

ON NOT DYING

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“yeyam prete vicikitsā manuṣye/ astītyeke nāyamastīti caike....” (This doubt that prevails among humans regarding life after death, some saying it exists while others say it does not...)

Katha Upaniṣad 1-20

“or is some riddle solved by my surviving for ever? Is not eternal life itself as much of a riddle as our present life?”

Tractatus Logico Philosophicus 6.4312

1. Immortality is supposed to be the negation of death. But what kind of negation? If mortality is taken as the *necessity* of death then something which does not necessarily die, i.e., that which can (but may actually not) survive death could be called non-mortal. But if mortality is the mere *possibility* of death then only that for which death is impossible, i.e. that which *must* live on for ever deserves to be called non-mortal. Some of Descartes writings tend to inspire the suspicion that he vacillated between these two senses—contingent and necessary— of immortality of the soul. While one of his arguments proves a necessarily indestructible soul, his positive conception of the continued existence of a finite spiritual substance requires that it could, at any moment, be annihilated by God. Apart from this damaging ambiguity, his “proof” seems, at best, to make room for the possibility that bodily death can be survived by the soul which is far from establishing that every human soul does or must exist eternally. Apart from bringing these critical points to light, the present paper hopes to unearth some basic unclarities in the very idea of deathlessness as well as investigate why and in which sense not dying should be such an attractive future for ordinary mortals like us.

To be frank, I must confess that confusions set in, even before the negation is introduced, right away with the notion of death. ‘To die’ can either mean (a) to perish or cease to exist or (b) to undergo a process whereby what was once alive stops being alive. Now, complete

cessation of existence is as hard to make sense of as coming into being from absolute nonexistence. That is why Bhartrhari argued that for understanding Being-changes (bhavavikara) like 'is being born' or 'is dying' we must make room for a secondary sense of existence (aupacariki satta) [see: *sambandha samuddeśā of Vākyapadīya*: verses 42 to 48 and Helaraja thereon]. Although Nyaya has the twin notions of pre-originary and post-destruction absence, change of state or alteration of attributes (parinama) of an abiding substance is easier to conceptualise than going clean out of existence. Because, once something has gone out of existence then it is not available even for bearing the property of 'no-longer-existing'. So the reference of the term 'The cup' in the sentence 'The cup has been destroyed' has to be found by tracing back in time. 'Socrates is dead' shares the same problem. It is trickier than 'Socrates was alive (or kicking)' which is translatable as "It was the case that (Socrates is alive or kicking)". But Socrates not only was *dying* (so memorably) while he was still around, he continues till now to be dead inspite of (and indeed because of) the fact that he does not continue to be.

If we now take the second sense of dying, neither the Cartesian soul nor the Cartesian body seem to be capable of dying. Of course it is the job of the soul not to die. To use Platonic or mediaeval terms, the soul is that essential form which makes the person alive. For it to die would be like the ideal triangle becoming non-triangular. The soul therefore is ever-living. The body on the other hand, according to Descartes is always a dead unconscious machine. It never was alive by itself hence cannot lose life in the second sense of dying. And surely after death immediately it does not perish or get annihilated. It is around the body that the lamenting kith and kin gather. Metaphysically speaking Descartes explicitly states: "...we need to recognize that body, taken in the general sense, is a substance, so that it too never perishes." (Cottingham vol II Page 10) Who dies then? Remember that unless an entity dies first, it cannot survive death! Only the mortal, in this sense, can be immortal. Even Descartes realised this, so that in his carefully composed Synopsis of the Meditations he writes "These arguments are enough to.... give *mortals* the hope of *an after-life*" (emphasis mine).

But as we saw above, neither the spiritual nor the material substance of Descartes is mortal in any sense. To use the language of the Bhagavadgītā

one of them is “*nityajāta*’ while the other is *nityamṛta*” We shall come back to the expression ‘*nityajāta*’ once again later.

2. Some popular representations of the *cogito to sum* arguments make it sound as if Descartes took the inconceivability of one’s current nonexistence to be a proof of its deathlessness. But it is obvious that while I cannot think that I am thinking and dead at the same time I can easily think of a time when I am not there at all whether it is prenatal or postmortem nonexistence. I have to be a thinker and witness *of* all my thoughts, but I don’t have to be present as a thinker and a witness *in* all the situations that I can think of. So the thought of my own cremation which is part of some Buddhist meditational practices does not have to be the thought of what it would be like to be present as a spectator at my own cremation. It may be a sad thing to imagine that one will be dead in the future but it is not an impossible feat of imagining what it would be like to *see* one’s own future absence. Even Descartes was aware of that. Indeed he has two good reasons not to prove that the nonexistence of the soul at any time is inconceivable and hence impossible. For one thing, to prove that would be to count every soul as a necessary being for which an ontological proof of existence could be given. But as a finite being a soul cannot be a necessary being like God. Secondly, as a good Christian he has to believe that before God created them the souls were nonexistent. So the souls could be nonexistent, simply because they once were so.

