
UNIT 1 PERSONAL IDENTITY AND SELF

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To explore some of the philosophical issues related to personal identity and self.
 - To appreciate how self and personal identity are preserved in spite of our bodily changes.
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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Before asking ourselves questions like “What is my identity?” “How is my self preserved?, we shall begin with a story. This story comes from Plutarch (46-126 ACE), which is often used to clarify the problem of identity and change. Theseus was a legendary king of Athens famous for many exploits, and appearing in works by many authors and on countless vases. The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars and was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place. This ship became a standing example among the philosophers; for the question of things that change. Some thinkers hold the view that the ship remained the same, while others contend that it was not the same. In the renewal process of the ship, there comes a point at which none of the original components remain. Is it then the same ship? Thomas Hobbes asks: If someone went around picking up the discarded parts and constructed a (new) ship with them, which would be the better candidate for being the original ship? This raises the question of whether an object, which has had all its component parts replaced, remains fundamentally the same.

This takes us to the issues related to personal identity and self. How do we preserve our identity through time and by gathering more experiences? Thereafter we proceed to reflect on some anthropological issues like the renewal of the cells in the body and the notion of personality, as the focus of our attention. Finally we indicate the relationship between the scientific notion of “centre of gravity” and that of the self and show that the self (and reality itself) is in fact a network of interrelating entities.

1.2 COUNTING THE UNCOUNTABLE

Pythagorean philosophy was the prime source of inspiration for Plato and Aristotle; the most influential philosophers in history. The school of Pythagoras (580-500 BCE) was every bit a religion as it was a school of mathematics. (For example, here are some of the rules he enjoined on his followers: To abstain from beans. Not to pick up what has fallen. Not to touch a white cock. Not to stir the fire with iron. Do not look in a mirror beside a light. Vegetarianism was strictly practiced probably because Pythagoras preached the transmigration of souls. The school of Pythagoras represents the mystic tradition in the scientific.) The Pythagorean philosophy may be understood better from this quote: “There are three kinds of men and three sorts of people that attend the Olympic Games. The lowest class is made up of those who come to buy and sell, the next above them are those who compete. Best of all, however, are those who come simply to look on. The greatest purification of all is, therefore, disinterested science, and it is the man who devotes himself to that, [sic.] the true philosopher, who has most effectually released himself from the ‘wheel of birth.’”(http://www.math.tamu.edu/~don.allen/history/pythag/pythag.html.)

Pythagoreans believed that all relations could be reduced to number relations. The assertion that “all things are numbers” aptly sums up their philosophy. This generalization stemmed from certain observations in music, mathematics, and astronomy. The Pythagoreans noticed that the vibrating strings produce harmonious tones when the ratios of the lengths of the strings are whole numbers and that these ratios could be extended to other instruments. They knew, as did the Egyptians before them, that any triangle whose sides were in the ratio 3:4:5 was a right-angled triangle. The so-called Pythagorean theorem, that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides, may have been known in Babylonia, where Pythagoras traveled in his youth. The Pythagoreans, however, are usually credited with the first proof of this theorem. In astronomy, the Pythagoreans were well aware of the periodic numerical relations of the heavenly bodies. The *celestial spheres* of the planets were thought to produce a harmony called the music of the spheres. Pythagoreans believed that the earth itself was in motion. Greek mathematicians, as well as the Pythagoreans, believed that whole numbers and their ratios could account for geometrical properties.

The most eminent mathematician of the last century, Bertrand Russell, commended: “It is to this gentleman that we owe pure mathematics. The contemplative ideal – since it led to pure mathematics or contemplation – was the source of a useful activity. This increased its prestige and gave it a success in theology, in ethics, and in philosophy.” (Bertrand Russell, <http://www.math.tamu.edu/~don.allen/history/pythag/pythag.html>.) Mathematics, so honored, became the model for other sciences. *Thought* became superior to the senses; *intuition* became superior to observation.

Though modern science will not approve of all that Pythagoras’ stood for, it is evident that number played a very important role in the existence of reality as we know them. (Here it is important that the atomic number and the basic constants of nature may be alluded as examples.) In this unit, what we want to stress is the role of relationship and placement in the ordinary counting with numbers. The zero, which is credited to Indians, is crucial at least in the counting system. What is significant is that the value of a number is based not only on its numerical value but on their positioning. Here zero constitutes an additional aspect of the number system and contributes to its meaning. Thus the number system that we use in our routine life enables us to

appreciate the fact that it is the relationship and the sequencing between the entities that makes the system meaningful. Incidentally we may note that using finite numerals by humans have devised a way of reaching the infinite. From the above observation it is evident that, though number does matter, “pattern prevails and configuration counts” both in the numerical system and in the larger life system. This leads to questions on relationship with things and persons as well as to one’s own self: personal identity.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Who claims that “all things are numbers”?

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2. How is number system related to relationship and sequencing?

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1.3 SOME ISSUES CONNECTED WITH PERSONAL IDENTITY

In philosophy, personal identity refers to the numerical identity of persons through time. In other words, the conditions under which a person is said to be identical to himself or herself through time are regarded collectively as one’s personal identity. Personal identity deals with questions that arise about ourselves by virtue of our being people (or, as lawyers and philosophers like to say, persons). Many of these questions are familiar ones that occur to everyone at some time: What am I? When did I begin? What will happen to me when I die? Others are more abstruse. Personal identity has been discussed since the origins of Western philosophy, and most major figures have had something to say about it.

The question regarding personal identity has addressed the conditions under which a person at one time is the same person at another time, known as personal continuity. This sort of analysis of personal identity provides a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the identity of the person over time. In the modern philosophy of mind, this concept of personal identity is sometimes referred to as the diachronic problem of personal identity. The synchronic problem is grounded in the question of what features or traits characterize a given person at one time. Thus

there is no single problem of personal identity, but rather a wide range of loosely connected questions (Wikipedia).

Who am I? We often speak of one's "personal identity" as what makes one the person one is. Your identity in this sense consists roughly of what makes you unique as an individual and different from others. Or it is the way you see or define yourself, or the network of values and convictions that structure your life. This individual identity is a *property* (or set of properties). Presumably it is one you have only contingently—you might have had a different identity from the one you in fact have—and one that you might have for a while and then lose: you could acquire a new individual identity, or perhaps even get by without one (Stanford Encyclopedia).

Personhood

What is it to be a person? What is necessary, and what suffices, for something to count as a person, as opposed to a non-person? What have people got that non-people haven't got? This amounts more or less to asking for the definition of the word person. In psychology (which historically is philosophically concerned with dualism), personal continuity, also called personal persistence, is the uninterrupted connection concerning a particular person of his or her private life and personality. Personal continuity is the union affecting the facets arising from personality in order to avoid discontinuities from one moment of time to another time. Personal continuity is an important part of identity; this is the process of ensuring that the quality of the mind are consistent from moment to the next, generally regarded to comprise qualities such as self-awareness, sentience, sapience, and the ability to perceive the relationship between oneself and one's environment. Personal continuity is the property of a continuous and connected period of time and is intimately concerned with a person's body or physical being.

