robinson to lament that concerning these matters, his mind was still 'dark – very dark'.[28] As he left Heidelberg that fall, Robinson was convinced that happiness would arrive when he could 'feel all these [doctrines] as liv^{g} & operating principles',[29]

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[21] Benecke, *Exposition* 6. All quotations hereafter are from the 1854 English edition, *An Exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, edited by Friedrich Wilhelm Benecke, Benecke's son.
[22] Benecke, *Exposition* 12.
[23] Benecke, *Exposition* 80.
[24] Benecke, *Exposition* 42.
[25] Crabb Robinson to Benecke, 26 January 1834, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-35, letter 3.
[26] Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-35, letter 3.
[27] Crabb Robinson Diary, 16: f. 8.
[28] Crabb Robinson Reminiscences, 1834, 4: f. 49.
[29] Crabb Robinson Travel Diary, 1834, 23: f. 61.

language reminiscent of his reading of Woolman in 1824, a work that must have been on his mind in Heidelberg, for upon his return to London he sent a copy of Woolman's *Journal* to Benecke.[30]

Benecke was aware of his friend's inner turmoil, explaining to Robinson in a letter dated 8 November 1835 that 'fundamental truths are not to be acquired by logic but must be derived from a very different source', a spiritual power that removes the 'obstacles which either a false Philosophy or a mistaken theology may have thrown in our way'.[31] Though he could not accept the rigid 'logic' of High Calvinism, Benecke shared an affinity with the evangelical Calvinism of the American divine Jonathan Edwards and that of many among the Evangelicals of his day in its emphasis upon religious affections generated by a spiritual knowledge apart from human understanding. 'Hence it is clear', Benecke writes, 'that what I have to offer can be acceptable only to such persons who not only have a longing for [truth], but who at the same time are aware that obstacles are in their way which may be removed'.[32] Robinson may have been 'clear' in his 'longing for [truth]', but removing the 'misunderstood truths' of orthodoxy by means of a divinely imparted 'spiritual knowledge' merely substituted one obstacle for another.

Benecke was not surprised at Robinson's inability to believe, for his comments that November juxtaposing 'logic' and spiritual knowledge were squarely aimed at his inquiring friend. In a letter to his son Friedrich Wilhelm, written shortly after Robinson's departure from Heidelberg in 1834, Benecke acknowledged that Robinson's 'company was often quite agreeable', noting that he had answered Robinson's questions with such force that Robinson 'had nothing to advance against it'. The elder Benecke, however, was convinced his answers would never adequately satisfy Robinson because the truth his friend sought was 'above all reason' and could only be known through a spiritual knowledge.[33] In his last letter to Robinson a few months before the latter's departure for Heidelberg, Benecke had provided a clue about distinguishing between those who seek after truth and those who actually find it. Benecke informed Robinson that the doctrine of the atonement divides humanity into the spiritually dormant and the spiritually enlightened, the former group comprising those who give rational assent to matters of faith and revelation, the latter group those who have been supra-rationally illuminated. 'Those who really believe in it', Benecke writes, 'are by that very belief . . . rendered capable of understanding . . . All this can be made as clear as day light to those who are in the secret, but it is impossible to make them understand it who are still without. (Draussen).'[34] In this letter, Benecke succinctly established for Robinson the metaphysical, theological, and psychological 'foundation' of his

[30] Crabb Robinson to Benecke, 27 April 1835, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-35, letter 101.
[31] Wilhelm Benecke to Crabb Robinson, 8 November 1835, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-1835, letter 136.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Robinson added that he fully assented 'to the general truth here expressed – It is what I was fully aware of –'. The letter, dated 14 December 1834, appeared in *Lebensskizze und Briefe* 2: 233-35. Robinson transcribed a portion of the letter (quoted above) and inserted it in his Reminiscences for 1834 (4: f. 50).
[34] Wilhelm Benecke to Crabb Robinson, 1 April 1834, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-1835, letter 18.

views on 'true religion' and true philosophy' – a foundation much closer to seventeenth-century English Puritanism and German Pietism than late eighteenth-century Rationalism.

