

## BELIEF IN IMMORTALITY

SHAKUNTALA BORA

Belief in the concept of immortality is not an independent belief. It depends on the concept of person, his identity, and most importantly the possibility of continuing as the same person after death of the corporeal body. If our concept of person is corporealist as suggested by the Analytic philosophers, the very concept of immortality cannot be held at all. No one can deny the reality of death, the dissolution of the physical body at death. If immortality has to make any sense we must believe at least in some form, in the continuity of the dead person. Person as understood in common parlance is a complex whole of body and mind or the soul. Under such a concept of person any discussion of immortality should be abandoned. "It must however be acknowledged that both the words 'I' and 'survive' are not being given their normal meaning when we talk of survival after death"<sup>1</sup>. Now what remains is whether the 'I' that remains survives in any sense at all.

Immortality as the belief in survival after death is accepted by all the advocates of the concept though they differ in their belief of how one should survive. There are three major forms of beliefs in survival after death. a) Resurrection b) Shadow-man and c) Disembodied existence. Resurrection suggests that the person survives in the same body that the person had prior to his death. This belief again may be held in two different ways-coming to life in an identical body after the previous body is either destroyed or decayed which involves a time gap between death and coming to life again and secondly, coming to life in the same body as was the case with Jesus Christ. Both the beliefs however demand sheer omnipotence. In case of cremation or a long time gap between death and being born

again it is natural that the body gets destroyed. The constituent particles dissolve into nature. These particles are integrated again to create the same body so the person can come to life. These two persons are numerically different individuals living in two different times. And yet they are believed to be the same individual. Though they are claimed to be the same individual it is difficult to establish their identity as the same person. *Person as a corporeal being is under constant change. Thus we must assume that the dissolved individual during the time was also changing.* The person who will come into being will be definitely a different individual so far as his bodily constitution is concerned. Even if we assume that there is no change at all with regard to his bodily appearance there is no way we can establish the fact that they are in fact one and the same individual. While we talk of identity of person inspite of all the changes we generally make reference to his spatio-temporal and psychological continuity. The person who comes into existence after the time gap does not have spatio-temporal continuity nor proven psychological continuity to assert his identity. As Terence Penelhum said, "the very same person that died previously but merely a replica or simulacrum of him: for, since there is a time-gap between death and resurrection during which the original body may very well have been destroyed altogether, the connecting link that would make it unambiguously the same person and not a replica will have disappeared"<sup>2</sup>. There is no criteria that would make such two individuals the same person rather than two different persons. Bodily similarities though exact cannot prove identity. Bodily identity is guaranteed only by spatio-temporal continuity. There may however be psychological similarities. Again psychological similarities do not prove identity. It is easy to find cases where two persons exhibit psychological similarities and yet we do not say that they are one and the same individual. True, the person may claim to have all the memories that the pre-mortem person had. There are no criteria by which we can prove that memory claims made by the person are really genuine memories and not just memory claims. It often so happens that we forget what we did or felt at a particular time, and sometimes we seem to remember doing things we have never done. In the face of such difficulties memory cannot be regarded as the criteria of identity. Memory serves as a supporting factor of identity but not as the only determining

factor of identity. The idea of such a person who looks like me and thinks like me but is not me living in some future time does not and should not make me think that I will be surviving through that individual. This *person in the future is separated from me not only by time but also by a better body and a mind*. Immortality to be something to be looked forward for must ensure a better life. If a person dies of sickness or old age or accident then it would not do to come to life in the same body. Such kind of revival will lead to another quick death. Resurrection not only demands coming to life but it also requires that one comes to life with some alteration. Question remains as to how much changes we can allow before destroying identity.

Resurrection does not always lack bodily identity. A person may come to life in the very body in which he breathed his last. However, such resurrection must happen within a short time period from one's death. It will not serve the purpose to come to life in a decaying body. Such a short time gap will always leave the question open whether the person really died or not. Moreover, the body which could not sustain the life resulting in death of the person cannot be expected to sustain life till eternity. These are some of the problems of resurrection. Besides these problems this concept does not make any sense without help from God. It also cannot answer why God in the first instance allowed death to the person if the person had to be brought to life again. Belief in resurrected immortality not only depends on the belief in God but also on the belief in the capricious whims of God.