Historically this question often arises out of the hope that we might continue to exist after we die—Plato's *Phaedo*, is a famous example. Whether this could happen depends on whether biological death necessarily brings one's existence to an end. Imagine that after your death there really will be someone, in the next world or in this one, who resembles you in certain ways. How would that being have to relate to you as you are now in order to *be* you, rather than someone else? What would the Higher Powers have to do to keep you in existence after your death? Or is there anything they could do? The answer to these questions depends on the answer to the Persistence Question.

What am I?

What sort of things, metaphysically speaking, are you and I and other human people? What is our basic metaphysical nature? For instance, what are we made of? Are we made up entirely of matter, just as stones are, or partly or wholly of something else? If we are made of matter, what matter is it? (Just the matter that makes up our bodies, or might we be larger or smaller than our bodies?) Where, in other words, do our spatial boundaries lie? More fundamentally, what fixes those boundaries? Are we substances—metaphysically independent beings—or is each of us a state or an aspect of something else, or perhaps some sort of process or event?

How could I have been?

How different could I have been from the way I actually am? Which of my properties do I have essentially, and which only accidentally or contingently? Could I, for instance, have had different parents? Frank Sinatra and Doris Day might have had children together. Could I have been one of them? Or could they only have had children other than me? Could I have died in the womb

before ever becoming conscious? Are there possible worlds just like the actual one except for who is who—where people have “changed places” so that what is in fact your career is mine and vice versa? Whether these are best described as questions about personal identity is debatable.

1.4 IDENTITY BASED ON CONSCIOUSNESS

John Locke considered personal identity (or the self) to be founded on consciousness and not on the substance of either the soul or the body. The chapter "On Identity and Diversity" in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) has been said to be one of the first modern conceptualization of consciousness as the repeated self-identification of oneself. Through this identification, moral responsibility could be attributed to the subject and punishment and guilt could be justified, as critics such as Nietzsche would point out (Self-awareness 2010).

According to Locke, personal identity (the self) depends on consciousness, not on the particular substance nor on the soul. We are the same person to the extent that we are conscious of our past and future thoughts and actions in the same way as we are conscious of our present thoughts and actions. If consciousness is this "thought" which "that goes along with the substance ... which makes the same person", then personal identity is only founded on the repeated act or experience of consciousness: "This may show us wherein personal identity consists: not in the identity of substance, but... in the identity of consciousness". For example, one may claim to be a reincarnation of Plato, therefore having the same soul substance. However, one would be the same person as Plato only if one had the same consciousness of Plato's thoughts and actions that he himself did (in his previous birth). Therefore, self-identity is not based on the soul. On the other hand, one soul may have various personalities (Self-awareness 2010).

Neither is self-identity founded on the body substance, argues Locke, as the body may change while the person remains the same. Even the identity of animals is not founded on their body: "animal identity is preserved in identity of life, and not of substance", as the body of the animal grows and changes during its life. On the other hand, identity of humans is based on their consciousness. Take for example a prince's mind which enters the body of a cobbler: to all exterior eyes, the cobbler would remain a cobbler. But to the prince himself, the cobbler would be himself, as he would be conscious of the prince's thoughts and acts, and not those of the cobbler. A prince's consciousness in a cobbler's body: thus the cobbler is, in fact, a prince.

But this interesting border-case leads to this problematic thought that since personal identity is based on consciousness, and that only oneself can be aware of his consciousness, exterior human judges may never know if they really are judging - and punishing - the same person, or simply the same body. In other words, Locke argues that you may be judged only for the acts of your body, as this is what is apparent to all but God; however, you are in truth only responsible for the acts for which you are conscious. This forms the basis of the insanity defense: one cannot be held accountable for acts from which one was unconscious - and therefore leads to interesting philosophical issues:

"Personal identity consists [not in the identity of substance] but in the identity of consciousness, wherein if Socrates and the present mayor of Queenborough agree, they are the same person: if the same Socrates waking and sleeping do not partake of the same consciousness, Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same person. And to punish Socrates waking for what sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was never conscious of, would be no more right, than to punish one twin for what his brother-twin did, whereof he knew nothing, because their outsides were so like, that they could not be distinguished; for such twins have been seen (Locke 1956)."

Therefore, Locke's conception of personal identity is in fact founded on the "same continued consciousness", which is also distinct from the soul since the soul may have no consciousness of itself. The problem of personal identity is at the center of discussions about life after death, and immortality (See next Unit). In order to exist after death, there has to be a person after death who is the same person as the person who died.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What are some of the issues connected to personal identity?

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2. Where does John Locke base identity?

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1.5 ANTROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

After having studied some of the scientific insights that indicate the relationality of nature, we take up some specific human issues: that of the body and the self. Here too we attempt to indicate the focusing aspect of human being, that open ourselves to a interlacing and relational dimension of the human being.

Our Skin Sheds Itself...

Recently, *The New York Times* published an article which posited that whatever be one's age, the body is many years younger. In fact, even the middle aged may be just 10 years old or less, as far as the body cells are concerned. This arises from the fact that most of the body's tissues are under constant renewal and has been underlined by a novel method of estimating the age of human cells. Its inventor, a Swedish scientist, Jonas Frisen, believes that the average age of all the cells in an adult's body may turn out to be as young as 7 to 10 years. But Dr. Frisen, a stem cell biologist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, has also discovered a fact that explains why people behave their birth age, not the physical age of their cells: a few of the body's cell types endure from birth to death without renewal, and this special minority includes some or all of the cells of the cerebral cortex.

In the scientific circles, it was a dispute over whether the cortex ever makes any new cells that got Dr. Frisen looking for a new way of figuring out how old human cells really are. Existing techniques depend on tagging DNA with chemicals but are far from perfect. Wondering if some natural tag might already be in place, Dr. Frisen recalled that the nuclear weapons tested above ground until 1963 had injected a pulse of radioactive carbon 14 into the atmosphere. Breathed in by plants worldwide and eaten by animals and people, the carbon 14 gets incorporated into the DNA of cells each time the cell divides and the DNA is duplicated.

Most molecules in a cell are constantly being replaced but the DNA is not. All carbon 14 in a cell's DNA is acquired on the cell's birth date, the day its parent cell divided. Hence the extent of carbon 14 enrichment could be used to figure out the cell's age, Dr. Frisen surmised. In practice, the method has to be used on tissues, not individual cells, because not enough carbon 14 gets into any single cell to signal its age. Dr. Frisen then worked out a scale for converting carbon 14 enrichment into calendar dates by measuring the carbon 14 incorporated into individual tree rings in Swedish pine trees.

Having validated the method with various tests, he and his colleagues have the results of their first tests with a few body tissues. Cells from the muscles of the ribs, taken from people in their late 30's, have an average age of 15.1 years, they say. The epithelial cells that line the surface of the gut have a rough life and are known by other methods to last only five days. Ignoring these surface cells, the average age of those in the main body of the gut is 15.9 years, Dr. Frisen found. Similarly, the human body constantly creates, from materials consumed, new component parts and cells as old cells die. The average age of cells in an adult body may be less than 10 years. (Nicholas Wade, "[Your Body is Younger than you Think](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/)" <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/>)

This team then turned to the brain, the renewal of whose cells has been a matter of much contention. The prevailing belief, by and large, is that the brain does not generate new neurons, once its structure is complete, except in two specific regions, the olfactory bulb that mediates the sense of smell, and the hippocampus, where initial memories of faces and places are laid down. This consensus view was challenged a few years ago by Elizabeth Gould of Princeton, who reported finding new neurons in the cerebral cortex, along with the elegant idea that each day's memories might be recorded in the neurons generated that day.

