

CAN I DIE ?—AN ESSAY IN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

I. Introduction

Often we feel there is something odd about death, and especially about our own. This latter at least we often feel beyond our ken. Well, I think in a sense it may be ; but in another, clearly is not. Among those who have felt this strangeness is Ramchandra Gandhi who, in an excellent recent work, *The Availability of Religious Ideas* (Macmillan; 1976), maintained —“There is no difficulty in seeing that I cannot intelligibly *conceive of* my own death—the ceasing to be, for good, of myself, my consciousness. I can *conceive of* temporary lapses into unconsciousness, always overcome by a return to consciousness. The difficulty is this : in asking myself the question ‘What will it be like to be irreversibly unconscious?’ (and the state of affairs here ought to be visualized would exclude all dream activity and dream-thinking of all types), I want both to remain self-conscious and *visualize* actual loss of capacity for self-consciousness. This cannot be done.” (p. 39 ; italics mine). In similar vein, Antony Flew, courting his own funeral, or the concept of it, asserts that, “ If it really is I who witness it then it is not my funeral but only ‘ my funeral ’ (in inverted commas) : and if it really is my funeral, then I cannot be a witness, for I shall be dead and in the coffin.” (‘ Can a man witness his own funeral?’ *Hibbert Journal*, 1955-56: p. 246).

But much of this rests with assuming the problem at issue resolved, for it rests with assuming a certain understanding of persons already settled and agreed upon. In Flew’s case, this concept is such that, to say “ I can’t survive my death”, is undoubtedly true, since analytic. Which pre-empts all discussion. It assumes the witnessing — ‘ I ’ in all ways the same as the “ me ” about when I speak in saying “ That’s me in that coffin ”, when I do this witnessing. (Compare, “ That’s me in that bottle ”, pointing to my pickled left-leg) Nonsense results from the mere suggestion that I might think the latter, according to Flew. As it must, for Flew begs the question at issue—whether there *is* some sense of “ I ”, or of “ me ” in which I survive my death, which *ergo* differs from some other sense of “ I ” (or of “ me ”) in which I don’t.

In a different way, Gandhi's utterance also begs the issue—by assuming, this time, another notion as normative of persons, the notion that a person is his consciousness (“myself, my consciousness”) so that what we can say of a person is *simply* what we can say of consciousness. But that I am my consciousness, as undoubtedly I am, neither shows my consciousness is *always* what “I” am, nor, when I am it, *all* I then am. Nor does it show I might not sometimes *use* the term “I” (or “me”) such that this consciousness *is*, then, all I am speaking of. “I”, like “me”, is a word with largely unnoted peculiarities, and a vastly complex grammar. And we can't dismiss one or other of the senses I've suggested we might viably employ in talking of “my death” without first looking to see if they are both viable senses. That we will only see in part by looking at how we do talk about ourselves, but more importantly, by looking, honestly, at how we do what we might for now call “experience” ourselves.

I intend to suggest, not that both these senses are viable, but that they could be. I intend in other words at least to argue for a sense of “I” in which what this is about cannot at any rate *picture* itself as dying, so cannot in that degree witness its own funeral. Whether what I then speak of actually does or could “die” is a wholly other question to which I will offer no answer. I will tend to feel the question in some way senseless. One thing, though. I will also speak of another sense in which I can picture, or visualise, my dying or being dead; and so leave open the question whether “I” in the first sense might not witness the passing of what I am in the second. I hold it clear that reflexives operate far more complexly than Flew and others would have us believe. Much person-philosophy founders on a failure fully to note this complexity.

And let me finally note that I will not be advancing any form of Dualist understanding of persons; that, in other words, my talk of “two senses of ‘I’” is not *that* kind of talk. In fact, it rests on a non-Dualist understanding, though I won't argue that here.

II. Two Provisos

Two things briefly to note. That I take the pronouns “I” and “me” to differ only in their grammar, and in no other way presently of interest to us. Certain, I think it silly to imagine

them in any way *about* different items in our world, being in each case in some way about the person I K—W knows himself to be (when, that is, I use them).

Secondly, I will throughout be talking of “picturing” or “imagining” certain things, and not, as Gandhi also does, of “conceiving of” them. I will mean, “imaging in my mind” by “imagining”, and hence the same as “picturing”. Now whilst I’m sure that picturing something is conceiving of it, the converse seems to me less clear. Certainly I do seem able to conceive of *there being* some things I cannot picture—thousand-sided figures, for instance. And quite as easily might I conceive of a world in which there were none. Though of course here the difficulty is an empirical one, of not being able to see a thousand sides in their right place all at once in my mind. On the other hand, I am told that mathematicians can conceive of “the square—root of minus-one”, and there seem logical reasons why that cannot be pictured. But again, they are disinclined to say that “the square-root of minus-one” *exists*; and I certainly intend to hold the non-picturable “I” to do so.