Robinson responded on 2 March 1836, his last letter to his German friend. His desire for certainty in matters of faith was still present though clearly more subdued than in his previous letter. He hoped to visit Benecke again, declaring that 'Of all the friends I have there is no one from whom I hear religious doctrines asserted with so strong an impression that they deserve my adoption.' Wordsworth's 'language', he adds, 'is become very like your's And he is far more intelligible to me than you are, yet his opinions impress me less with being both credible and desirable as objects of belief, than your's do.'[35] Benecke would die before Robinson could return to Heidelberg, but the latter's friendship with Wordsworth continued to flourish, even though they agreed on little in matters of religion beyond the idea of pre-existence. Strangely enough, it was during one of his many Christmas vacations at Rydal Mount with the Wordsworths that Robinson would encounter another lay theologian whose opinions on the afterlife would expand Robinson's search for religious certainty and a rational faith in ways he had not previously thought.

III

In January 1839, during the second of his ten Christmas vacations with the Wordsworths at Rydal, near Grasmere, Crabb Robinson discovered Isaac Taylor's *Physical Theory of Another Life* (1836),[36] an imaginative account of the afterlife that served as a striking counterbalance to Benecke's theology of pre-existence. Isaac Taylor (1787-1865) was trained to be an engraver by his father, Isaac Taylor, Sr. (1759-1829), an engraver turned Dissenting minister, first at Colchester and later at Ongar. Due to his poor health, the younger Isaac gave up engraving in 1812 to become a professional writer. He published some poetry in conjunction with his talented sisters,[37] but he did not become known as a writer until he became a regular contributor to the *Eclectic Review* in 1818. He stood for election to the chair of logic at Edinburgh in 1836, but was narrowly defeated. In 1862 he received a civil list pension for his services to literature. He served as a deacon in the Congregational church at Ongar for many years, but by the early 1830s had become a member, defender, and sometimes critic of the established church. His best-known titles include the *Natural History of Enthusiasm* (1829), in which he argues for a more reasonable Christianity as a counter to fervent Evangelicalism (which he essentially equates with 'enthusiasm'), as well as *Fanaticism* (1833), *Spiritual*

[35] Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1836-1837, letter 103.

[36] London: Willliam Pickering, 1836.

[37] Ann (1782-1866) and Jane (1783-1824) Taylor were performing contract work as engravers for the London publisher, Darton & Harvey, in their teens, with Ann contributing poems to the *Minor's Pocket Book* (using the *noms de plume* 'Clara' and 'Maria') at the same time, eventually becoming editor. The two sisters gained considerable fame for their books of poetry for young readers, including *Original Poems* (1804), *Rhymes for the Nursery* (1806) (which included 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'), *Limed Twigs to Catch Young Birds* (1808), and *The Linnet's Life* (1822), as well as substantial contributions to *The Associate Minstrels* (1810).

Despotism (1835), and *Four Lectures on Spiritual Christianity* (1841). Just as he had been struck by Benecke's appropriation of orthodox terminology to promote something few Christians accepted – a pre-existent state – Robinson was likewise intrigued by Taylor's heterodox support of something all Christians accepted – the afterlife.

In his *Practical Theory*, Taylor moves away from polemics about the present condition of the 'visible' church (the chief focus of his previous works) in order to take a speculative look at the 'invisible' church as it might appear in the next life. The Bible has much to say about the former but little about the latter, but to Taylor, such silence was not meant to prohibit speculation. Taylor bases his argument on Paul's statement from I Corinthians 15:44, 'There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body', using that verse to counter the accepted notion that heaven is inhabited by bodiless spirits. Taylor contends that the notion of whether the human essence is purely material or immaterial belongs to the theoretical speculations of Hobbes and Berkeley, not to practical theology. His exploration of the physicality of the afterlife is grounded on the belief that 'our personal consciousness . . . and the perpetuity of our senses of good and evil, and our continued sensibility of pain and pleasure, and the unbroken recollection . . . of the events and affections of the present state' will continue in the future state.[38] Taylor does not tie this future physicality to our current flesh as much as he believes there will be another, far superior, encasing of the spirit, a new body no longer subject to the effects of the fall (our 'corruptible' becoming 'incorruptible'). 'The christian scriptures then, and St. Paul, specifically, affirm', Taylor concludes,

> not any abstruse metaphysical doctrine concerning mind and matter; but the simple physiological fact, of two species of corporeity, destined for man; the first, that of our present animal and dissoluble organization, which we share, in all its conditions, with the irrational sentient tribes around us; and the second – a future spiritual structure, imperishable, and endowed with higher powers, and many desirable prerogatives.[39]

Thus, the materialism of Hobbes (matter as the only reality) and the idealism of Berkeley (the external world as a creation of the mind) are rejected by Taylor in favor of a coalescing of mind and matter in a clearly perceived corporeal body manifested in two radically different states of existence, the present and the future.

