

# GEORGE BARNARD SHAW'S THEORY OF LIFE FORCE

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**Abstract:** Shaw's theory of Life Force was considerably influenced by the scientific theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The scientists, including Biologists, believed that in the beginning there was all matter and no life or spirit. Then under the influence of certain specific, but rare physical conditions this matter became conscious of itself, i.e. It came to Life is rare. Because the conditions for matter's coming to life are so rare and also because life is something alien in a hostile and brutal universe. Since man is the instrument of the Life Force for the evolution of higher forms, he must act in a way which is likely to further the evolutionary process. It is by the maximum expenditure of effort and energy in working and thinking that a man will develop his existing faculties and thus contribute his might to the process of evolution. His increased intelligence and faculties will become a part of the common heritage, and so in the next generation life will express itself at a slightly higher level, and the process will continue from generation to generation. This paper focuses on man is the instrument of the Life Force for the evolution of higher forms

**Key Words:** Life force, principle, evolutionist, tragic.

## 1. SHAW A CREATIVE EVOLUTIONIST:

Shaw is a philosopher in the sense that he has tried to present a coherent and comprehensive view of human nature and of human life. And also to show the way in which human life should best be lived. He has come to the conclusion that the life force is the essence, the ultimate reality behind the world of the senses. In the words of Sen. Gupta, "he has found that the other things might be fictitious; but there can be no skepticism about life (the Life Force) which does exist and cannot be dismissed as a Maya." This theory makes its appearance from time to time in other plays as well. But it has been discussed in detail in the preface to Man and Superman and in the Hell scene of the play. The theory finds further and fullest development in the five plays of the Back to Methuselah series. It is this theory which makes Shaw a "Creative Evolutionist". It is this Life Force that mocks at all accepted ideals.

## 2. THEORY OF LIFE FORCE: IT'S BACKGROUND:

Shaw's theory of Life Force was considerably influenced by the scientific theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The scientists, including Biologists, believed that in the beginning there was all matter and no life or spirit. Then under the influence of certain specific, but rare physical conditions this matter became conscious of itself, i.e. It came to Life is rare. Because the conditions for matter's coming to life are so rare and also because life is something alien in a hostile and brutal universe. Life evolved into higher and higher forms. And Darwin explained this evolution through his famous doctrine of natural selection and survival of the fittest. Variations in species occurred. While Darwin attributed these variations merely to the play of chance, Lamarck attributed them to climatic and other changes in the physical world. However, all were at one in one respect: they all denied the operation of any spiritual force or agency, mind, life or some superhuman creator. It was Samuel Butler who for the first time postulated the possibility of some living force or spirit which animated matter, which was in some way independent of it, and which tried to use it for its own purposes. Bernard Shaw got the hint for his philosophy of Life Force from Butler, whom he regarded as, "the greatest writer of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century". We may mention that the German philosopher Schopenhauer had called this spirit or life-giving force by the name of will, and this will is closely similar to Shaw's Life Force. Chesterton, on the other hand, equates it with the Nature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Naturalists.

## 3. THE ORIGIN OF LIFE: ITS AIM:

Shaw is of the view that even in the very beginning universe contained both life and matter. Matter was there to begin with as also there was life. Matter is as a matter of fact, often spoken of as Life's enemy. Regarding matter in the light of enemy, Life seeks to dominate and subdue it. It is for this reason that life enters in to matter and animates it. The result of this animation is a living organism; it is life expressed in matter. Shaw suggests that life uses matter as an instrument, because life cannot evolve or develop unless it enters in to matter creates living organism. Life has two purposes<sup>1</sup>. The immediate purpose of life is to acquire new faculties and higher intelligence. This is done by creating living organism. Life has two purposes: 1. the immediate purpose of life is to acquire new faculties and higher

intelligence. This is done by creating living organisms. Matter, though Life's enemy is also, "the whetstone upon which life sharpens itself in order that it may advance further". Matter limits the operation of the Life Force, thus forcing it to make efforts to overcome these limitations and thus acquire new powers and new faculties. 2-the ultimate object of the Life force is to pass beyond matter, i.e. the necessity of incarnating itself in matter, of depending upon matter for its evolution. When this is achieved, Life's individualized expressions will become permanently individualized, i.e. immortal. Thus in *Back to Methuselah*, the Ancient tells the newly born that their ultimate destiny is to become immortal, which is conceived of as a state of pure thought. From a study of this series of plays we learn:

1. That life was originally a whirlpool of pure force.
2. That it entered into matter. And used it for its own purposes.
3. That by doing so it became matter's slave.
4. The object of Life Force is to put an end to this slavery by winning free from or conquering matter. But it is not clear whether matter will still persist or it will be eliminated by life.
5. That redemption from flesh having been achieved. Life will become pure thought.