Nonetheless, it is picturing only, and imagining, I will speak of here. I don’t know whether there is some deeper sense in which the “I” I am shortly to argue cannot be pictured, cannot also be conceived of. Without doubt, I have the concept; but that may differ from “conceiving of” what that concept is about. Still, in saying I cannot picture the death of “I” in a certain sense, I *may* not be saying this death cannot be conceived of. That will depend on whether there could be something here to count as “conceiving” which isn’t merely picturing, a question beyond the scope of our present concern, which is—to show there to be a clear sense in which I can imagine my death which is nonetheless such that there is another sense in which I cannot. Later it may get clearer whether I can “conceive of” this non-picturable thing, or anyway, of one thing about it—its death. For now, we will stick with picturing, and leave conceiving to follow. The implications of this must await another day.

III. What Someone Could Mean

There are, perhaps, a number of things someone who says, “I cannot imagine my death”, meaning either my dying or being dead, might have in mind.

(i) He could be thinking : " I cannot imagine *this* about me, for I cannot imagine anything about me; that is, I cannot have an image of anything about me. For the " me " here, being the self I directly know when self-conscious, is non-picturable. And since what I mean when I speak of " me " in this sense is necessarily inaccessible to others—for they cannot share my self-consciousness, or they would *be* me, so not then sharing—it is clearly non-picturable to them also ".

I will say why this " me " should be thought non-picturable in a moment. Let us for now merely note that by directly knowing myself, I don't mean, say, seeing my body from the outside or having a " sense " of it from within. I don't mean perceiving anything I might in some way call myself. Nor do I mean the kind of direct-knowing I have, say of my thoughts or emotions. What I mean comes before all these, if it comes at all, and cannot be equated with them. The directly-knowing situation I am talking of here is this—the consciousness I have of myself in merely being conscious, such that what I am *is* this consciousness. The " I ", here, and " myself ", are one and the same; and any tendency there might then be to deny the possibility of any " knowing " in which the agent *is* his object, even to say that our language won't allow this, must be misguided. For here we have one such situation—the consciousness each one has of himself in which he knows he *is* this consciousness. Any denial can only be the urge, *a priori*, to thrust a certain model of knowing on all situations, willy-nilly, such that, should it not fit, we tailor the facts and not the model. For no fact is plainer to any of us than that we are self-conscious—or often so—that is, conscious of being the self who, then, knows the self it is. To us as humans, no fact *could* be plainer, for upon this entirely is built our humanness. Were there no self-consciousness, I would be inclined to say there would be no humans. Certainly, there would be no beings who presently *call* themselves " human ", and who, in doing so, distinguish themselves from every other creature on earth. For only a self-conscious creature can be such that " facts " could in any sense be " plain " to him; so a prime fact that must be plain is his self-consciousness.

Accordingly, we mean a simple thing by this directly-knowing—namely (we might now say), *my being awake to the fact that I am*

me, through merely being awake. When inwardly centred, I often am aware of myself, directly, in this way, often the consciousness I have of this being in of being this consciousness. Which must make this awareness about as familiar as any could be. Nothing of mystery lurks here, but something with which we must all, in our inwardness, be wholly familiar, often. And yet, though of its very nature so wholly familiar, something a puzzle to many, because it defies describing or talking in descriptive detail about. Why, and in what way, "defies" we'll see in a moment. That there should be this puzzle, we might note here, is a crippling legacy of our false belief that every real thing we do know must be describable, or not a real thing. We have no good reason for this belief at all, merely the dazzling experience that most things are describable in this way. "What has bedevilled much of the discussion of the nature of persons", notes H. D. Lewis, "both on the side of those who favour some kind of reductionism and on that of those who defend a pure self, has been the failure to appreciate properly how each person knows himself to be himself in a way that eludes capture in any kind of description or normal identification. I am what I am and simply could be no other, however different my history and physical attributes may have been".¹

(ii) Returning, then, a second thing someone could be thinking in saying, "I cannot imagine my death", is that I cannot imagine *me* being dead, for what I then imagined would not be *me*, but some object. It would not be *me* being anything; for it would not be *me* at all. I can't be some object I observe. There may be some trick in this, but certainly at least half a truth. It's this half we'll be interested in.

(iii) And a third thing someone might, here, have in his mind is, briefly, that I, the self-conscious me, cannot exercise my consciousness to give myself a picture of what it would be like for me, as conscious-being, no longer to be able to exercise consciousness. For that would be for consciousness to try to depict itself as non-consciousness—a seeming nonsense, the full measure of which I will test later on.