Taylor blurs the usual mind/matter debate by declaring that 'body' is, in

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[38] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 10. Taylor's position is closer to that of the Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614-87), whose views on body and soul occupied a middle ground between his contemporary Hobbes (and to a degree Descartes) and later that of Berkeley. To More, however, the idea of a 'spiritual body' was not confined to heaven, but pertained to our earthy existence as well. A 'Celestiall Substance', More contended, pervaded the whole body performing all 'Vital and Animal functions' and eliminating the possibility of a vacuum. Unlike Descartes' contention of the body and soul joined at the pineal gland and cooperating in all human actions and passions, More saw the soul as permeating and activating the body; in essence, *spiritualizing* matter. See Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London: J. Flesher, for William Morden, 1659), 260.

[39] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 18-19.

essence, a third substance that subsumes mind and matter within time and space. Consequently, our future *spiritual* bodies will partake of similar qualities of mind and matter as our earthly bodies, such as motion, extension, sensation, intellect, and moral sentiments.[40] In our current bodies, these qualities are limited, but in a spiritual body, they will significantly expand, so much so that 'the infant who now crosses the nursery, may in time . . . perambulate the globe'.[41] Appearing in the same year as Emerson's transcendental manifesto, *Nature*, Taylor echoes his American counterpart in proposing 'that Perception is, at present, a circumscribed faculty; and we confidently anticipate an era when it shall throw off its confinements, and converse at large with the material universe, and find itself familiarly at home in the height and breadth of the heavens'.[42] The heterodox Transcendentalists, however, believed such heightened powers of perception were possible in this life through the animating presence of a near-pantheistic Divine Spirit. Taylor, still a child of orthodoxy, relegates these enhanced powers of mind and body to the next life, when what was once 'inscrutable shall be openly displayed'.[43]

As with Benecke, Taylor sees the next life as a state in which our mental powers will make 'real progress in knowing the Infinite Perfection' through our ability 'to seize . . . as by intuition, the most remote and intricate abstract truths'.[44] Benecke, however, was convinced that such perfection was possible only through divine influence and the imparting of spiritual knowledge, something Taylor associates more with enthusiasm than traditional Christian faith. Robinson, always the rational Dissenter, preferred Taylor's belief in human progress to Benecke's doctrine of divine influence, as he did Taylor's conclusion that in the next life 'The several powers of life . . . will burn clear and steady, and will need no replenishing; but yet the inner man – the individual – the moral personality, will be untouched: – the remembrance of yesterday and its little history, will be distinct and familiar', that last phrase of particular interest to Robinson the diarist. Consequently, Taylor argues, the afterlife will not be an eternal state of mental arrest and mere recollection, but rather one in which 'the active principles of our nature, and our intellectual habits, such as they are now in training, shall, in the future life, come into actual use',[45] a future state of never-ending moral, intellectual, and physical development.

Robinson read Taylor's book between 5 January and 11 January 1839, composing sixteen pages of notes as well (belonging now to the Robinson Archive, Dr. Williams's Library). He noted in his diary on 6 January how surprised he was that 'so excellent a writer should have remained so long unknown to me', though his impression of the Taylor family (of whom he had known since the 1790s through his friends at Colchester) was not a favorable

[40] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 40.
[41] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 60.
[42] *Ibid.*, 60.
[43] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 65.
[44] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 90, 95.
[45] Taylor, *Practical Theory* 188, 192.

one in 1839. 'I had no idea', he writes on 11 January, 'that out of that family anything so good co[d] proceed.'[46] 'The one new Idea which seems pregnant with many', he writes on 6 January, 'is that *body* unites the matter & spirit And itself may have a spiritual nature – as St Paul says in the Corinthians.' 'Even Wordsworth', Robinson continues, 'so intolerant of novelties allowed his remark on the *imaginative powers* to be pretty; but would have them like his ode in a poem rather than in prose.'[47] Robinson would quickly remedy his ignorance of Taylor, devouring four of his books during his stay that January at Rydal Mount. Robinson did not own these books, and it is not clear from whom he borrowed them, but he remarked that he would purchase them when he returned to London.