Dr. Frisen's method enables all regions of the brain to be dated to see if any new neurons are generated. So far he has tested only cells from the visual cortex. He finds these are exactly of the same age as the individual, showing that new neurons are not generated after birth in this region of the cerebral cortex, or at least not in significant numbers. Cells of the cerebellum are slightly younger than those of the cortex, which fits with the idea that the cerebellum continues developing after birth. Another contentious issue is whether the heart generates new muscle cells after birth. The conventional view that it does not have recently been challenged by Dr. Piero Anversa of the New York Medical College in Valhalla. Dr. Frisen has found the heart as a whole is generating new cells, but he has not yet measured the turnover rate of the heart's muscle cells.

Thus the anthropological findings regarding our own bodies are interesting. On the average our body cells last about ten years. At the same time there are specific cells that last from the beginning of our life. This throws light on how dependent our bodies are on the changing cells. The interesting question that comes out of this investigation is: if our cells keep on changing,

what gives us a permanent self or identity? Are our bodies like the ship of Theseus, which is given the same identity only by external observers?

The Centre, that Is the Self

What is a self? I will try to answer this question by developing an analogy with something much simpler, something which is nowhere near as puzzling as a self, but has some properties in common with selves. This leads us to investigate the phenomenon of self or personhood, using another scientific notion of “centre of gravity.” In physics, the centre of gravity is an imaginary point in a body of matter where, for convenience in certain calculations, the total weight of the body may be thought to be concentrated. The concept is sometimes useful in designing static structures (e.g., buildings and bridges) or in predicting the behaviour of a moving body when it is acted on by gravity. (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9037797/centre-of-gravity>) The centre of gravity, a well-behaved Newtonian concept is not an atom or a subatomic particle or any other physical item in the world. It has no mass; it has no colour; it has no physical properties at all, except for spatio-temporal location. It is a fine example of what Hans Reichenbach would call an *abstractum*. It is a purely abstract object. It is a theorist’s fiction. It is not one of the real things in the universe in addition to the atoms. But it is a fiction that has a neatly defined, well delineated and well behaved role within physics.

This theoretical abstractum is a robust and familiar idea. Consider a chair. Like all other physical objects, it has a centre of gravity. If you start tipping it, you can tell more or less accurately whether it would start to fall over or fall back in place if you let go of it. We’re all quite good at making predictions involving centers of gravity and finding explanations about when and why things fall over. Place a book on the chair. It, too, has a centre of gravity. If you start to push it over the edge, we know that at some point it will fall. It will fall when its centre of gravity is no longer directly over a point of its supporting base (the chair seat). The key terms in it are all interdefinable. And yet it can also figure in explanations that appear to be causal explanations of some sort. We ask “Why doesn’t that lamp tip over?” We reply “Because its centre of gravity is so low.” Is this a causal explanation? It can compete with explanations that are clearly causal, such as: “Because it’s nailed to the table,” or “Because it’s supported by wires.”

We can manipulate centers of gravity. For instance, I change the centre of gravity of a water pitcher easily, by pouring some of the water out. So, although a centre of gravity is a purely abstract object, it has a spatio-temporal character, which I can affect by my actions. It has a history, but its history can include some rather strange episodes. Although it moves around in space and time, its motion can be discontinuous. For instance, if I were to take a piece of bubble gum and suddenly stick it on the pitcher’s handle, that would shift the pitcher’s centre of gravity from point A to point B. But the centre of gravity would not have to move through all the intervening positions. As an abstractum, it is not bound by all the constraints of physical travel.

Consider the centre of gravity of a slightly more complicated object. Suppose we wanted to keep track of the career of the centre of gravity of some complex machine with lots of turning gears and camshafts and reciprocating rods – the engine of a steam-powered unicycle, perhaps. And suppose our theory of the machine’s operation permitted us to plot the complicated trajectory of the centre of gravity precisely. And suppose that we discovered that in this particular machine the trajectory of the centre of gravity was precisely the same as the trajectory of a particular iron

atom in the crankshaft. Even if this were discovered, we would be wrong even to *entertain* the hypothesis that the machine's centre of gravity was (identical with) that of the iron atom. That would be a "category mistake". A centre of gravity is *just* an *abstractum*. It's just a fictional object. But when I say it's a fictional object, I do not mean to disparage it; it's a wonderful fictional object, and it has a perfectly legitimate place within serious, sober physical science.

A self is also an abstract object, a theorist's fiction. The theory of the self may be regarded as part of psychology, phenomenology or hermeneutics, or soul-sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). The physicist does an *interpretation* of the chair and its behaviour, and comes up with the theoretical abstraction of a centre of gravity, which is then very useful in characterizing the behaviour of the chair in the future, under a wide variety of conditions. The hermeneuticist or phenomenologist or anthropologist sees some rather more complicated things moving about in the world – human beings and animals –and is faced with a similar problem of interpretation. It turns out to be theoretically perspicuous to organize the interpretation around a central abstraction: each person has a *self* (in addition to a centre of gravity). In fact we have to posit selves for *ourselves* as well. The theoretical problem of self-interpretation is at least as difficult and important as the problem of other-interpretation. (<http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/selfctr.htm>.)

We propose that we take this analogy seriously. "Where is the self?" A materialist philosopher or neuroscientist might ask. It is a "category mistake" to start looking around for the self in the brain. Unlike centres of gravity, whose sole property is their spatio-temporal position, selves have a spatio-temporal position that is only grossly defined. Roughly speaking, in the normal case if there are three human beings sitting on a park bench, there are three selves there, all in a row and roughly equidistant from the fountain they face. Brain research may permit us to make some more fine-grained localizations, but the capacity to achieve *some* fine-grained localization does not give anyone grounds for supposing that the process of localization can continue indefinitely and that the day will finally come when we can say, "That cell there, right in the middle of hippocampus (or wherever) – that's the self."

The chief fictional character at the centre of that autobiography is one's narrative *self*. And if we still want to know what the self *really* is, we are making a "category mistake". After all, when a human being's behavioural control system becomes seriously impaired, it can turn out that the best hermeneutical story we can tell about that individual says that there is more than one character "inhabiting" that body. This is quite possible. All that is required is that the story doesn't cohere around *one* self, *one* imaginary point, but coheres around *two* different (even conflicting) imaginary points.

We sometimes encounter psychological disorders, or surgically created disunities, where the only way to interpret or make sense of them is to posit in effect two centers of gravity, two selves. One isn't creating or discovering a little bit of "ghost in the machine" stuff in doing that. One is merely creating another abstraction. It is an abstraction one uses as part of a theatrical apparatus to understand, predict, and make sense of, the behaviour of some very complicated things. The fact that these abstract selves seem so robust and real is not surprising. They are much more complicated theoretical entities than a centre of gravity. And remember that even a centre of gravity has a fairly robust presence, once we start playing around with it. But no one has ever seen or ever will see a centre of gravity. As David Hume noted, no one has ever seen a self, either. "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or

pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.... If anyone, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me. (*Treatise on Human Nature*, I, IV, sec. 6.) Though the self is not empirically perceivable, we are aware of it and we are to some extent our own selves. Thus the self is an indicator of the relationship that involves our body and goes beyond it. Further, it is insightful to see the relationship between the self and one's body. Obviously, without the material body, there is no centre of gravity and so without the physical body, there is no self. And the self may be visualized also as the "focusing centre" that deals with the interrelationship between various physical parts of the body. Since it is not itself physical, it can balance the web of relationship originating from various parts of the body. Thus the self may be seen as the best example of the relationality of reality.