In sum, the possible things meant are these: (i) that I am non-picturable, so cannot be imagined, hence not imagined dead or dying; (ii) that anything I *can* imagine must be an object, in some I.P.Q...⁴

way viewable as distinct from me, and I as self-knowing subject can in no way be viewed as distinct from me, so cannot be imagined, so not imagined, dead; (iii) that consciousness cannot give itself a picture of *itself* as non-conscious, so cannot *imagine* its own death, or ceasing to be. (i) is because of what I must be—non-picturable; (ii), because of what I cannot be—a reifiable thing; and (iii), as we'll see, is either a trivial logical point, or an extension of (i) and (ii), though basically of (i).

Now I think these, in their own way, and in a certain sense, all are true. And non-trivially so. Yet not true in some sense which means I cannot imagine my dying or being dead. And though at least Gandhi's formulation clearly is closer to (iii), than expressly to (i) or to (ii), viable sense can only be made of any of them with the aid of the other two. For these three are very closely knit together. Without aid especially from (i), (ii) is in danger of becoming the trite truism that I cannot imagine or picture something lacking in its defining mark, say "X", if what I'm then supposed to be imagining is that something. A trite truism, for this neither shows I cannot imagine the thing then in question, only now lacking in the mentioned "mark", so it's now a different thing, *nor* that I cannot imagine that thing's ceasing to be — its "death" — in that it now ceases to have this mark. I am not at all convinced that Gandhi has escaped this triviality. But this I am convinced is not the sense in which (iii) should be taken. And to get clear on why I think this, and on how I think it should be taken, let us say a mite more about the sense of "me" and of "I" I've so often stressed to indicate its seeming specialness.

IV : A glance at the me I am

As I've noted, all these meanings, to make sense, much depend on a certain clear usage of the pronouns "I" and "me", namely, how they are used in speaking directly about that most familiar mode of awareness mentioned above. In this, they are used to talk of *self-knowing consciousness* where this can be distinguished from, say, me as my physical-body or articulable contents of mind. There is something else I want to add to this analysis of these pronouns to make it, in my view, complete, or complete enough for our purposes, but one or two other things must be said before we can add this.

Meanwhile, let me note that I hold this fact— of self-knowing consciousness — more revealing than any other about what marks humans off from others. I find the meagre treatment it has received in recent English-speaking Western philosophy about persons at least astonishing, if not sad. The mere fact that the consciousness here in question is the only thing in our world which can be self-known should on its own vindicate its claim to close scrutiny. I recall a certain noted Australian philosopher trying despairingly to interest a group of blank-faced Oriental students in the fact that a cylindrical strip of paper with two sides can be turned into a Merbius strip with only one, continuous side, by a mere twist, with the words—“But don’t you find it fascinating that there should be such a thing in our world?” I confess, in my Philistine way, to finding this strange fact as little intriguing as did my Chinese students. Yet, the uniqueness of this fact about consciousness seems to me both obviously vital and wholly fascinating. For it’s about people and not about scraps of paper.

V : That this Consciousness Cannot be Pictured

Now “me” in this I think wholly common place sense cannot, be further depicted, pictorially, for the following reasons. Firstly, any attempt by me to picture it would, here, be an act I knowingly do, and all acts I knowingly do, since done consciously, pre-suppose I am already there. Obviously, if it is an attempt *by me* to do something (no matter what), it pre-supposes my conscious presence anyway. Perhaps I should note that acting “knowingly” is not merely doing things “on purpose”. I throw each blow in boxing, or make each stroke in tennis, or even simply take each step when I walk, certainly on purpose, but not in my sense knowingly. That is to say, I am not aware of myself doing these things, *in* doing them. Which is as much as to say that, in doing them, I am not *aware* of myself; or, of *myself*. And that is simply another way of saying, I am not self-conscious. I don’t do each single deed self-consciously, that is. I don’t throw every single punch or take every single step, that way. Though I may well be aware of doing the whole thing of which these are bits—of fighting for the World Crown, or taking a stroll. I could in the overall picture well be self-conscious.

Now saying this — that all acts I knowingly do pre-suppose I am already there — may seem sufficiently to make the case. That

is, the fact that my effort to picture pre-supposes my self-conscious presence may seem to *show* that this consciousness cannot *be* pictured by me in my mind. This argument has often been appealed to in Western philosophy. I suspect Kant used a variant of it in arguing existence not to be a predicate.² But it's a bad one for all that. For all this *shows* is that no act of picturing can *give rise to* self-consciousness; for a thing cannot give rise to its pre-conditions. An important conclusion to begin with, but not in itself sufficient. For, from this alone it does not follow that such an activity may not scrutinize these pre-conditions.