Not only did Taylor open the door for intellectual and imaginative development and a lively imagination in the next life, but, as Robinson informed his brother Thomas, he made his theory of the future life 'credible by realising it to the imagination'.[48] Taylor, however, was not attempting to create a purely imaginative heaven, for his emphasis throughout was on its materiality; Robinson was simply struck by the scope of Taylor's imaginative vision of this material heaven. Taylor was not alone in imagining some form of heaven, for it was a common topic among Dissenters in the 1830s. In 1836 John Sheppard (1785-1879), a popular Baptist writer and prominent layman from Frome, took some rooms at 44 Bernard Street, just around the corner from Robinson's future quarters in Russell Square (at this time he still lived in the Plowden Buildings, Inns of Court). Sheppard came to London on behalf of his son, who had just enrolled at London University. At that time Sheppard was finishing his long poem, *An Autumn Dream*, which appeared early in 1837, just after Taylor's *Physical Theory*.[49] It seems probable that Sheppard and Robinson, both prominent Dissenters and men of letters, might have met through mutual acquaintances among London Dissenters and even had discussions about the poem, although no references to Sheppard appear in Robinson's diary. Sheppard's poem, like Taylor's book, depicted an afterlife in which the individual retains both earthly knowledge and personal identity but, unlike Taylor, Sheppard peoples his heaven with glorified replicas of earthly bodies still subject to physical and intellectual limitations. Sheppard's heaven takes one prized earthly object – the dissenting chapel – and transforms it into a purified evangelical mega-church (much like Spurgeon's Tabernacle would

[46] Crabb Robinson Diary, 11 January 1839, 17: f. 145.

[47] Crabb Robinson Diary, 6 January 1839, 17: f. 139.

[48] Crabb Robinson to Thomas Robinson, 19 January 1839, Crabb Robinson Archive, Bundle 2.XI.(6.), DWL.

[49] *An Autumn Dream: Thoughts in Verse, on the Intermediate State of Happy Spirits. To which are appended, collections from various authors, on the 'separate state', and on the immateriality of mind; with a dissertation on the opinions cited concerning the mind of the lower animals* (London: William Ball and Aldine Chambers, 1837) went through three editions in Sheppard's lifetime. As a young man Sheppard inherited a personal fortune of more than £30,000. In 1812 he enrolled at the University of Edinburgh, studying medicine, philosophy, and religion. Two years later, Sheppard went on an extensive tour of Europe, an experience that led to his first publications—a translation of Racine's *Athaliah* (1815) and *Letters, Descriptive of a Tour through some parts of France, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany, in 1816* (1817). From 1823 until his death at Frome in 1879, at the age of ninety-four, Sheppard devoted his life to religious writing, lay preaching, and foreign travel, as well as to an active involvement in the affairs of the Particular Baptists, both in his home church in Frome and throughout England.

become) led by the celebrated Baptist minister Robert Hall (Crabb Robinson's family friend whom he wrote against in letters to the *Cambridge Intelligencer* during his Godwinian phase in the 1790s[50]) and various post-Reformation and eighteenth-century religious figures, such as François Fénelon, Friedrich Klopstock, Robert Boyle, and Albrecht von Haller, who guide the narrator and the congregation into contemplations on creation and redemption, matter and spirit, the bodily resurrection and the glories of heaven, a place where there is 'love with no partings; – bliss without a dream'.[51] Sheppard, however, can only 'dream' of such a place through his poetic imagination.

Sheppard may have received the impetus for composing *An Autumn Dream*, as well as aspects of his poetic theory, from his close friend and former pastor at Frome, the Baptist essayist John Foster (1770-1843), a popular writer for the *Eclectic Review* and someone known to Robinson and their mutual friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Foster had written to Sheppard on 23 January 1834, offering a glimpse into his own explorations of the difficulties of visualizing the afterlife, difficulties shared by Robinson and explored in Taylor's *Physical Theory*. 'It does always appear to me very unaccountable', Foster writes,