There is another theory that lies between resurrection and disembodied existence. It is the belief of continuing in the form of astral body or subtle body. After the death of the physical body one survives in the form of astral body. Such bodies are not in space in the sense of occupying space. But they have location and thus they are in space. Astral Bodies do not emerge after the death of the corporeal body, they are always there even when a person is alive. When a person dies it detaches itself from the body. It is thought as a replica of the original body and is like the original person except for the absence of the physical body. Such a vision is not difficult to form. The difficulty arises when we have a closer look. Our concept of a person as a bodily being involves reference to space. These bodies being non-spatial has nothing to give them *a shape, a form*. What

*is it that determines the individuality of such a person? Mental qualities cannot give spatial position to individual. To continue in the same form such bodies must be material to a certain extent. And if they are so then their persence should have made itself known to the living persons somehow. As Geach has said : “How is it then, subtle bodies have never forced themselves upon the attention of the physicist, as x-ray did, by spontaneous interference with physical apparatus? There are supposed to be a lot of subtle-bodies around and physicists have a lot of delicate apparatus, yet physicists engaged in physical research are never bothered by the interference of ‘subtle bodies’ . In the circumstance I think it wholly irrational to believe in subtle-bodies. Moreover, I who am no physicist am invited to study the existence of subtle bodies. I find that very fact suspicious. The discoverers of x-rays, electrons did not appeal to the lay public, but the physicist to study the evidence, and so long as physicist (at least in general) refuse to take subtle-bodies seriously, a study of evidence for them by a layman like me would be a waste of time”<sup>3</sup>.*

However, Geach’s argument does not prove conclusively the non-existence of subtle-bodies. It can be argued that subtle-bodies are not supposed to be just floating around interfering with the apparatus of physicist. That may be so, but still they require to be detected. Sometimes it is claimed that a chosen few can detect their presence. This however gives rise to the problem of proving the validity of their claim. Such perceptions may easily be said as illusion or hallucination as said by G.N.M. Tyrell. Again they may be claimed by supporters of disembodied existence as the materialization of disembodied soul rather than astral bodies. Accounts of subtle-bodies are always a bit obscure to eliminate such claims. But whatever they are they are claimed to be detectable in some way. If so, a definite way has to be found for its detection before such a view of survival is accepted.

The very concept of immortality as continuing in a new body or continuing in subtle bodies face certain logical difficulties. But belief in immortality may not *consider* the body itself as essential for *survival of a person*. *It may be argued that the very essence of person is non-physical. So that the dissolution of the physical body does not bring any change to a person’s survival and identity. It might be belief of person as*

essentially a soul or a something unsplitable, undiversifiable, having an awareness of being itself. Such a being does not need the body to survive. It continues to be itself in spite of any changes that may come upon it. It is indescribable. But each person is aware of being a person in the ultimate sense by himself. Such a being eludes all definition. Everyone knows what it is but nobody can describe what it is. It is the experiencer, its presence is realised in having experiences yet it is not the experience. It is that sense of self identity which cannot be lost no matter what changes may come upon the individual. "When I lost my memory, I am no longer aware of who I am in one sense, namely that I do not remember my name, where I live, what I have been doing in the past and so on. I cannot place myself in the sense in which the outside world observer would place me on the basis of what is known about me. But I do all the same recognize myself as the unique person I am. It is particulars about my past history and situation that I cannot recover. In a more basic sense I have no doubt who I am -I am myself, the being expressly recognize myself to be in a way which is not possible for knowledge of any other"<sup>4</sup>.