However, even after ‘warning’ his readers lest they expect arguments for the immortality of the soul in the second meditations in his *Synopsis* Descartes does give an argument, let us call it the first argument, for the immortality of the soul in this *Synopsis* itself.

The argument goes like this :

- 1) To die is to get divided or decomposed into parts.
- 2) The soul, unlike the body, is partless “for we cannot conceive of half of a mind, while we can always conceive of half of a body”.

Therefore, the soul is incorruptible and hence incapable of dying.

Whether this argument is sound or not, that is whether we are compelled

to treat its two premises to be true does not concern me here. But surely it proves immortality in the stronger sense that it is logically necessary that the soul goes on existing since a simple partless entity has no other ontological option.

What is most intriguing is that while Descartes refuses to think of spatial parts of the soul, he forces us to think of its temporal parts. In the Third Meditation and in the fifth set of *Replies* he insists that a soul's life-span can be divided into countless (does he mean a Zeno—infinite?) parts, each completely independent of the others. From the fact I existed in one of them it does not follow that I shall exist in the next one “unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment— that is preserves me”. Here we find a most literal fleshing out of the idea that the soul is *nitya-jāta* or born every moment! This most peculiar and even at his time most controversial conception of preservation as creation every moment not only goes flatly against the first argument because it explicitly denies that the soul once created is incapable of going out of existence because of its simplicity, it goes to the Buddhist extreme of asserting that indeed the soul is perishing every moment because otherwise if God created a new Descartes every moment while the previous Descartes were still in circulation, there would be a ‘countless’ number of the same person(s) around. So presumably God has to be busy recreating each of us every moment (this could be called His recreation!) because we are perishing every other moment. That may be a picture of our continued existence in some Heraclitian sense, but it surely is not a picture of our souls being imperishable. Quite a different and more passive picture of ‘preservation’ as permitting to exist emerges out of the passage at the end of the fifth part of the *Discourses* where Descartes gives what I call the *second argument* for the immortality of the soul :

- 1) The soul is entirely independent of the body, i.e., it can exist detached from and during the absence of the body.
- 2) Therefore “it is *not bound to die* with it.”
- 3) Since we see no other causes which destroy the soul,
“we naturally conclude that it is immortal”.

Here God figures at most as one of those causes which could have

destroyed the soul but instead of doing so simply allows it to go on. Not only does such survival of the soul upon this conception, *not* require creation afresh every moment, the immortality proved by this argument is the weaker immortality : it is not necessary that it dies at the time of biological death, which keeps the possibility open that after a little while of after-life the soul also gets extinct either because something exterminates it or because it loses touch with its divine source of existence.

By now it should be clear that while the first argument proves immortality in the sense of negation of the possibility of cessation, The second argument proves immortality as negation of the necessity of cessation. So they are not two arguments for the same conclusion at all.

Furthermore, if it were pointed out to Descartes that for God to recreate every moment the same soul which was incorruptible because of its partlessness is to perform the logically impossible task of bringing into existence anew what was already there without duplicating it, he would reply, like some scholastic Christians, that God can do things that are not conceivable by the logic of the finite. The fact of the matter is that Descartes did not have either a clear notion or a clear proof of the immortality of the soul. Somewhat simplistically, he thought that since the body is subject to death— and even in this as I have tried to show at the outset he was confused— and the soul is unlike and independent of the body, it follows that the soul is deathless. In a letter to Mersenne, dated 24 December 1640, he admits the reason for his reticence on this topic in the *Meditations* : “You say that I have not said a word about the immortality of the soul. You should not be surprised. I could not prove that God could not annihilate the soul but only that it is by nature entirely distinct from the body, and so that it is not bound to die with it.” (Kenny ed: *Philosophical Letters*, p.87)

3. Why is immortality worth proving, after all? Western Philosophers of the self from Augustine to Shoemaker have been obsessed by the idea of bodily survival because without some sort of a body how shall I identify myself as distinct from another soul? Shall we then say that a person is immortal if and only if he or she keeps growing older and older but never expires or may be never even gets older

after a point? Such bodily eternity is hardly ever meant— except by the most crude alchemist— as a desirable possibility or prospect, let alone as an accomplished metaphysical fact about ourselves. Apart from and millennia before Bernard Williams brilliant *reflections on the tedium of immortality*. The Makropulos Case (1973), Nachiketa in the Kāṭha Upaniṣad had summarised the unattractiveness of bodily immortality by the remark “*ati dīṅghe jīvīte ko rameta?*” (Who would delight in an exceedingly long life?)

The Nyaya school of Indian Philosophy finds even the prospect of a cognitionless and joyless liberation more worthy of pursuit than eternally ‘enjoying’ the poisonous honey (*madhu-viṣa samprkṛtam aṅgam*) of embodied existence. Even in Upanishadic thought the immortality that we pray for by invoking “MR̥TYOR MĀ AMR̥TAM GAMAYA” does not consist in not dying or getting back our body after a resurrection but consists in ceasing to fear death.