> . . . that the state of the soul, after death, should be so completely veiled from our serious inquisitiveness. That in some sense it is proper that it should be so, needs not be said . . . It is true, that a profound darkness, which we know we are destined, ere long to enter, and soon to find ourselves in an amazing light, is a striking object of contemplation. But the mind still, again and again, falls back from it, disappointed and uninstructed, for want of some defined forms of reality, to seize, retain, and permanently occupy it. In default of revelation, we have to frame our conjectures on some principle of analogy which is itself arbitrary, and without any means of bringing it to the test of reason. . . . It is a subject profoundly interesting to myself.[52]

Immediately upon the publication of his poem, Sheppard asked Thomas Poole of Nether Stowey, a friend of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey from the 1790s and by the 1830s known to Crabb Robinson, to critique the poem. Poole responded on Wednesday, 2 February 1837, his letter addressed to Sheppard's London residence, though Sheppard was actually in Frome that day oddly enough delivering a funeral address.[53] Unfortunately for Poole, the reality of death interrupted his response to Sheppard's imaginative depiction of the afterlife, for halfway through his letter he put down his pen and rushed to

[50] See Timothy Whelan, "'I have *confessed myself a devil*': Crabb Robinson's Confrontation with Robert Hall, 1798-1800', *Charles Lamb Bulletin, New Series* 121 (2003), 2-25.

[51] Sheppard, *Autumn Dream* 149.

[52] J. E. Ryland, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of John Foster*, 2 vols (London: Jackson and Walford, 1848), 2: 129-30.

[53] Derek J. Gill, ed., *Experiences of a 19th Century Gentleman: The Diary of Thomas Bunn of Frome* (Frome: Society for Local Study, 2003), 36.

Bristol after receiving news that his sister was dying. He resumed his letter a month later, with thoughts of the afterlife more pressing now than ever. He writes to Sheppard, 'I heartily believe, especially because Revelation has told us so, that we shall carry our present consciousness to the other World; and I confide on then meeting and knowing those whom I have known in this World.'[54]

Sheppard's poem and the letters by Foster and Poole all attest to a desire for knowledge of the afterlife as well as a frustration with the paucity of information provided by revelation about such an important subject. Taylor acknowledged the same frustration, but rather than taking those few details gained from revelation as his *starting* point, thus ending somewhere near Sheppard (a heavenly congregation strikingly similar to a local Dissenting chapel) or Poole (a heavenly consciousness capable of recognizing and communing with other heavenly entities), Taylor takes the Pauline declaration of a 'spiritual body' as his *ending* point and imaginatively, yet rationally, fills in the gap between that existence and our present physical body. Along the way he provides an array of possibilities about what a 'spiritual body' might entail, speculations Sheppard and Poole do not explore. As Robinson explains to his brother Thomas on 19 January 1839, Taylor's *Physical Theory*

> is a work of *pure speculation*, but rich in thoughts and in imaginations, which are not given presumptuously as truths; he does not reason *from* Revelation, but *to* it; that is, shows that all he imagines as possible is compatible with it. He says it will not please those who think of heaven as place where angels are engaged in ecstatic contemplations of God, for he supposes, in the other life, analogous occupations, and a scheme of duties arising out of an expansion of our powers. The leading thought of the whole book is contained in St. Paul's expression, there is *a spiritual body and a natural body*. He declares the whole controversy concerning matter and spirit to be idle and worthless, which men will soon cease to discuss. In the other world, we shall still have a body, but a spiritual body; and the whole speculation is a development of the distinction. You, who love metaphysics as I do, will enjoy this.[55]

Whereas Benecke begins with a spiritual entity that becomes a part of human physicality only to become spiritual once again in the next life, Taylor merges the physical with the spiritual into a new kind of entity, an oxymoronic 'spiritual body'. Robinson wants to 'believe' that in the afterlife he will experience this new 'body', but he cannot ground his desire solely on the dictates of reason because, in this instance, the demands of revelation and faith are inescapable. Benecke, by reasoning *from* revelation to belief, ultimately

[54] Thomas Poole to John Sheppard, 2 February 1837, Joseph Angus Papers, acc. no. Angus 168, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. For more on Foster, Sheppard, and Poole, see Timothy Whelan, 'John Foster and Samuel Taylor Coleridge', *Christianity and Literature* 50 (2001), 631-56; *idem*, 'Thomas Poole's "Intimations of Immortality" in a Letter to John Sheppard, February 1837', *Romanticism* 11 (2005), 199-223.