But in any normal sense of "picture", that I cannot picture the self-knowing me is obvious. For any normal picturing takes a certain shape—that of a picture picturing some other thing pictured. A model involving three quite distinct things; picturer, thing pictured, and the operation whereby that former does picture the latter. And this model clearly won't fit self-knowing. For when I know myself in self-awareness, so that I know myself directly, the knower, the known, and the knowing collapse into one. I simply am the me I know — a blatant fact about something in our world which need puzzle us only if trammelled too much by our pre-conceivings about how "knowing" of any sort must be. There is absolutely no reason on earth why the knowing of everything in it should be modelled on some form of picturing. And every conceivable reason why any possible knowing of consciousness, directly by its bearer, cannot be modelled on this.

But is there some non-normal kind of picturing? Someone might think so. Surely, he might say, this is only a point about one thing I cannot do, and not another — about my inability to look at myself as if I were a thing apart (which I cannot be, so cannot do), and not about whether I might nonetheless have in my mind some picture or other. I don't have to have something actually before me to conjure an image of it. And were it objected that any picture I can conjure must be of something I can *in principle* look at, and I *cannot* in principle look at this "me" in that way should the retort not be — Why this? Could there not be some way in which a picture as it were might emerge, as a picture, say, of the centre of the earth, or of atoms, emerges in the light of evidence?

This suggestion is tempting and must be given some credence; for there is precisely a process of this kind we indulge in coming

to know about hidden things like dispositions and capacities. These, it could seem, and assuming for now a certain *analysis* of their nature (which says that in some minimal sense they are real aspects of my being which *ex hypothesi* must pre-exist their expressings), are things we don't directly picture, yet in some way *get* a picture of. I will say more about this later on. For now, it is at least clear that, tempting as this suggestion might be, and decidedly helpful in forestalling, at the very outset, too much mystery here, it nonetheless must be abandoned. For the simple fact does remain if I can have a picture, no matter how I get it, or how deeply buried or strangely hidden may seem to be the object it is of, it nonetheless must be of some object, if *really* a picture, and so of something I *can* both picture, and conceive of, as *distinct from me*.

In part the problem here is another one also—the usual one of identification. If there were some strange process whereby I got a picture of some thing I nonetheless cannot be confronted by, I must have some independent touchstone to vindicate it *as* a picture of that supposed thing. And in the case of me knowing myself, directly (in the way in question), there can be no such touchstone. I can be told by another, or make up this picture myself on the basis of inference. But another cannot be reliable, for he cannot have my self-consciousness; and any picture I make up, were it even sensible to say it *could be* of me (and I've argued it isn't even sensible), would always remain some made-up picture, entirely speculative. Apart from certain general statements about non-picturable possible properties — and I will come to these later —, no single notion, or picture, I could give myself, or find myself possessed of, could carry any more persuasion than countless others I might also give myself, or find myself possessed of. For I simply have no way of testing their veracity. Which naturally doesn't mean they, or some one of them, might not be accurate; simply that I can have no touchstone for accuracy here, so never any *reason* for believing any I might so concoct really to be of me.

But more of course : it is also clear that none of these concoctings could *be* of me. I cannot be a thing stood apart from what I am, even merely in my mind. For even when I see things in my mind, I, in their seeing, am really and totally there as something

distinct from this seeing, and so from the thing *in* my mind as "what I now know (*viz.*, the picture)". And when I know me, I am never distinct, either from this knowing, or from what I then know. In a nutshell, *any* picture I have is distinct from me, so cannot itself be what's known in self-knowing. Which means, that which it pictures cannot be either. I am me; and know so — which totally conveys the scenario.

Not, though, to say that pictures we do, often, give ourselves of our selves are *ergo* to be abandoned, each one and always, as somehow maliciously misleading. For we have no reason whatever to believe they are that. The reasons we adopt self-images are many and varied; and some of these are very good reasons indeed.

VI : The soul

Now it is, I suspect, at least in part "me" in this sense religious people mean in speaking of "the soul". For to speak of this is to speak of me, such that I am neither a material thing, nor a mental thing, nor an immaterial or non-mental thing, or any combination of these, being in no sense a *thing* at all, but what I initially know myself to be in self-consciously *knowing* things, physical or mental. I have called this "self-knowing consciousness", though no doubt more than this is meant by "soul". At least, I should think, "the consciousness anyone is, whether self-known now or not". But since knowing this consciousness, directly, alone ensures non-inductive knowledge of its really being here, the evidence of this self-knowings clearly ranks high in value. Where possible, appeal must be made to this, and not to something else, for knowing there truly to be a soul here. For no one can be better placed than me to say that I, and not some clever replica, am here to say that there's a soul, and not some merely seeming soul, here. Others merely view my conduct, and infer my presence. Where as; I don't need to do this. I know I am here, directly.

I think it another matter, though, whether another might not be better placed than I am to make true statements about me, in some sense of "me". I certainly feel I know more about how my small daughter will respond to certain situations than she does at present. But this is another matter I merely mention to mark it off from what I am speaking of here namely, directly-knowing

my-self. Certainly, in knowing this more about my tiny daughter there is no way in which *I* directly-know her as she does, herself. This remains a hard fact of the matter, no matter how we use the word "person".