Under such a concept of person it is possible for the individual to continue being so even after the dissolution of the body. According to this concept the same person continues by virtue of knowing itself to be so. Of course it is difficult to understand what is really meant by such a person it is not an object of which one can be aware. Its realization is completely intuitive. In intuition we are not aware of the existence of any continuous being by virtue of whose presence I know myself to be a person. It must be something and yet there is nothing which could tell us what it is. If we are to think that this being will continue after our death then we must at least have some idea about its character. It is sometimes thought as a kind of dream body who though has a form does not exist in space. When we dream we see ourselves with a particular body having certain experiences. *It can be imagined that while in<sup>3</sup> dream our bodies are whisked off and what remains is only the dream body, continuing to have experiences.* Just as the experiences of the dream do not have any impact on real life similarly the experiences of the life after death will not have any impact on this world. Again it can be conceived that a person is so lost in thought that he is hardly aware of his own physical presence. In such a moment of

existing in the thought world the body may disappear and the person may continue without body. True that such a picture is hard to conceive but we cannot deny the logical possibility of such a life. Possibility of having this kind of life does not however make one desire to survive after death. Lewis saw the difficulty of such a life and said: "It would indeed seem to us now that such an existence would be anaemic and colourless. But intellectual exchange is not always unexciting, and there might be many compensations and new modes and media of existence, rich and rewarding and intimate beyond anything we can comprehend now. We only know mind and matter. What other dimensions might there not be?"<sup>5</sup> It is true that there may really be such kind of life. But no matter how rich it might be it needs to be capable of being explained to us, here and now. If we can show that the life that will come to us posterior to our death is the kind of life we consider as interesting from our present state of affairs the concept of immortality will really carry some meaning for us. To be appealing to living persons it has to involve continuity of having experiences. As Williams has said: "I am afraid I associate my life rather concretely with my tastes, some of them are of rather bodily character, those I love and so on rather than this etiolated system of delusion, which you (Lewis) seem to be offering"<sup>6</sup>. Just to continue as 'myself' cannot be called as surviving. It will be a mere substance rather than surviving. We need to continue with our experience to go on surviving. Now the question is whether it is possible to go on having experiences after bodily death?

Having no body a post-mortem person cannot have some of the experiences that a normal *human being can have*. For example, he cannot walk, smile, frown etc. We can however imagine such a person having mental experiences. But this person might be claimed to be having some experiences which an embodied person cannot have. These experiences should not be such that they cannot be understood in this world of space and time. "Mystery though natural and expected cannot be complete"<sup>7</sup>. Any experience to be called so much be capable of being discussed and evaluated by us.

A disembodied being can be imagined to have perceptions but it is difficult to make out whether it is possible for such a being to have them the way we do. We have perceptions in a particular way because we are

in a particular position in space. Let us say that this being is in the space so far as it has a particular location. Its location can be made out from the fact that things appear to him in a particular way rather than other way. So this being sees things as we do from a particular angle. In such a case there is every possibility that he took like us may commit mistake. When we feel that we are not having a proper vision of the object we tend to change our position to have a better look. The disembodied being too in order to have a better view will have to change his position. How does he do it? His movements do not involve any movements of his muscles as he does not have them. He can be thought to move by willing, or trying or by simply deliberating. That is he can see things from wherever it is necessary just by willing. There will be nothing for him not to see if he wills so. That is granting special power to him which we do not have. He can see things which are not within 'sight'. He can desire to see and he will see. If we grant this power to this being we must grant him super control over his will. Otherwise he will see too many things at the same time to make any sense of it. These are difficulties which will come along with diasombodiod existence. But they do not prove the impossibility of having such experiences. As Penelhum said: "There seems no decisive reasons to insist that a disembodied person could not perceive our world, or, with the aid of inherited true beliefs about its nature, make some correct judgement about it, and be able to understand and sometimes correctly use, the fundamental distinction between how it seems and how it is"<sup>8</sup>.

It seems logically possible that one can continue after death and can also have experiences. But all these ultimately depend on our belief that an individual really remains being so in the state of disembodied being.

It may be true that our sense of identity is fundamental and we know that we are persons without being told so by anyone. But is it really possible to have the very concept of being a distinct being without being what we have been? I may have the knowledge of being the unique being but the sense of being a distinct individual can come when we can individuate ourselves as different from others. The feature of being myself in that fundamental sense could not have created the sense of being distinct from others. Without a particular mind or a distinct body this sense cannot distinguish one individual from another. Everyone knows that he is a unique