[55] Crabb Robinson to Thomas Robinson, 19 January 1839, HCR Archive, Bundle 2.XI.(6.), DWL.

inhibits the imagination in terms of the afterlife by grounding his theology too strongly upon certain traditional doctrines of Christianity; on the other hand, Taylor, by reasoning from concrete forms *to* revelation, empowers the imagination by freeing it from doctrinal and hermeneutical constraints so that he can conceive a post-existence based on rational, intellectual, even imaginative concepts not explicitly stated in the Bible. Benecke's doctrine of pre-existence was not necessarily invalidated by Taylor's theory of the afterlife, for the latter's notion of an eternal consciousness (the pre- and post-soul) inextricably woven into a physical encasement (the physical body) ultimately evolves toward the spiritual perfection proffered by Benecke's theology. In some respects, both men's theological speculations hovered near heterodoxy: a pre-Christian doctrine of the reincarnated soul on the part of Benecke and the heterodox Arian notion of a form of eternal humanity on the part of Taylor, neither view necessarily prohibitive to Robinson the rational Christian.

Taylor was well aware that in the history of English Dissent, the controversy between matter and spirit had never been 'idle' nor deemed 'worthless', especially in the seventeenth century. Hobbes, the great materialist, argued that 'the universe . . . is Corporeal, that is to say, Body', and since spirits have 'dimensions', they 'are therefore really *Bodies*'.[56] Consequently, God and angels should be thought of as some form of *materialized spirit*, but not a bodiless spirit, for to Hobbes the notion of '*Separated Essences*',[57] like a body and a soul or innate knowledge derived separately from sensate experience, were illogical impossibilities, for the finite can only experience the finite, not the infinite or the immaterial. Descartes, the Cambridge Platonists, and the Puritans (and their late eighteenth-century descendants) all countered Hobbes in various ways, but unlike Descartes's mechanistic dualism or the *spiritualized matter* of such Platonists as John Smith, Ralph Cudworth, or Henry More (a subtle yet profound counter to Hobbes), some seventeenth-century Puritans opened avenues for uniting matter and spirit simultaneously in our present bodies as preparatory for a more complete unification in the next life that foreshadow Taylor's idea of a 'spiritual body'. To Stephen Charnock, the 'body hath neither life nor motion, without the active presence of the soul, which distributes to every part the virtue of acting, sets every one in the exercise of its proper function, and resides in every part', so much so that the 'body of man cannot move without the soul, no more than a ship can move itself without wind and waves'.[58] More explicitly, Arthur Dent, in *The Plainemans Path-way to Heaven* (1614), asserts that 'the whole minde is flesh, and the whole minde is spirit, partly one, and partly another'.[59] Later in the century, Thomas Wadsworth would write,

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[56] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or, The Matter, Form and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 371.

[57] *Ibid.*, 373.

[58] Stephen Charnock, *The Spirituality of God, and Spiritual Worship*, in *The Works of the late Rev. Stephen Charnock, B.D.*, ed. Edward Parsons, 9 vols (London: Baynes, 1815), 1: 250.

[59] *The Plainemans Path-way to Heaven* (London: Edward Griffin, 1614), 15.

> The soul doth not move the body, and its members, as the Pilot doth the Ship wherein he sails: for though the Pilot be in the Ship, yet he is not vitally united to the Ship: He doth not diffuse a life into the Rudder, Masts, or Sails; this (could it be) would speak a Ship a great Animal, of which the Pilot would be the Soul: but we know the Ship is a lifeless carcass made up of Ribs, Planks, Masts, Sails, and a Rudder: But the soul of man moves the body, and its several parts, by uniting it self thereto, and by communicating a life to every part; by virtue of which communicated life, the body of man is called a *living Body.*[60]

Thus, to Wadsworth, the soul creates the 'living body' in this life and, to Taylor, a 'spiritual body' in the next. Taylor simply transports an improved version of Wadsworth's 'living body', a body possessing enhanced 'physical' qualities of time and space, into his imaginative depiction of the afterlife.