We can now add the extra *I* said needed to complete our analysis of reflexives used in this way, by noting this use to be about *self-knowable consciousness* and observing this to be what we will and what, I maintain, most people do mean, or do *at least* mean, by "soul". I take this to be the clearest we can, or presently need, say about what I am in the sense in question, and would remind us only of this : that consciousness is special in that it alone, *and only*, can be known directly when known reflexively, or such that the thing known is the knowing thing. No one else can look directly at my consciousness but me. And even I don't *look*. I am it; and know so. This *in toto* describes the situation, and no more need be said. All the facts, in another words, are clear. It is vital always to bear in mind this unique status of consciousness in our world. And it's also vital to note that only the user, properly, of reflexives like "I" and "me" *is a* bearer, not merely of consciousness, but of directly knowable consciousness. Putting this simply by and large in our day-to-day experience, only humans do directly know themselves in this way.

Indeed, I feel this part of what Semitic traditions have been trying, sometimes confusedly, to get at in distinguishing humans from other, often clearly conscious creatures, in claiming only the former to "have souls". They have I think in part been wanting to say that only humans, and less well-known higher creatures like angels (or *devās* in the Hindu tradition) enjoy a mode of consciousness which is reflexively knowable. Which seems to me roughly true. I don't myself believe any non-human animals, even the most clever, can search their souls in anguish or in joy. Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish Existentialist, once remarked that whilst he had often seen his cat reason, he had never, ever, seen it weep. He had this in mind.

Now, in this sense, clearly I do have a soul. And if you are a human person, as I would appear to acknowledge in acting towards you as one, you have one too. Though "have", the verb used here because it normally is used in speaking of one's "relation" to one's soul, clearly is not entirely happy. For it must be rather more true to say I *am* my soul. All the same, this may not be the

full-blown sense of "soul" many would wish for. For about this there can for instance, be no guarantee of immortality, merely a guarantee of no readily predicable mortality. To ask me whether something I cannot see in my mind's eye dies may sometimes be to ask me something to which I can give no ready reply. For certainly, I cannot *imagine* its demise. And were it the case that all things *dieable* could be picture dead, or dying, then this *couldn't* die.

But there seems no reason why things must be *picturable* dying, or dead, to actually be dieable. Sub-atomic particles cannot be pictured, and some of these we know have a very short half-life indeed. Admittedly, these are not *in principle* non-picturable, and consciousness is; but this would seem to make no difference. For this is a fact about consciousness and its uniqueness, and has no bearing whatever on whether non-picturables can perish. There seems in principle no reason whatever why souls should not. Whether they do is of course another question entirely. And we simply don't have the evidence we'd need to say *for a fact* they do, as we do have for atomic-particles. Particles are defined as the kinds of things we *infer to* from the behaviour of certain instruments, so that, should this behaviour stop, we know these particles have perished. And whilst there might be questions about the accuracy of these instruments, there can be no other kind of question. But souls are not defined as things we infer to in any sense. We have no instruments of any kind whatever to measure these; and need none. Souls are what we know when we know ourselves; *and they are nothing else*. No behaviour of any kind defines them otherwise; so the presence or lack of this behaviour can be no infallible indicator of the presence or lack of souls.

But quite as mostly certain kinds of behaviour do seem very good guides to the presence here of a soul,—the kinds of behaviour we normally associate with a person—,so would it seem *reasonable* to hold the lack of such behaviour soundly to show the lack of a soul. The problem here is twofold—that this can be no more than reasonable, and never certain, for the link between there being a soul and this behaviour is merely contingent; and secondly, that even were a soul no longer here, that would not in itself show it had perished. Merely that it was no longer *here*. I am not suggesting the soul to be any kind of "thing"; merely that not being the

behaviour to which it is contingently linked, it need not be thought to perish when this behaviour does. That there is an aura of immortality hovering awesomely about our understanding of souls should come as no surprise. For we do seem unable to guarantee its mortality, even should we be able sensibly to think it.

I am also unsure about the soul's uniqueness, about there being a separate one in every person's case. For if something marks me off from something else, and I can know it does, it must do so in virtue of certain properties it has I can know about and which this other thing lacks. But having properties I can know about certainly in one sense is something I cannot say of my soul—in the sense that there might be *articulably describable* properties. If my inwardness has properties I can picture, it isn't the "me" in question, but some thing I can separate from me, albeit merely in thought. Something thought by me to be separate from me certainly cannot be *this* me; cannot, that is, be self-knowable consciousness.

But might it not have these properties and me not know about them? Not if they are articulably describable ones, for these; can *in principle* always be pictured. They are essentially picturable and the soul is not. In this sense of "properties", the soul doesn't have them, and cannot be held to be a uniquely propertied thing. For no one ever can know his soul in *that* way.

