

DISCUSSIONS

Survival And Memory : A Critical Note*

A familiar tradition in Philosophy of Mind treats persons as essentially non-physical in nature and defines personal identity solely in terms of psychological continuity. According to this tradition, memory and character continuity is not only the primary criterion but also the sole criterion of personal identity. The importance of memory, in preference to bodily continuity, is almost taken for granted. Even while trying to offer a proof — the like of which is the favourite of the memory theorists for the primacy of the psychological criterion, the authors of this tradition do not appear to be open-minded at all. Thus Locke, for example : “Should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of his past, enter and inform the body of a cobbler. . . . everyone will know him to be the same person as the prince”¹ Such cases of alleged change-of-body, instead of being tendentiously described as such, could as well be described as cases of memory-and-character interchange, or at least as cases where we wouldn't know what to say. In this tradition, characterised by a rather dogmatic adherence to the psychological criterion of personal identity, the belief in disembodied survival and reincarnation etc. (I, shall refer to this as, simply, “survival” and describe the proponents of this belief as the “survivalists”) follows equally dogmatically. In sharp contrast to this, Professor G. C. Nayak's paper ‘The Criterion of Personal Identity — Must It Be Physical?’ (*Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, July 1978) is a useful contribution.

Nayak's concern seems rather to justify survival (as cases of personal identity) by examining the status of memory and pleading for its being sufficient condition of personal identity. To this purpose, he considers an imaginary case in which memory seems to suffice for personal identity, despite the absence of bodily continuity. Thus he says, “. . . if we can point to a single case, imaginary or otherwise, where we are likely to talk of identity in terms

* The paper is a critical response to Prof. G. C. Nayak's article “The Criterion of Personal Identity — Must It Be Physical ?” published in this journal, July, 1978.

of memory alone in the absence of bodily continuity, then there should be no reason why we may not speak of identity in cases of reincarnation and disembodied existence after the destruction of the body" (*op cit*, p. 590). A rare merit of Nayak's approach lies in the fact that, far from showing an a—priori preference for the memory criterion, and accordingly for what I call the survival thesis, he judges them for what he thinks they are and even goes on to suggest that memory in the case of survival "serves as a criterion only in an *extraordinary sense* and only because there is already a physical basis for identification" (*op cit*, p. 598, my emphasis). Incidentally, this suggestion has not been adequately argued for. I shall try to throw some (constructive) light on this significant suggestion, and I shall do it by putting pressure on "memory" which is so crucial to Nayak's account of survival.

If there is a logical connection between memory and personal identity, it is because it lies in the meaning of "remember" that if one remembers having done X, then it follows that one is the person who did X. But memory in this sense (call it the strong sense) implies personal identity and can't, therefore, be a criterion of personal identity.² However, people do not always remember in the strong sense; there are often cases of misremembering or delusive memory. Thus, when someone says that he remembers doing such and such he makes a memory *claim* which may or may not be memory in the strong sense, and which thus does not imply personal identity. (Let us call it memory in the weak sense). And if memory is taken to be a criterion of personal identity at all, it is because we take memory claims to be (probable) cases of real remembering which, in turn, suggests personal identity. But, let us ask, how do we know cases of real remembering as distinct from delusive memories etc? How, indeed, do we learn, and are taught, the meaning of 'memory' (in the strong sense) so as to be able to detect the wrong cases? Certainly by being told (or shown cases) that the person himself *did* what he now says he remembers,³ i. e. the person making the memory claim now is the same person as the earlier person who did what is being 'remembered', and, if we are not to beg any question, the last can be explained by telling (or it being shown) that the rememberer and the doer of the action are physically continuous. But for this, we would not only fail to tell delusive memories from real ones, we could not be having (or introduced to) the concept of memory in the first place. If this