1.6 CONCLUSION

Starting with Pythagoras, we saw the importance of numbers (monads) and then we took up some of the philosophical issues related to personal identity. Then we discussed two basic anthropological domains: renewing of our physical body approximately every ten years and the relationship of centre of gravity to the self. In all these undertakings, we have tried to illustrate that relationality is intrinsic to reality. The whole of the cosmos is interconnected, just like the human body, which through networking and interconnection form the person or self that we are.

Therefore, monadic understanding of ourselves as entities may be practical at times, but is definitely inadequate to cope with the complexities of contemporary times. We are the ever widening horizon of our consciousness, which includes definitely our physical entity and incorporates the intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions of being alive. In this sense we are not mere individuals, but patterns or relationships. We could very well describe ourselves as the nodes of the network or the focus of interactions.

From a religious point of view, it is easy to see that when Christians affirm God as love, they proclaim the essential relational nature of God. In the same sense, the doctrine of creation is essentially affirming an intrinsic relationship of dependence between the Creator and creation. In this sense without belittling the monadic dimension of reality, contemporary science rediscovers the love aspect of reality, which vibes very well with the deepest religious insights. We are truly bonded to one another and to the Ultimate through the relationality of love. Humans are thus not individual entities but horizons that merge and fuse with similar horizons. Such an enhancing vision throws some light on our understanding of the self and personal identity. That is why The Buddha attacked all attempts to conceive of a fixed self, while stating that holding the view "I have no self" is also mistaken. This is an example of the middle way charted by the Buddha.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have elaborately dealt on personal identity and finally related the centre of gravity from physics to personal self in philosophy.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is “centre of gravity”?

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2. Give some differences between ‘self’ and ‘centre of gravity’?

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1.8 KEY WORDS

Centre of gravity: It is an imaginary point in a body of matter where, for convenience in certain calculations, the total weight of the body may be thought to be concentrated.

Geisteswissenschaft: (More frequently used in plural form *Geisteswissenschaften*). It is a traditional division of faculty in German Universities that would include subjects such as Philosophy, Theology, and Jurisprudence. Most of its subject matter would come under the much larger Humanities faculty in the typical English speaking University.

1.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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UNIT 2: PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Contents

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- 2.2 Scholastic View on Person
- 2.3 Philosophical Reflections
- 2.4 Phenomenology of Death
- 2.5 Let us Sum up
- 2.6 Key Words
- 2.9 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To explore some of the philosophical issues related to understanding of death of person.
 - To appreciate how various thinkers and traditions have approached the question death and of our bodily changes.
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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, in order to have a philosophical understanding of death, we first deal with the scholastic view of the human person. Then we take up what some philosophers hold on death. This leads us to take up the phenomenology of death.

2.2 SCHOLASTIC VIEW ON PERSON

Let us now try to work out a more precise philosophical definition of a supposite. In the first place, “supposite” is a barbarous word in English. Scholastics have traditionally assembled four necessary qualities for a being to be ranked as an authentic “supposite” or individual being. If an entity doesn’t possess all four of these qualities, it is to be classed as a “principle of being”.

Conditions for being a “supposite” (a). **Subsistence:** It must exist “in itself” and not derive its existence by “inherence in another” (like an accident or additive, as we prefer to say). This of course, does not rule out the possibility of having received its proper act of existence from another (i.e. God), participating in Him (not inhering in Him: it’s not that God and the creature share the same act of existence among themselves).

(b) **Distinctness:** By this we mean that it is not identical with another being nor even a part of it. Creatures are supposites, for their participation in God does not render them identical with God or parts of God – unless we uphold some kind of pantheistic conception of reality. Again I may be “similar to” other human beings, I may even be “the spitting image” of my twin brother, such that strangers might not be able to tell us apart, but I am not my brother for all that: we are two distinct realities.

(c) **Wholeness:** In other words, a certain completeness in the development of the being is necessary. A grown, physically mature adult human being is a “whole” man or woman. This, of course, does not mean that there cannot be further scope for dynamic development. The man or woman in question can grow in wisdom or the capacity to love. But the arms or legs of the

individual concerned are not “whole beings”: they are part of the wholeness of the person in question.

(d) **A certain nature:** A supposite must have a certain basic unity in its properties and actions and this must flow from within, not something that results from construction and programming from outside, as in the case of a computer (which, as we shall see, is in reality only an aggregate). If this nature is rational we call the supposite a person.

Following this line of thought, the traditional scholastic definition of the person: a rational supposite. More in detail, a person is whole, distinct, subsistent of a rational nature. This is how scholastics in general, and Thomists in particular, define the person. But let us take a brief glance at how this definition evolved.

Etymologically, person comes from the Latin *per-sona* (literally, one through which sounds are made), a mask. The Greek equivalent was *prosopon*. In the classical days of Latin and Greek drama, the characters, instead of make-up, wore type masks, called *personae*. Thus there was the mask of the old man, the hero, the heroine, the villain and so on. In course of time, the word was applied to the character depicted by the one who wore the mask. Eventually it was referred to the actor or actress.

It was Boethius, the 4th century forerunner of scholasticism, who gave us the definition of person as “an individual substance of a rational nature.” Aquinas slightly revised this and put it down as “distinct subsistence of a rational nature.” The reason why he sought to link up person with subsistence, rather than substance, was because he wanted to use the related (but not identical) concepts of substance and person to throw light on the mystery of the Trinity. The Gospels and Epistles tell us that God is somehow one and somehow three: of course, it would be totally against the principle of identity and contradiction, if we to interpret this to mean that God is one and three at the same time and under the same aspect. So he held that God, in His/Her most basic and underlying aspect (as substance) is one and from a less basic dimension, that of subsistence, He/She is three and each of these is a person, a personal being, among other things, an ultimate centre of attribution (i.e. it is the person who acts, who is responsible for what is done, not his/her faculties or organs). Thus in God, there are three distinct agents, as it were: it is the Second Person who became incarnate and died for us, rising again and leading us to the Father. It is not the Father or the Spirit who did these things: they are different persons and are responsible for other salvific acts.

Aquinas stressed the role of reason or the intellect in personhood, giving pride of place to that spiritual faculty in the Scholastic perspective. Hence the “intellectualism of St. Thomas”. However, other scholastics, notably his mentor and co-Dominican, St. Albert (revered as “the Great”) preferred to underscore the priority of the will in all things: he is called a “voluntarist” or a “volitionist”. Not that there is any real contradiction in their views. The one emphasises the initially perfective act of the person (the intellect), the other the completeive dimension of personhood (love, the act of the will). If Aquinas sees the beatific vision as primarily an act of the intellect and Albert as essentially an act of the will, they are reminding us of the scholastic adage that they both uphold, “The will follows the intellect.” Aquinas is underscoring the spiritual faculty that leads and Albert is pointing out that the one that follows bringing full flowering to the activity initiated by the former. After all, you can’t love someone whom you don’t know, but, in a personal relationship, knowledge is fundamentally a drive which is meant to end in love.