But this is no marvellous mystery, leading in one triumphant jump to pan-psychism, monism, mysticism (or some such). This is a mere fact about the limits our knowing of souls must bump into. And we still might openly *speculate* on being "unique", each one in this way, and having lots of properties. To be unique, we noted, means first to have properties, and second to have them such that they mark us off. And as to the first,—the having of properties, we still might have them, though non-pictorially. For properties don't *need* to be articulably describable to be such. They could be pictorially inferable such, as those of electrons from Cloud Chambers. But the problem of this in the case of souls is obvious—that knowing we had properties ascribable to us as souls would need to be inferred, even by us, from our conduct, and conduct must always only remain contingently linked to the soul giving rise to it. My soul, defined as "self aware of itself", or such that it can be, accordingly entails, for *being* what it must be, no behaviour whatever. There is utterly no observable doing I must do for it to be true that I am a soul, or for my directly knowing so. So any move from

conduct to speculating ascribable non-picturable properties must always be problematical.

I disagree, partly, with Lewis when he claims, "It would be a mistake to suppose that the self which is thus uniquely known to itself can be known or thought to exist apart from its having certain experiences".³ I don't disagree that mostly we only do know ourselves as we directly do *in* our experiences, and certainly not that, in our experiences, we at least often do so know ourselves. I only dispute the suggestion that Lewis appears to be making that we only *can* so know ourselves, still less, be "thought to exist", in or because of our experiences. I suspect this suggestion could only be advanced by a thinker steeped in Western traditions, and not sufficiently in any Eastern one. For such as *dhyāna*, or depth-meditation, is precisely designed to purge this manner of inward self-knowing of every experience whatever. There seems in other words no reason whatever why I might not so directly know myself without engaging in experience, and at least one well attested area where, should I wish, I might do so. All the same, I don't imply the soul to be some empty nothingness within, enshrining in no way potential for conduct; for at the very least what we are speaking of does give rise to conduct, and does effect an influence in experience. I only mean we can't assume this inwardness must be given some specific analysis, such, for instance, as that it is propertied. Unless we mean no more than that it does give rise to its conduct by "is propertied", this may well simply not be the right phrase to use of it.

Accordingly, whether my soul is propertied—with it must at least be to be unique—must to this point remain an open question. Likewise, therefore, whether it *is* unique. Though only to *this* point. For another open question must be whether there might not be other ways of knowing my soul than merely being awake to it. There remain whole denizens of possible person-knowing as yet unexplored. And it may for instance be that depth-meditation casts light upon this question; or, perhaps, the way we come to know things about ourselves, about our capacities and dispositions, through intercourse socially. May be this question gets closed a little in these areas.

But these are not places to go now. Suffice to say that I *am* my soul, and that this must be beyond dispute. For this is merely to say that I am the conscious-self who can know himself to be

conscious. And any denial of this by me must be self-defeating. It would, indeed, make a nonsense of everything I said, admitting it to be said *by me*. For that involves the self-consciousness it denies. Descartes' much maligned *cogito* in part shows this.

Briefly, I can only knowingly deny facts about me, as distinct from this denial being true, if I am aware of their lack. But if I am aware of their lack, it is either the case that I am *merely* aware of this lack, or also the case that I am aware *I* am aware of their lack. I suggest that the first kind of mere awareness, whilst not impossible—no doubt it's true of many animals—, cannot be true of a being who can *put the fact of* this lack, and this awareness, to himself. Which, typically is the human mode of awareness and this entails self-consciousness. In other words, if I can put this (or any) denial to myself, I must be self-aware; so my denying that I am a soul must, always, be self-defeating.⁴

Let me now separate out two issues I've so far run together—the question of whether my soul is unique, and whether it has properties. It might seem these should be kept together, for if my soul is unique it should then follow it has properties. And I think it does. But it doesn't at all seem clear that anything having properties must be some unique in the sense of *individual* thing. Waves of force are propertied, though scarcely individual things. They can't be picked-out or pinned-down in the way individuals can. They simply are too pervasive. But this in a degree is a matter of the grammar of the term, and certainly we distinguish force-waves, even "the atmosphere", or, say, "the weather" from other items. We do mark them off from others, in virtue of properties they are said to have which others do not, which is all we need for their being "unique" in the present sense. Closer to the point would be "the Cosmos", as "the sum total of all there is". It would only be a stretched imagination who would call this an unique individual. Still, imaginations can stretch, even warp, and provided one doesn't imagine there is some other, similar unique thing from which the Cosmos could even *in principle* be distinguished, language is flexible enough to accommodate the use.