Unfortunately, obstacles remained for Crabb Robinson. All three positions on the afterlife – disembodied spirit, humanized spirit, or spiritualized body – required a belief in something not seen or verified by intellect alone. Even his youthful flirtation with Priestleyan materialism in the early 1790s required him to hold certain points of revelation in abeyance to pure reason. Robinson's friend, the novelist Mary Hays (they first met in 1799), was a devoted follower of Priestley during that decade, and in Letter XV ('To Amasia') from her 1793 work, *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*, she presents a materialist view of the afterlife that Robinson would easily have understood. Like Benecke and Taylor, Hays considers her opinion as 'rational' and 'scriptural', though she admits the 'silence of revelation' on the subject.[61] However, unlike Priestley's more static afterlife, Hays's vision is remarkably similar to Taylor's, in which all heavenly bodies persist in 'an unquenchable thirst after perfection, an ever ardent and restless pursuit after something – "higher, more powerful, more living than visible nature."'[62] Hays rejects the view of the afterlife as 'monotonous' ease interrupted only by 'eternal hallelujahs', 'psalmody', and the 'reveries of incessant, intense, extatic contemplation'.[63] Like Taylor, she sees the resurrected body as 'changed and spiritualized', a body capable of 'intellectual pleasures', 'benevolent affections', and conversable society.[64]

What had proved a formidable obstacle in Robinson's acceptance of the diverse views of the afterlife presented by Priestley, Hays, and Benecke would surface again in his engagement with Taylor. 'Oh how earnestly do I hope that I may one day be able to believe', he writes in his diary after reading Taylor, 'but I feel the faith must be given me I cannot give it myself[.] I will try, but I doubt my powers energetically to will anything so pure & elevated – And it is

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[60] Thomas Wadsworth, *The Immortality of the Soul Explained and Proved by Scripture and Reason* (London: T. Milbourn, 1670), 42-43.
[61] Mary Hays, *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (London: T. Knott, 1793), 201.
[62] Hays, *Letters and Essays* 203.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] *Ibid.*, 204.

not in my nature to grieve at anything.'[65] His desire for a 'faith' that must be 'given' to him oddly enough brings Robinson full circle with his childhood origins in the theology of Calvin, not Priestley or Hays. Clinging to the supremacy of reason was certainly a viable connection with Priestley, but Robinson's questions concerning reason and faith, body and soul, pre-existence and the afterlife, are rooted primarily in the legacy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Calvinism, not the rational, deistic, mechanistic movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Cambridge Platonists may have viewed reason as 'the Candle of the Lord', inextricably linked to the soul, not the body, but to the Reformed theologians, a clear distinction always existed between human reason and divine knowledge, the one having a natural birthright accessible from *within* and available to all individuals, the other the result of a spiritual infusion from *without* by God, granted only to the elect. Thus, when Benecke closed his discussion of Robinson in his 1834 letter to his son with the word 'Draussen', he invoked this seventeenth-century debate between human reason and divine knowledge. In his youth Robinson read *Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards, that 'most awefully tremendous of all metaphysical divines',[66] and his early introduction to Priestley made clear to him the difficulties he faced in bridging the gulf between these two states of religious knowledge, one based on rational assent to questions of belief (what he calls his 'powers', something residing solely in the mind), the other based on something ultimately supra-rational (the 'faith' that 'must be given' to him, something experienced through 'religious affections', as Edwards puts it).[67] Robinson's conflict began in earnest with his reading of John Woolman and Edward Irving in 1824; it continued through his conversations with Benecke in Germany in 1834; and it surfaced once again at Rydal Mount that January in 1839. Walking with Wordsworth's friend from Grasmere, Dr Thomas Arnold, on 14 January, three days after finishing Taylor's *Practical Theory*, Robinson posed a question concerning grace and prayer, arguing from Pascal that even though grace is given through prayer, no one can properly pray apart from grace. Thus, 'they only can ask for it, who have it already',[68] a dilemma Arnold confessed that day he could not satisfactorily resolve and one to which, despite the best efforts of Wilhelm Benecke and the stimulating writings of Isaac Taylor, Crabb Robinson likewise never found a satisfactory answer.

[65] Crabb Robinson Diary, 8 January 1839, 17: f. 140.

[66] Crabb Robinson to Wilhelm Benecke, 27 April 1835, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, 1834-1835, letter 101.

[67] The contrast is evident in a comparison of Priestley's *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (1771) with Edwards's *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746).

[68] Crabb Robinson Diary, 14 January 1839, 17: f. 143.