#### **4. THE NATURE OF THE LIFE FORCE: THE WAY IN WHICH IT OPERATES**

What is the nature of this Life Force and how does it operate? As mentioned above. It is purposive and in this respect differs from Hardy's immanent will which is blind, ceaseless striving, without any purpose or direction. Shaw defines Life Force as, Vitality with a direction, expressing itself in the will to create matter or to mould matter which it finds, but which it has not created. Will to do anything, can do that thing, and the will to create, if sufficiently intense, can create. Just as an athlete can. "Put up a muscle", so by intense willing one can, "put up a brain". By intense willing evolution takes place, new organs are developed in the existing species and ultimately there is the development of new species. Thus by the intense willing of the vital Life Force new and higher forms of life are evolved. First, there is desire, then imagination, then will, and then creation. "You imagine what you desire; and at last you create what you will." This evolution is not towards forms of greater beauty or physical strength but towards higher and higher forms of intelligence. New powers of mind, powers of insight, vision and intelligence are gradually developed because Life Force wills them, so that it may evolve more effectively towards higher forms of life. Evolution takes place not continuously or faultlessly, but through a constant process of trial and error. Life enters matter so that it may be transcended; it is a ladder which must be scaled in order that it may be transcended; it is a ladder which must be scaled in order that, having arrived at the top, life may pass on to something higher. As pointed out above, the ultimate purpose of Life Force is to evolve into pure thought. But Shaw does not make it clear how Life can exist as 'pure thought' or what it would 'think' about.

#### **5. MAN, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE LIFE FORCE:**

Since man is the instrument of the Life Force for the evolution of higher forms, he must act in a way which is likely to further the evolutionary process. It is by the maximum expenditure of effort and energy in working and thinking that a man will develop his existing faculties and thus contribute his might to the process of evolution. His increased intelligence and faculties will become a part of the common heritage, and so in the next generation life will express itself at a slightly higher level, and the process will continue from generation to generation. Such effort will result in happiness, for it is the furtherance of the purpose for which we were created. A life of pleasure-seeking, self-indulgence is not likely to bring any happiness for it defeats the purpose of the Life Force. As the direct pursuers of pleasure, we shall miss the pleasure we pursue. Hence, the aphorism, "Folly is the direct pursuit of Happiness and Beauty".

#### **6. THE FEMALE PRINCIPLE:**

According to Shaw's conception, the initial form of life was female. Lilith in the *Back to Methuselah* tells us that in the beginning she was alone. No man was with her. She created man by "sundering herself in twain". Shaw conceives the Life Force as working through woman to create man, who is designed to carry life to higher levels. We are told in the hell scene in *Man and Superman*. "Sexually woman is Nature's contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Sexually, Man is woman's contrivance for fulfilling Nature's behest in the most economical way". Thus the romantic notion of love which glorifies womanhood is mocked at by Shaw's philosophy.

#### **7. THE SEXUAL BAIT:**

Far back in the evolutionary process, woman invented man for her own impregnation, because in this way could be produced, "something better than single-sexed process can produce". But as man is assigned so small a part in the process of reproduction- he has not to undergo the exhausting labor of child birth- he has at his disposal a store of surplus energy which he has used to invent, "dreams, follies, ideals, heroism", and creeds and causes. "He has become too strong to be controlled by her bodily, and too imaginative and mentally vigorous to be content with mere self-reproduction." Art and literature and such other higher activities divert his attention from the purely biological

purpose for which woman created him. But as woman is biologically primary and man biologically secondary woman is able to subdue him in most cases by first turning him into an adorer of herself- hence the romance of love and marriage-and when he has been ensnared by the bait of sexual attraction, by turning him into a bread-winner for herself and her children. Hence it is that Shaw considers marriage a heavy chain. In order to wean man away from his artistic or idealistic activities, she shares man's interest and ideal. But this is only a bait to convert man into a suitable bread- winner- an ideal father and husband.

## **8. WOMAN AND GENIUS**

Woman is able to win over ninety-nine men out of hundred, but the hundredth case is an exception. He is the genius, the man selected by Life Force to carry life to higher levels. To quote Joad: "in the genius Life's purpose is to carry life itself to heights consciousness not previously achieved; in the woman, to safeguard and maintain the level which has already been attained". Thus as in the genius, too, the Life Force is extra-ordinarily intense, he is ready to sacrifice woman to his higher purposes, just as woman sacrifices the ordinary man to her own. The mind of the genius is in advanced of the age in which he is born, the world is not ready to pay for the work which the genius does. In other words, he does not make a good bread-winner, and hence the clash between woman and man of genius. Woman may sometimes win him over by making him devote his energies to her own glorification of woman. But in most cases, the genius sees vision of Beauty and devotes his time and energy to make others see it. In a genius, "woman meets a purpose as impersonal, as irresistible as her own; and the clash is sometimes tragic".

## **9. SHAW'S THEORY: ITS WEAKNESS**

Shaw's philosophy has not won wide acceptance, despite its remarkable coherence. For one thing, Shaw's eminence in other fields has come in the way of his being regarded as a philosopher. Moreover, his theory of Life Force suffers from a number of weaknesses. He does not make it clear how the Life Force arose or who created it. Nor does he explain how it came to have a mind, a purpose and a direction. Similarly, he conceives of matter as different from the Life Force, but does not tell us what was the origin of matter. Shaw tells us that the purpose of the Life Force is to evolve into 'pure thought', but he does not tell us, "What it will think about". Not does he make it clear as to how the Life Force conquers and subdues matter after it has entered into it. Then again the question arises whether man is free to will and act or is he a mere passive instrument in the hands of the Life Force.

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