Likewise here, the only point at issue is whether each person's soul is uniquely individual in his own case, or not. And this, we can now see, would not be resolved by finding it propertied at all, even did we find that each individual person—and *persons* can be

individuals—always exhibited certain properties not exhibited by others. For quite as the Cosmos, though propertyed, is not a thing to be contrasted with other similar things, so could souls, though propertyed, all in fact be expressions of the same “whatever”. So that knowing one’s soul is always in each case knowing that same “whatever”. I shun the phrase “the same *one*”, for “one” may not be the right word if there can be no contrast. And nothing whatever follows from the fact that we use the word “soul” in the plural; for that is merely a way we *talk*.

These are musings at present which I don’t wish to follow up in full, but one word about possible properties. If the soul has properties, it must be in some non-describable sense. That is to say, they cannot directly be described, since though they may directly be known—I must in some direct way know my disposings to behave unerringly in terms of them—this directness of knowing is that mode of knowing I have of myself, and not of describable objects. Any properties my soul might be said to have must be properties I am; and as such, non-picturable, so non-directly describable ones. And any strangeness lurking here can only be the product of wanting knowing of properties to be of one kind, namely, the kind I have of seeable things, a kind of wanting we in the West are, for reasons of our history accustomed to cultivating. Still and all, since self-knowing cannot be of this, the “seeable things” kind, my knowing of any properties I might prove to be—I say “be” and not “have” advisedly—cannot be of this kind either. Nor is there any reason why we should assume it must. When H. D. Lewis remarks, “the self (*viz.*, the soul) is inwardly known to itself not as an entity apart and capable of being characterized on its own account, but as a unique being”,⁵ he is only a little bit right. That the self (soul) cannot be known “as an entity apart” clearly is true. But that it cannot be characterized, as distinct from pictured, and that it *is* “unique”, are distinctly doubtful. Souls need not be thought to be empty of everything. Were they, as Flew has remarked, we may well be silly to be in the least concerned about them. For they may well not, then, have anything to do with life.

But souls can be thought to be propertyed, provided they are not then thought to be things. And the area we might fruitfully search for such properties is that of dispositions. For talk of one’s

disposings well brings out the sense in which the soul can be said to be propertied, and the sense in which it can't. Briefly, to speak of dispositions is not to give a picture of some thing-in-itself called "soul", but rather to say two things: that my soul *must be such that* (i) I can behave as I do, that is, disport my mind and body as I do; so that (ii) there must *be* something I am *other than* how I behave, and this I call "soul". To borrow again from Lewis, the self is "more than its experiences and uniquely known in each case, by each person".⁶ In this, no *picture* is given; merely the statement that whatever (unspecified because unspecifiable) I am, it is, and can be, responsible for certain specific behaviors.

Eastern thought seems to me correct to stress the importance of talk about disposings⁷: for something is here told us "about" the soul. Still, not some *describable* something. In understanding disposings we are not, in other words, given a picture of bits of something. But if, someone may still want to say, my behaviour differs from yours, doesn't this mean we are different souls? No: it means what it says—that there are different *behaviors*. Which may mean there are different *persons*—that rests with our grammar. But whether there are different souls is another matter entirely.

VII : And so, at last to death

Let us return to the third thing I said someone might have in mind in claiming not to be able to envisage his death. This could now be rendered thus: that I, as self-knowable consciousness cannot exercise this consciousness to give myself a picture of what it would be like for me no longer to be able to exercise consciousness. Not because it might not happen. Nor because, as Gandhi seems to hold, it makes no sense even to conceive of it's happening. Rather because, I simply cannot picture myself *exercising* consciousness, should this, as here, supposedly entail picturing consciousness. I cannot envisage the before and after of a situation which cannot be envisaged in the first place.

I am tempted to say, if I cannot imagine myself having something, I cannot then imagine myself not having it. But this could merely be the trivial thing we mentioned at the start—that any picture of a thing is not a picture *of that thing* if it lacks the marks which define or constitute it. It is only both true and significant that I cannot imagine myself lacking in something *because* I cannot

imagine myself having it, if the latter inability is because this thing is *in principle* non-imaginable. Which, as we've noted, is the case of souls.

And naturally, another cannot do this thing of me either. For myself—consciousness must, in its nature, be inaccessible to any other. If I cannot do this—picture my soul as lacking—no one can. It simply cannot be done.

So much then seems clear, or reasonably so. Perhaps I haven't put it clearly. I hope I have. Now I think that, from this, many have wanted to conclude that, *ergo*, I cannot *imagine* either my dying or being dead. And, moreover, that because I cannot imagine this, *therefore* I won't, or likely won't, die. But this is just confused. For what it is impossible for me to imagine is not my death, for that it is perfectly easy to picture. To explicitly take "being dead" for now, and leave "dying" (hopefully) for later, the term refers to a perfectly everyday state of affairs I've noted, or could have noted, being true of others, and can imagine being true of me. It refers simply to the cessation of life in a body, such that it ceases to function as a living body, and decays (unless artificially preserved or kept "alive"). And *this* it is in my case perfectly easy to picture. What I cannot imagine is something else—the cessation of that which I know when I reflexively cognize the consciousness I am; the cessation, that, is, of my soul. This I cannot picture for reasons adduced.