is so, it follows that identity in terms of bodily continuity is the primary concept of personal identity and that any other idea of personal identity (e. g. in terms of memory and/or other psychological continuities) can *make sense* only by depending on this primary sense, but not conversely. Thus, if the 'survival' theories make sense at all, and seem to be plausible cases of personal identity despite the absence of bodily continuity, it is because (and that's a conceptual "because") there is this primary sense of personal identity. This conceptual dependence can be explained by the fact that, if there were not persons who were bodily continuous with other non-contemporaneous persons, we would not be able to apply the concept of *same person* in the first place and the survival thesis, which makes use of the notion of "same person" only in a secondary sense derived from the primary sense in the bodily context, would not be an intelligible thesis at all. This is due to the fact that there will be what I call the secondary use of "same person" only if there is the primary use thereof, and not conversely. "My doll is in pain" makes sense only if "the girl is in pain" is meaningful;⁴ had there been no meaningful employment of the concept of pain in the human context, no possible sense could be attached to its use in the context of inanimate objects. The secondary use of a concept is, thus, an extended use, derived from and dependent on its primary use. Disembodied survival and reincarnation etc. will be cases of personal identity only in this sense and memory in all such cases of survival will only be the criterion of identity in an equally secondary sense. In the light of this, Professor Nayak's suggestion about memory being the criterion (in the cases of survival) in an "extraordinary sense" is certainly revealing and symptomatic of a welcome departure from customary writings on the subject of survival.

However, if I may beg to differ, my analysis of the status of memory as a (usable) criterion of personal identity, coupled with my theory of the secondary use of concepts, implies stronger consequences than is contained in Nayak's suggestion in particular and his theory in general. For if my analysis holds, then memory is seen not only as criterion in the secondary sense in the described context, but also as a secondary criterion *simpliciter*, dependent as it is, for its meaning as well as applicability as a criterion of identity, on the bodily continuity criterion. If this is so, then memory can not be the primary criterion in *any* case, and in as

much as Nayak believes to the contrary (as regards his imaginary case and like cases) his described suggestion and professed theory have not obtained full possession of his mind. For is it not an integral element in his theory that the "physical basis" of identification is not only unavoidable but also indispensable for the applicability of memory as a criterion of personal identity? And is not his allusion to the idea of "Sukhma Shariva" and quotation of Geach with approval evidence of this?⁵

I shall now attend to another aspect of the paper where I find the arguments rather weak and oversimplified. Quite in keeping with the central spirit of his theory, Nayak argues for the necessity of independent check of memory claims which, he rightly says, turns upon bodily continuity. But with the inevitable absence of the latter in the cases of survival the possibility of this check is ruled out. If, in spite of this, we feel inclined to take them as plausible cases of personal identity, then, on my showing, memory can at best be said to be criterion here in the secondary sense (there is a sense in which it could be said that in this types of cases where, in the absence *ex hypothesi* bodily continuity, the possibility of independent check of memory is, in principle, ruled out, we can have no criteria of identity at all, and so our saying that the alleged post-mortem person is the same person as the premortem one is without any justification whatsoever. I shall, however, not pursue this stronger argument here, since the secondary-sense-criterion argument is good enough for my present purpose). But Nayak would not agree, apparently, under the influence of the customary inclination to treat memory as sufficient criterion in this case. He therefore proceeds to argue that, in the case of survival, either (1) there *is* a check available for the memory claims of the "survivor" or (2) no check is *necessary*. Both the arguments have been adduced in support of disembodied survival and bodily reincarnation respectively. I shall show, by considering them in the way they have been advanced and (by implication) also in the way they *could* be, that these arguments fail to do the trick, since while the one is irrelevant the other is a gross oversimplification.

The first argument is produced in order to show how a memory claim about the supposed former life of disembodied person could be checked (and I also take it to be the procedure by which the memory claims of an *embodied* survivor might be thought to be checked); and Nayak appeals to a kind of "verification procedure"⁷

which the person himself may take resort to. It is significant that the supposed procedure has been conceived in the first person and in the case of disembodied persons this procedure can only be conceived in the first person.⁸ The procedure is this; I may 'remember' that in my previous embodied state I kept some valuable in a secret place and I may verify this by visiting the place and finding the treasure. Thus, it is argued, I shall be "convinced" (of my identity with the previous person). This may be true but very uninteresting. For what we are concerned with is what the criterion (or criteria) of personal identity is, and *first person* judgements implying self-identity can't show us any, since for me to remember even in the weak sense, is to be in no doubt that I am the same person. The really interesting and relevant question is : whether I would be 'convinced' that someone *else* is the same person if *he* carried out this verification procedure. But this question can have no answer from Nayak's suggested procedure. For admittedly, I would not know if he (another *disembodied* person) carried out this procedure. The procedure may, of course, seem to have some plausibility if it were carried out by an *embodied* survivor (though Nayak does not use his argument in this way); but that will not show that the 'survivor' is really remembering and, so, that he is the same person as the pre-mortem person. However, the force of the last objection shall be more clearly seen if we examine Nayak's second argument, namely that no check is necessary for any of the survivor's memory claims. (Nayak is here concerned with the embodied survivor who claims to be a reincarnation of an earlier embodied person). For, he argues, there are "good reasons for believing the memory claims that are made with sincerity and conviction to be veridical more often than not,"⁹ and he "fail(s) to see why this should not be true also of those few memory claims of earlier lives that are made with sincerity and conviction". I submit that while Nayak is certainly right about the first part of this claim, he is guilty of oversimplifying the matter with regard to the second part. To see this, let us understand carefully what the first part of the claim amounts to. Surely, there are good reasons for believing that sincere and confident memory claims are generally true. Indeed, this can be taken even as a necessary truth. Shoemaker, who made this claim explicitly, reasoned that this is one of those "general facts of nature" which must be assumed in order for our concepts to have significance.¹⁰