Modern thinkers more inclined to go along with St. Albert than St. Thomas and define the person as a being capable of loving and of being loved. Of course, such a person would have to be an intellectual supposite – that is implied by the very definition itself, for there can be no love of what is totally unknown (hence, a person must be capable of knowing): the will and its acts follow the intellect. Inasmuch as the will is blind, there must be a precedent intellectual act to stir it to action. They would rather put the emphasis on loving, rather than knowledge as the latter approach is more consonant with Greek thinking and the former is more in keeping with the biblical viewpoint. If Aristotle defined God as *noesis noeseos* (literally, “thought thinking about itself”), St. John called God love. Thought is essentially an inward movement, *intussusception* (drawing things into oneself and making things what one is). Hence the traditional synonym for God as the Absolute (literally, the one cut off from), the unrelated. To call God love is an extremely radical, revolutionary idea: love, by definition is just the opposite of the absolute, unrelated, self-withdrawn reality.

By its very nature, love is turned to others, is related, is a movement away from self. Thus a person is fully a person not when he or she is cogitating in isolation and making things one with itself through the intellect, but when, Godlike, he/she is reaching out to others, entering into their lives and beings through love. This is what the incarnation is all about and we human persons would do well to remember that. Our perfection is not in withdrawal. If we wish to be God like, we have to be outgoing, community persons and not cold “Absolutes”, unmoved and locked up in ourselves. Maybe Aquinas' approach is not really opposed to all this but it is far easier to misunderstand this way and end up in precisely that conception of the person.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is ‘wholeness’ which is one of the conditions for being a ‘supposite’?

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2. Show the complementary nature of the understanding of ‘person’ according to Aquinas and Albert.

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2.3 PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

After having understood the scholastic notion of person, we are in a better position to reflect on death philosophically. In the contemporary times, Herbert Marcuse says that we have the right to be scandalized by all repressive forms of death and according to whom we should neither glorify death nor fear it. The false triumphal of *homo technologicus* led some people to believe that technology can overcome death. When this claim failed, scholars began to come to terms with death. The path of death should lead us further on the path of life and the latter should lead us deeper into the former. Life and death are inseparably related to one another. Death belongs to life. So the act of dying is the act of the living, as Michel de Montaigne has hinted that to philosophize is to learn to die (Irudayason 2010).

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, human freedom has no control over death that escapes him/her and can never give meaning to life. The very fact I am condemned to die makes my life absurd. If it is possible for me to find meaning in life, it is not because I am being-unto-death, but because I can exercise freedom when I exist. Thus Sartre considers death as a reality outside existence. With a little imagination, I can represent my corpse while I exist, but once I am dead, it is others who know my death, make funeral rites and cherish me in their memory. It is then absurd to say my death is my own.

For Albert Camus too, life is absurd because it leads to death. Even if life is meaningless, it is worth living. I have no right to resign myself to the absurdity of life. Valuing life and revolting against its absurdity are related imperatives. The preciousness of life depends on the variety of experiences and challenges encountered. Camus places himself in the tradition of Kierkegaard* and Nietzsche. The former values life by virtue of its precariousness and vulnerability and the latter by his affirmation that one cannot say yes to joy without saying yes to sorrow. *Amor Fati*, this strange love of fate, is what makes humans want to live a dangerous life in a boat on a rough sea, leading nowhere. Freud holds a view similar to that of Friedrich Nietzsche. On the one hand life is dominated by the tendency to seek pleasure, life instinct, *eros*, but it is counterbalanced by the death drive, *thanatos* (Irudayason 2010).

For Martin Heidegger, who revives the Pre-Socratic tradition, human person is “being-towards-death.” Death does not lie at the end of life; it pervades the entire life. As soon as I am born, I enter into the flow of time spanning from birth to death. Death is the final condition, the end of my being-thrown. Death is my way of being-in-the-world. This is the finitude that characterizes all human experience. However, death is unique and singular to everyone. If there is something that is not shared, it is my death; it is my own, but it remains non-representable. It always escapes me when even when I will be dead, I do not possess it. Death is a part of my everything, which escapes me.

As a reaction to Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas affirms that the identification of death to nothingness suits the death of the Other in murder. But this nothingness presents itself also as a kind of impossibility. Outside of my conscience, the Other does not appear as the Other and

his/her face is an expression my moral impossibility of annihilation. This is not a pure and simple impossibility that presupposes the possibility precisely challenged by the face of the other, but the challenge is already housed in this very possibility. This challenge comes from my neighbour whose face alone tells me that I am responsible for his/her death. It is in the death of the other that I am responsible to the extent of including me in death. I am responsible for the other because he is mortal. Death of the other therefore comes first. It uncovers the face of the Other, which is an expression of the commandment, “Thou shall not kill” (Irudaydason 2010).

The later writings of Jacques Derrida deal extensively with death along with other related themes such as survival (*sur-vie*) and mourning. With his usual play of words, he deconstructs Heidegger’s claim of death as the own most possibility only of *Dasein*. Heidegger makes a crucial distinction between dying and perishing; only humans die, animals perish. This distinction is not linguistic but drawn from language. Thanks to language humans can imagine and represent death. Thus Heidegger’s distinction between properly dying and merely perishing hinges on this. Death, for Heidegger, is therefore the impossibility of *Dasein*’s existence. But this impossibility is the possibility most proper to *Dasein*. Derrida evokes the image of border to represent death in terms of the impossibility as possible. It involves a certain step (*pas*) to cross over the border. The French word “*pas*” can also be translated as “not,” thus bringing out the impossibility of crossing over. Death is figure both of passage and non-passage. Thus the question of the possibility of death is a paradox. (Irudaydason (2010).

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is Sartre’s notion of death?

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2. How does Levinas understand the commandment “Thou shall not kill”?

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2.4 PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEATH

Getting Our Sights Straight

T. S. Eliot, in one of these intuitively lucid moments that so often come a poet's way, once made a most significant prayer. "Save me from him who knows to ask the right question," he cried. No mean cry for liberation, that. For most of our questions, innocent information-seeking feelers though they seem, conceal a prejudice. They don't merely "beg the question" (which would be bad enough); they insinuate a questionable world view, a dogmatically assumed theory as a background into which the unwary questioner must fit in his/her response. And very often the latter falls haplessly into a vicious trap whereby he/she gives a response in terms of a particular interpretation of reality which he/she, on deeper reflection, would realise is one to which he/she does not subscribe at all.

Why do We Die at all?

Put this way, the question has been stripped of most, if not all, its vitiating prejudices and dogmatism. Unfortunately, the question is hardly ever posed like that in everyday life. When a loved one is struck down by death or some terminal illness (particularly if he/she had been relatively young or had dependents who would hardly be able to fend for themselves), the invariable form the anguished question would take is, "why has God done this to us?" The implicit assumption is that we die because God has so decided. God is taken to be the immediate cause to death. Her/his "inscrutable will" has worked it out, has pre-planned the exact time and place and manner of our dying and when "your time comes" there's nothing you can do about it. On the other hand, "If your time has not yet come", you can have hair-raising, breath-taking "close calls" and come out of it unscathed.