Likewise, "dying". Quite as I can picture being dead, so, and as easily, can I picture my dying. I can see in my mind's eye *this* body exhibiting the normal signs of receding consciousness have witnessed, or could have witnessed (we tend to be much shielded in the West), countless times, in observing others dying, in, as it were, being in on their death. This occurrence simply is what we mean by the term "dying". Nothing mysterious here, and nothing more that needs explaining.

But again, what I cannot picture is the ceasing to be of the consciousness I know, or can know, myself to be. But then, why should this unpicturable thing be thought to be "dying"? I feel like saying—"Even could I picture my consciousness ceasing, *that* would not be to picture my dying. For dying is this other commonplace thing I can perfectly easily picture".

VIII Conclusion

The question remains. Certainly, I can imagine my death, for I can picture the passing of life from this physical body I call "mine" as easily as anything. But can I picture the death of my soul? To which the answer must clearly be that I cannot, that *this* is a kind of dying I cannot imagine, and no doubt what people have felt in puzzling here. I think this says something very important, for it does distinguish between one plain sense in which I might die, and another in which I at least cannot be pictured doing so. What it does not of course show, in either case, is that I will, or that I won't die. The sense in which I can be pictured doing so is fairly clearly a sense in which I will die, all things being otherwise equal. But the sense in which I cannot be pictured doing so, the sense relating to being a soul, is one about which I can have no *certainty* either way. For that I cannot *picture* my dying in this sense in no straightforwardly simple way shows I cannot conceive of it.

Yet the question remains as open as has been our success in distinguishing what I am as my soul from what I am as my physical-body. Which means, assuming we have been successful, death of the soul in no way *follow* from death of the physical body, no matter how likely the lack of its normal behavioural concomitants on physical death is to influence us to *believe* that it does. Compelling as this belief may be, it remains in no way necessary. Hope in the possibility of its continuance is a wholly available one.

None of which means, or is meant to mean, that *persons* don't die. Only that we don't know whether souls do. For whether persons perish depends on the grammar of the word, on what, on any occasion, the word "person" *means*. And it may not at all points mean the same as the reflexive usage of "I" and "me". I *am* a person, certainly. But I am also conscious (sometimes). And, is "my consciousness" a person? Well, this, I suggest depends on what you want to *say*.

Department of Philosophy
La Trobe University
Bundoora
Australia

IAN KESARCODI WATSON

NOTES

1. H. D. Lewis, "The Elusive Self", *Talk of God*, Macmillan, 1969, p. 169.
2. I think Kant thought that, if existence is a *pre-condition* of there being properties, it cannot be listed among them, it cannot be a property; much as some have thought that, if self-consciousness is a *pre-condition* of thought, it cannot be found embraced by it, it cannot be thought about. But, to combine these two suggestions, from the fact that I must first exist to be able to think — to have this dispositional property — it follows neither that I cannot *think* of my existence, nor that *existing* cannot be one of my properties. It would be an odd property, since it would be found where all other properties were found, and not without them, quite as they, severally, would not be found without, it. But an odd property is still a property. Something that is found where everything else is found is not a non-property on that account. Space and time perhaps are like this; though I wouldn't care to say what *kind* of properties space and time are.

Still, I think existence is *not* a property for another reason; that it makes no sense to predicate it *of* things. For there are no things without it. But a property can *of its nature* be predicated or denied of things. Perhaps this is what Kant meant. If so, it seems more a point about the concept "property" than about the nature of things. For certainly it is *true* that things "exist". And we might as easily choose, or have chosen, to define "the properties" of things as those things which are true at any given time of them. I just don't think we have.

3. H. D. Lewis; *op. cit.*, p. 169.
4. In a quite remarkable book called *Thinking*, Vol. 1 of *The life of the Mind*, (Secker and Warburg, London, 1978). Hannah Arendt says what amounts to the same. In speaking of self presentation, a human act, and self-display, a merely animal one, she remarks, "self presentation would not be possible without a degree of self—awareness—a capability inherent in the reflexive character of mental activities and clearly transcending mere consciousness, which we probably share with the higher animals" (p. 36).
5. H. D. Lewis; *op. cit.*, p. 169.
6. H. D. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
7. Hindu and Buddhist speaks of *vāsanās* and *samskāras*, both roughly translatable as "innate and/or acquired inclinations or dispositions", as determining, not only the manner we are initially inclined to behave, always, but the very person and station we come into this world as, or with.