In particular, if it were not a "general fact of nature" that sincere and confident memory claims are generally true, no one could possibly make and none could be understood to make memory statements at all. Now, given this "general fact", a sincere memory claim of any particular person is not to be doubted *unless* there was reasonable ground for such doubt and check. But certainly this is no reason for saying that the sincere and confident memory claims of his supposed past life by an alleged survivor (reincarnate) is not to be doubted and not to be checked. For, firstly, we must remember that the truth of the sincere and confident memory claims is a "general" fact of nature, and, secondly, that this general fact is compatible with there being *reasonable* grounds for doubting any *particular* memory claim. And it will hardly be denied that the cases of an alleged reincarnated survivor recounting events and actions of "his" past life is not a general fact of nature. How, then can a general fact explain or account for a phenomenon that is not so general and admittedly "few"? Further I believe that 'general facts of nature' which Wittgenstein¹¹ refers to and which Shoemaker subsequently appeals to are closely connected with what may be called a 'semantic feature' of language. This can be explained by saying that for example in order that certain statements may be made and understood *as* memory statements certain semantic conditions must be satisfied *viz.* that the words "I remember..." must be uttered by persons and that the utterance of these words must be correlated with certain happenings in *their* pasts and so on. And what is perhaps equally important is the fact that these correlations must be *known* to hold in most cases for otherwise not only the use of memory-language could not be taught and learned but the general reliability of memory claims can never be guaranteed. Now in the case of the alleged reincarnated persons, what are the 'semantic conditions' that might give content to their "remembering" their earlier lives? In the absence *ex hypothesi* of bodily continuity none of the "remembered" actions of a previous life done by any previous person in that life (if such could be known) could be reasonably said to be happenings in *their* pasts — much less known to be so. It follows therefore that not only are the cases of alleged survival *not* general facts of nature, they also supply a *reasonable* ground for doubting the memory claims in those cases and call for the need to check at least some of these claims. Besides this reasonable ground becomes a *strong* ground in view

of the fact that such cases are not only admittedly "few" but are certainly abnormal. As Wittgenstein had said "It is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly prescribed; we know we are in no doubt what to say in this or that case. The more abnormal the case the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say."¹² It follows therefore that in the cases in question checking of memory claims *is* necessary and that the normal rule of general reliability will not apply to the memory claims about some supposed "past lives" (and to say to the contrary would be making the mistake of treating the normal cases *on a par* with the evidently abnormal case of reincarnation). But since in the absence of bodily continuity there is no *possibility* of such checks there would in such cases be no ground for saying that a person is really remembering things and events in his past life rather than showing an excellent feat of retrocognitive clairvoyance. Penelhum has argued that it would only be a matter of option as to what to say in these cases and that the identification simply on the basis of these memory-like claims *does not have to be made*.¹³ to which I add that it will be unreasonable to make such identification. Incidentally the supposed verification procedure discussed above may seem to be more plausible if known to be performed by an embodied survivor. A Charles in 20th century may claim to remember what a Guy Fawkes in 16th century had hidden in a secret place and may also be able to visit the place and find the treasure. Yet this will not show that Charles really remembered. For what is required is not simply that what he "remembered" be found to be true but (since it is a case of personal memory) also that it is *he* who had hidden the thing. In the unavailability of bodily continuity (and so of independent check) all necessity for saying this is lost and no justification for saying this is forthcoming.

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NOTES

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II ch 27 sec. 16. See also A. M. Quinton. "The Soul" in *Journal of Philosophy*, 1962.