being. There is nothing distinctive about this feeling. This is universally present in all human beings. Identity in this sense cannot give a person his distinct identity. To be a distinct being as different from others he needs to be characterised. This characterisation of a person comes from his distinct body and a distinct mind. Sometimes it is claimed that a mind alone can serve as identity conferring factor for a person. But to have a distinct mind one has to have a distinct body. A mind is nothing but the total construct made up of all mental states in a person's life. Now this mind is said to be one mind because it belongs to one body. Without a body one mind cannot be distinguished from the other. Reference to body is necessary for individuation of mind and without individuation it is not possible to confer identity. Because our body occupies a particular position we have a particular view of the world. Our world-view is given by our spatial position. And our mental states depend on how the things appear to us. As we are situated in a particular position which can not be anybody else's we develop our unique characteristics. The role of body over our mind is undeniable. The very fact of having a distinct mind is body dependent. "We find bodies without mind; we never find minds without bodies. When we do find minds we always find a close connection between their process and those of their bodies. This, it is argued strongly, suggests that minds depend for their existence on bodies, in which case, though survival may still be abstractly possible, it is to the last degree unlikely. At death there takes place completely and permanently a process of bodily destruction which, when it occurs partially and temporarily, carries with it the destruction of part of our mental life"<sup>9</sup>. This may be too radical a view. But we cannot deny that a distinct mind is distinct by virtue of belonging to a distinct body. There are stories of swapping minds like that of the cobbler and the prince. And on the first look they do seem probable. There are however many problems with such cases. In such case of interchange of minds a particular person acquires the other person's personality and the other acquires his. But it is difficult to comprehend how one person's, for example, the prince's personality can get expressed in the body of the cobbler or vice-versa. "When we are asked to distinguish a man's personality from his body, we do not really know what to distinguish from what"<sup>10</sup>. However, it is true that once the mind is formed there is a tendency to identify ourselves with



the mind. It happens so because with our mind goes the way we see the world. That is vital to the distinct characteristic we have which in turn makes us what we are. It is this tendency of ours to identify ourselves with our mind that has led some of us to conceive the idea of continuing after the dissolution of our bodies. But the logical possibility of conceiving such an idea does not prove the existence of such beings. In fact the very 'I' does not seem to be a reality on a closer look. The awareness of being a unique being seems to signify only the formal aspect of my being in which mental contents can be put. The 'I' seems to be a formal category of cognition which is created to distinguish oneself from other as realised by the mind and created by one's distinct spatial position. Without bodies there will be no distinguishing factor and there will not arise a distinct 'I'. Whatever is said to continue after the dissolution of the body cannot be called the person continuing. Mental features which can be thought to continue with the person alone cannot sustain it. Parfit tried to show we can survive with our psychological continuity without identity. We find it hard to accept such survival as survival at all for not having identity. Identity is a psychological matter which we confer upon ourselves at the realisation of being a distinct being. We may conceive the idea of surviving in some form but should we really call it the continuation of a person? There will be nothing save our awareness of being oneself and our mental continuity to sustain our identity which will need to be confined to certain boundaries to continue being distinct. Having nothing to confine it to any where one person carries the possibility of overlapping another person and being overlapped. It seems improbable that individual consciousness should continue after the dissolution of the body. It can be conceived that consciousness of some sort continues after death but that cannot be individual consciousness. Immortality as person is a myth.

#### NOTES

1. Pul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction*, Macmillan London, 1982 p-14.
2. 'Survival And Identity' in Mostafa Fagfoury (ed) *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa, Ontario : University of

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3. *Immortality, in God and Soul*, Routledge, London 1969.
  4. H. D. Lewis, *An Elusive Self* Hertford and Harlow. London. 1969.
  5. H. D. Lewis 'Life after Death. A Discussion' in Lewis (ed.) *Persons and Life After Death*, MacMillan, London, 1978.
  6. B. A. O. Williams, 'Life After Death A Discussion' in Lewis (ed.) *Persons And Life After Death*, MacMillan, London, 1978.. p.70
  7. Terence Penelhum. *Survival And Disembodied Existence*. Routledge. London. 1970. p-22
  8. Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*. p.35.
  9. C. D. Broad, "*The Mind and its Place in Nature*" (Routledge, London, 1968)p-533.
  10. B. A. O. Williams *Problems of Self* Cambridge 1973 p-12.