On "Gods of Death"

Many religions have, understandably, a special presiding deity or set of deities – who are responsible for death and need to be placated from time to time, lest we be noticed as likely candidates for the next round. There is the image of the grim reaper who, with her/his relentless scythe, is ever mowing down a rich harvest of lives. Significantly, our male chauvinistically dominated world frequently assigns to a goddess or a group of female spirits such a mission. After all, aren't women as whimsical and unpredictable as death, cry the macho men in chorus?

The ancient Romans and Greeks often believed in the same gods and goddesses, but gave them different names. Thus they believed in three goddess sisters who rule human lives, jointly called *Parca* (plural *Parcae*) by the former and *Moirai* (plural *Moirai*) by the latter. These formidable ladies kept themselves busy spinning and cutting the thread of life. *Clotho* (represented with a spindle of thread) was the spinner. *Lachesis* (armed with a measuring rod) decided the length of the thread and *Atropos* (who'd write final, never to be changed, decisions on a tablet) cut the thread. These stern and implacable females were offered rich sacrifices by people to escape death, but once their "fate" was decided, nothing could change the ladies' minds. In *Hinduism*, there is the Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva triad of creator preserver destroyer respectively. However, it is Shiva's wife who is more commonly associated with destruction under the name of Kali or Durga. Under the name of Parvati or Uma she is the goddess of motherhood. Feared under the former aspect and loved under the latter, she typified the insight of Hinduism that time and matter constantly move from birth to death, from creation to destruction and back again (Pandikattu 2011).

Christianity – at least the popular variety – seems, in this matter, to have done nothing more than transfer the job of the Greek fates to God the Father, with one slight change. In place of the

relentless, implacable and whimsical feminine will we now find ourselves facing the inscrutable, mysterious divine will. Of course, we are assured, it is not whimsy or foible that guides the divine decision making in this regard but love. S/he knows what is best for us and sees to it that the moment of our taking away, all things considered, is the optimum moment, our “prime time”. I think this is but another instance where we have let dominant Greek patterns of thought, rather than the biblical vision, rule Christian thinking. This has ever been the bane of our Western Christian heritage. As Samuel Ryan so well points out in his monograph, *The Anger of God* much of Christian thinking is more faithful to Greek ontological presuppositions and prejudices than the Bible. And has not Paul Ricoeur rightly observed that Christianity, in practice, is nothing but “Platonism for the masses”?

Death, The Law of Matter

We mortal humans die for the same metaphysical reason that our shoes wear out, mountains erode and solid iron bars rust: all material things eventually fall back – or disintegrate – into that out of which they are made. Matter has final decomposition built into it and it couldn’t be otherwise. Leave your table aside for a sufficient number of years and, left to itself, it will finally fall apart. The nails or screws will rust away and no longer be capable of holding it all together. The wood will begin to rot and finally it will collapse eventually without the help of the demolition crew. Matter, as even traditional metaphysics says, is characterised by the fact of having “parts outside of parts”. Eventually there comes a time when these will fall apart. We call this disintegration, corruption or whatever. In the case of living being, we call this “death”.

A human being, then, dies because of this inherent vulnerability, frailty or what have you. Either we trap some fatal “germ” which is our undoing, or there is some violent – intentional or accidental inroad from outside that crushes us, or “old age” or a “heart attack” bears us off. And what are these but acknowledgements that the organism eventually wears out or breaks down (if we may be excused from using a mechanistic metaphor – which doesn’t necessarily imply that we subscribe to a “mechanistic view of life”)? (Desbruslais 1997).

The Cycle of Life And Death

We have had occasion to refer to the Hindu “Kali-Parvati” notion as an insight into the fact that matter is ever on the move from life to death and back to life. There is a scientific basis for this in the Law of Conservation of Matter in Chemistry. Accordingly we know that birth and death as we perceive them around us are not creation and annihilation (i.e. a coming into being from nothing and falling back of being into nothingness, respectively). There is a chemical change at work whereby one being’s corruption is another being’s (or group of beings’) generation. What we call “death” or “corruption” is a breaking down of the being concerned into its elemental or molecular constituents and the recombining of these into other beings or another being. Death is never annihilation, in no wise is it a reduction to utter zero. Is this “good news”, a hint of “better things to come”? Whatever, there seems to be a latent message about the after-life in the phenomenon of human birth from the perspective of this life on earth as we know it was “death” from the point of view of the life of the foetus that we were on our mother’s womb. The foetus, as foetus, had to “die” (that is, give up its foetus form of life) so that we could begin this human form of life. And I’m sure all of us, now that we know this life – whatever be its anxieties and anguishes – would agree that, compared to this, our foetus-life was not even fit to be called life. However, if it were possible to interview a foetus, no doubt it would be quite content with life as it knew it, would feel quite comfortable and warm and well-provided for and, not knowing what it was missing, would not want any change at all – in

other words, wouldn't want "to die". And "birth" – as psychologists tell us – comes to it as a traumatic experience. It "dies" to its former life, is either ripped out or pushed out by forces beyond its control, from its cosy environment which it had grown to love, out into the blinding, noisy life "out here", has to learn to breathe (almost shifting from a fish to a human in a twinkling of an eye) and enters this world in a shuddering, gasping cry which is really its frightened attempts to learn how to inhale and exhale. Often the midwife or gynaecologist – or whoever – has to administer it a tight spank on the behind to make it cry out and thereby force the air into its lungs.

Isn't there a kind of dynamism in the whole process which invites us to wonder whether what we fear so much and call "death" from this point of view might not, in reality, prove to be but "birth" into an even yet higher form of existence? In spite of all our griping and whining, most of us would like to cling to this "life" and dream of staying here as long (even longer.) as possible. Who knows, may be this parallel experience will be known to us as we die to this life, that the foetus discovered when it died to its former life? This, of course, is no "proof" of life after life or life after death (whatever be your preferred vocabulary). But there is a strong invitation to believe (or interpret or guess) that such will be the case...

Life Before Death And Life After Death

"The human soul may be immortal," wrote Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest revolutionary. "But hunger is mortal." Hunger kills and is grimly at work on planet earth. "Marxism", says the Russian Philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, "bears witness to an unfinished task of Christianity." Unfortunately, millions of Christians down to ages (with many other religious folk), were so busy dreaming of "pie in the sky when they die", as the cynic put it, were so busy planning out their "lives after death" in heaven or wherever, that they neglected the beauty and the duty of this life. Millions of others were either ignored or given an occasional dole in their impoverished and dehumanised existence: after all, their resignation and suffering would be rewarded by life in heaven after death, wouldn't it? (Pandikattu 2011) It would be a sorry state of affairs if convictions or investigations about "life after death" were to make us pay scant attention to the social concerns to this present life *before* death. The Second Vatican Council has sought to remind us, more than once that, "a hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives." The document goes on, "By contrast, when a divine structure and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest." Whatever, I think that, to complete the picture, we must grant that current and past events also bear out that belief in, and concern for, the life after can also dull one's social conscience. Ultimately, it's not the life that is to blame but what we make of it (Desbruslais 1997).