2. See Bishop Butler, "Of Personal Identity" in his *The Analogy of Religions* (George Bell and Sons, London, 1902).
3. It should be noted that memory, as related to personal identity, is that form of memory which is known as personal memory as distinct from other forms thereof. For further reference on this, see Malcolm, "Three Lecturers on Memory" in his *Knowledge and Certainty* (Prentice Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963) and also Don Locke, *Memory* (Macmillan, London 71).
4. Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell, 1953), Part I sec 282.
5. See G. C. Nayak, *op. cit.*, *IPQ*, 1978 p. 594 and also p598 the last line.
6. *Op. cit.*, pp 592 and 595.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 592.
8. See Nayak's approving reference to the theory that a disembodied person is bound to be solitary (*op. cit.*, p. 594).
9. *Op. cit.* p. 595.
10. S. Shoemaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Cornell University Press Ithaca, 1963), pp 239-41. Also cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* Part II p. 56 (last line).
11. See Wittgenstein, *Ibid*, part II p. 56.
12. *Ibid*, Part I sec 142.
13. Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, Loudon), chs 9 and 10, and esp p. 97.

BOOK REVIEW

**Problems of Mysticism : Nils Bjorn Kvastad : Scintilla Press;
Fredensborgveien, 2205101, Norway : Pages 368**

In the history of human thought one finds two approaches to the problem of understanding the nature of reality viz. Scientific and Speculative — the latter sometimes assuming the form of Mysticism. Science and Mysticism are thus two approaches to understand the nature of reality. However, these two are often projected as incompatible to one another owing to their very nature. Scientists are often suspicious about the claims and validity of mysticism; and Mystics often stress the limitations of science in its attempt to grasp the nature of reality as a whole. The book under review attempts to “reconciliate” Science and Mysticism. The proposed reconciliation is attempted at two levels. At the level of clarification, the author tries to have a “key term” which would bring together the various types of mystical phenomena. The key term, which the author chooses is “Mystical Experience”. The definition of the term as the author proposes is normative in character. The definition reads: “ a mystical experience as either an extrovertive or introvertive”. The characteristics mentioned of these two types are: The unifying vision, the subjective feeling, feeling of the holy, sacred, divine, peace, love, sense of beauty, unitary consciousness which is bereft of spatio-temporal qualities. The author also elaborates these characteristics in some details. The key term i. e. “mystical experience” as used by the author also help him to differentiate mystical experiences proper from the other types of experiences e. g. religious experience. The author has very elaborately worked out several distinctions when he discusses the nature of mystic experience, leaving the readers to expect some definitive conclusion which the author may arrive at. However, the conclusion (chapters 1 & 2) which the author arrives at is “Mysticism thus becomes a rather vague and wide field but sufficiently precise for our purpose”. This conclusion leaves the reader in a quandary about the extent to which the nature of mysticism becomes “sufficiently precise”. The author also speaks about the “Methodology for the scientific study of

mysticism". Very rightly he points out that mysticism is an interdisciplinary field which embraces art, religion, psychology etc. This itself justifies the need to have a scientific study of mysticism understood in a general manner and it is on this background, the author points out different aspects of the scientific study of mysticism. He, for example, refers to behaviourism and introspection as two methods which psychologists adopt; and the Hypothetico-Deductive method which natural and social scientists adopt. Similarly, the author mentions the notion of intersubjectivity and claims that at least the behaviouristic study of mysticism fulfils the requirements of the intersubjectivity; and also that of testability, concept-formation, measurement, and validity. The author says that although no attempt has been made so far to construct a system of the formalized propositions of mysticism, yet he hopes to "fit behaviouristically based propositions about mystical experiences into formalized theories...". The entire discussion in this regard provides a stimulus for further thinking.

If the elaboration of the methodology for the scientific study of mysticism is an important task, the statement of the relation between mysticism on the one hand and philosophy and theory of values on the other, is an equally important task. The author, in this respect, has attempted to show the relationship between mysticism and epistemology, ontology, logic, ethics and religion. In the zeal of giving a scientific look and thereby some status to mystic claims, what is often overlooked is the intimate relation between mysticism and the way of life in general. The problems of religion, ethics, art, and the problem of the existence of God—all these have something to do with the notion of the way of life. The author rightly touches upon a great variety of problems in this regard. The strategy which the author adopts to deal with these problems is to place the claims of mystics on the relevant background of different theories of epistemology, ethics, art and so on. This helps the reader to see and understand various aspects of mysticism vis-a-vis the various aspects of our way of life. This attempt on the part of the author may help the reader to rethink about certain views about mysticism, which would otherwise appear as lop sided.

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