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have dealt with a philosophical understanding of person and of death. This was followed by a phenomenological understanding of the process of dying.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Who are the Greek gods of death?

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2. "Marxism bears witness to an unfinished task of Christianity." Comment.

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2.6 KEY WORDS

Neoesis noeseos (literally, "thought thinking about itself"). This is the Aristotelian understanding of God.

Supposite: it is an individual being possess qualities of subsistence, distinctness, wholeness and a certain nature.

Thanatos is the death drive according to Freud, in contrast to the sex drive present in humans.

2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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UNIT 3 NIHILISTIC AND POSITIVE VIEWS ON 'LIFE AFTER DEATH'

Contents

- 3.0 Objectives
 - 3.1 Introduction
 - 3.2 Funeral Customs
 - 3.3 Recognising the moment of death
 - 3.4 Alternatives Interpretations of Life after Death
 - 3.5 The Nihilistic Response
 - 3.6 The Positive Response
 - 3.7 Let us Sum up
 - 3.6 Key Words
 - 3.9 Further Readings and References
-

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To understand the positive and negative views on life after death.
 - To enable the students to appreciate some of the philosophical arguments for life after death.
-

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In unit we continue with a phenomenology of death. Then we take some of the nihilistic responses to life after death. This is followed by some of the positive views on what comes after death.

3.2 FUNERAL CUSTOMS

It is not so much the fact of death that strikes us as a basic datum, but the more or less elaborate rites and customs with which different religions and cultures have surrounded it. Hence, we shall turn our attention first to a reflection on these. Very often they very clearly express certain convictions about death itself. We know, for instance, that as early as 60,000 years ago prehistoric people were observing special ceremonies while burying their dead. Neanderthal graves contain tools, weapons and even traces of flowers. The ancient Egyptians, together with many early peoples placed food, jewels, furniture and other goods in tombs. This would seem to be a clear enough indication that they believed that a person continued to live even after death and would have more or less the same needs as in this life; Hence s/he would require these things at some time. The Egyptians also developed the art of embalming into a sophisticated technique called *mummification*. They believed that the spirit or soul would (eventually) return to inherit the body it had quit. Thus it was necessary to keep the body incorrupt and ready to receive back the vagrant soul which, otherwise, would be condemned to an endless vagabondage.

Burial is the common method of disposal of corpses among Jews, Christians, Muslims as it had also been fairly widespread in ancient civilisations. It may be linked to a belief that a dead body, planted in the ground, like a seed, will one day yield new life. Cremation is customary among Hindus as also among followers of religions more or less derived from it, such as Buddhism. It is nowadays spreading among Westerners, too. Traditionally, conservative groups of Catholics, Protestants and Jews have opposed this method as being disrespectful to the body which is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. At any rate, corruption and being devoured by worms – the natural outcome of burial –

hardly seems more respectful to the said Temple. Other societies have other ways of disposing of the dead. The Parsis, as we know, expose their dead in lofty enclosures called towers of silence where bodies are picked clean by birds. This is because Parsis believe that fire and earth are sacred and must both not be contaminated by burning or burying a corpse. In Tibet, bodies are sunk in water. Some Amerindian tribes, like the Sioux, place their dead on big platforms. Some groups of aborigines in Australia leave dead bodies in trees.

Mourning is the expression of grief after a death. In some societies this is done in a very stylised fashion and one is even supposed to hire professional mourners to weep, howl and scream at funerals. Common mourning customs require bereaved family members (particularly next of kin) to dress in black or wear black armbands for a certain period of time. Sometimes people in mourning are also required to deny themselves certain foods and forms of amusement. We should remember that in many cultures (as in India) white is the colour of mourning. Certain lesser known religions and cultures, in order to emphasise the belief in an afterlife, require signs of celebration at death, for example an elaborate funeral feast.

In many so-called developed nations, as in the United States, funeral ceremonies are elaborate and extremely costly affairs and take place in a funeral parlour with the embalmed body on display, surrounded by banks of flowers and an orchestra playing solemn music. There is often a funeral eulogy, a pedantic oratorical exercise, proclaiming the real or fancied virtues of the person before the body is conducted to the graveyard (or crematorium in a very formal procession, borne in a hearse). Many people, recognising the needless expense and the empty show of such practices, opt for quieter ceremonies at home with family and close friends in attendance. The Catholic Church, since Vatican II, has learnt to stress less the traditionally gloomy and terrifying aspect of death in favour of a more Christian affirmation of the hope of the resurrection. No longer does the celebrant vest in black and no more are we required to listen to the unchristian (if poetic) strains of *Dies Irae*, famous thirteenth century Latin hymn meant for masses for the dead. White vestments, flowers and hymns of faith and trust, with even an occasional Alleluia are to be observed and the prayers have less references to the departed's sins and his/her need to be rescued from eternal damnation.

Whatever one may feel about the religious beliefs expressed in the various funeral customs, it is certain that they fulfil an important psychological and social function. It focuses public attention on the person of the departed as also provides a forum of public support and consolation to the survivors. It also gives them a cathartic opportunity to give vent to their feelings and discharge their grief.

3.3 RECOGNISING THE MOMENT OF DEATH

Just when does death set in? This is not an easy question to answer. In fact it's largely a matter of semantics, depending on which precise phenomenon or set of phenomena we take as evidence that death has set in. The problem is that very often people who've been pronounced "clinically" or medically dead – on the basis of this or that evidence – have been known to "revive" or respond to some method of resurrection. Shall we say that the person had earlier died or that he/she had only fallen into some sort of coma or suspended animation and had now "become normal"? Most people would prefer the second alternative.

Scientists, in fact, recognise three types of death that occur during the life of all organisms, except that of those consisting of only one cell. These are *necrobiosis*, *necrosis* and *somatic death*. *Necrobiosis* is the continually going on in us. It refers to the death and replacement of individual cells throughout life. Indeed, except for the nerve cells, all the cells of an organism are constantly

being replaced. For instance, new skin cells form under the surface as the old one die and flake off. *Necrosis* is the death of tissues or even an entire organ. This may or may not cause somatic death. During a heart attack, for instance, a blood clot cuts off circulation of the blood to part of the heart. The affected part dies, but the organism continues to live – unless, of course, the damage has been severe.

Somatic death (from the Greek *soma*, body) is generally defined as the end of all life processes in an organism. A person whose heart and lungs have stopped working is usually considered *clinically* dead, but somatic death may not yet have occurred. The individual cells of the body continue to live for several minutes. The person may yet live if the heart and lungs can be made to start working again and give the cells the oxygen they need. Once the brain cells – which are very sensitive to a lack of oxygen – begin to die, it is practically impossible to resuscitate or revive the person. The last cells to die are those of the bone, hair and skin and these may continue to grow for several hours after the person has been certified dead. Since not all life processes come to a stop necessarily at the same time, there arises the problem of selecting the phenomenological criteria to decide that death has taken place.

Some people would identify “death” with the absence of clinically detectable vital signs. Phenomenologically speaking, this would mean that a person is “dead” if her/his heart stops beating and s/he quits breathing for an extended period of time, her/his blood pressure drops so low as to be unreadable, her/his body temperature begins to go down, etc. This is the clinical definition, and it has been employed for centuries by physicians and lay persons alike. In fact, most people who have ever been pronounced dead were deemed so on the basis of these criteria. The difficulty is that when advanced techniques of resuscitation have been applied *after* many of these facts were observed, the person has revived. Can we speak of a genuine “coming back to life” here?

Nowadays, however, the advancement of technology has brought the development of more sensitive techniques for detecting biological processes, even those which cannot be observed overtly. The electroencephalograph (EEG) is one such. It amplifies and records the minute electrical potentials of the brain. With such sophisticated equipment, one tends to identify “real” death with the absence of electrical activity of the brain, that is, with “flat” EEG tracings. Generally speaking, “brain death” is taken to have set in when it is deprived of oxygen for about three minutes. But rare cases have shown that patients have been revived after a lapse of five and even seven minutes.

Many changes can be observed once a person is well and truly dead. The temperature of the body slowly drops to that of its surroundings. The muscles develop a stiffening called *rigor mortis* (literally, a stiffening of death). The blood, which no longer circulates, settles and produces a reddish-purple discoloration in the lower areas of the body. Eventually, bacteria and other tiny organisms grow on the corpse and cause it to decay. These parasites are inactive at very low temperatures and so frozen bodies can be preserved. Similarly, blocks of ice or exposure to relatively cold environments can slow down the process of corruption.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What are some of the different ways of disposing the dead?

2. What is necrobiosis?

3.4 ALTERNATIVES INTERPRETATIONS OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

Fundamentally, there are two basic responses to the question of the after-life. One is *positive*, holding that there is some form of life after life and the other is *nihilistic*, denying that there is any such. One could also cite a third possibility: the view of the *indifferentists* – those who refuse to entertain discussion on the issue. For such people this is an irrelevant question, one which should be ignored in the face of other matters of greater moment. It would appear that from the earliest times the majority opinion has been in favour of the positive reply. Indeed, as anthropology and palaeontology seem to surface more and more evidence of some kind of belief in life beyond the grave and this is practically at all times and in all cultures, there have not been lacking some thinkers who have even hazarded the opinion it constituted some kind of primitive revelation to mankind. However, to get the record straight, let us not forget that the ancient Jews had such an integrated concept of the human person they did not sanction the belief until a short time before the birth of Christ. In fact, one of the doctrinal points that divided the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' time was this precise issue. The more conservative Pharisees denied any such idea whereas the more progressive Sadducees, under the influence of Hellenistic thought, upheld it. Still the ancient Hebrew did speak of a *Sheol*, inhabited by the souls (more properly, the "shadows") of the dead.

In the next section we shall present, under two main headings, the various responses to this question. We shall begin with the negative response and distinguish two variants at the practical level. Then we shall pass over to the views of those who are in favour of the opinion that there is some kind of life after death. The main two currents of thought here are reincarnation (which, historically, goes back to India) and resurrection (which, it seems, was first developed in ancient Egypt).

3.5 THE NIHILISTIC RESPONSES

Under this rubric we include the views of all those who deny that there is any life after the grave: any conviction about the "after-life" is dismissed as wishful thinking or, at any rate, an irrelevant issue that distracts us from matters of greater moments, as we have already had occasion to point

out. However, not all these people advocate, as a result, a licentious and orgiastic form of the socially committed people have also held this view. Let us take a closer look at these.

The “Eat, Drink and Be Merry” School

It is more than likely that adherents of this “school” of thought exist only in the simplistic imaginations of their detractors. If the Stoics and Epicureans of Western classical antiquity denied life after death, neither of them advocated licentious abandon – not even the much-maligned “people of the Garden”, as many *Ancient Western Philosophy* sources will remind us. As for the Stoics, well, even the popular understanding of the term calls up the image of a proud, detached individual in perfect control of her/his passions. Of course, there is the whole system of Carvaka, in ancient Indian thought, that is usually trotted out as an instance of such an inhuman and debased life-style resulting from the denial of life beyond the grave. Even here we would do well to be cautious. We know this school mostly from the descriptions and summaries left by the dominant schools of Indian thought who were challenged by this minority. It is more than likely that the Carvaka school advocated, in practice, a life-style more similar to the Stoics and Epicureans of old and ranged themselves disgustingly against the idealistic, overly spiritual and world-negating world views of the majority. These, in turn, consciously or not have left us a highly prejudiced and distorted vision of their adversaries (Desbruslais 1977).

The Socially Committed

Very many of those thinkers who deny the existence of God and any form of afterlife have actually called for a life of serious social responsibility and commitment. Since this is the only life we have and since there is no God to clean up the mess – either in this world or in the next – we must do all we can to make this world a better place for everyone. After all, there is no heaven to “make up” for those who’ve had a raw deal on this earth. We should live a life of love, service and sharing, be a voice for the voiceless and try to establish a world of justice, love and peace for all people, even if we feel sure that this is a forlorn hope, a never to be realised dream because this is the only human way to live. This is the philosophy of “courageous despair” proposed by people like Albert Camus (1913 – 1960). This attitude is well summed up in the words of the song from *The Man from La Mancha*, “The Impossible Dream”.

*“To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go.
To right the unrightable wrong,
To love, pure and chaste, from the fire,
To strive, when you are to weary
To reach unreachable star.
This is my quest, to follow that star,
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far.
To strive for the right, without question or pause
To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.*

*To this glorious quest.
 That my heart will be peaceful and calm
 When I'm laid to my rest.
 And the world will be better for this
 That one man, scorned and covered with scars,
 Still strove, with his last ounce of courage
 To reach the unreachable star."*

Such people would never agree with the character in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* who remarked that if God did not exist – if there were no “after life”, we might well add – “everything would be permitted” (i.e. there'd be no moral system possible). People like these are real prophetic voices that can shame us out of our social unconcern in spite of all our prattling about working for God's kingdom.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Who are the indifferentists, with regards to life after death?

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2. What is “courageous despair” faced with death?

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3.6 THE POSITIVE RESPONSES

Among the three positive responses we take the first two in the next unit.

a. Reincarnation (More about it will be studied in the next unit.) b. Resurrection of the body (More about it will be discussed in the next unit.) c. The Immortality of the Soul

Compared to Reincarnation

All reincarnation theory pre-supposes the immortality of the soul. But if one accepts immortality of the soul (that is, the conviction that it is, in itself, unable to die) one is not obliged straight-away to hold that it will be reincarnated subsequently. In this sense, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is (at least logically) prior to that of reincarnation. In fact, we shall find both theories using the same basic arguments to establish the immortality of the human psyche. The reincarnationists will then proceed to try and establish re-birth as a further property of the animating principle. Some careless thinkers assume that the very same argument which establishes the immortality of the soul is nigh automatic “proof” that there is such a thing as reincarnation. Even Plato himself seems to do this from time to time. Whatever, I think it is good, at least for pedagogical purposes, to separate these two moments. It will also be useful as a help to understanding the evolution of the vocabulary to express, in traditional terms, the Christian teaching of life after life.

Views of the Human Person

The greater degree of dichotomy we accept in our understanding of the human person, the easier is it to provide theories and arguments in favour of life after death. In the face of death, decay and putrefaction, it is difficult to argue that there is some kind of survival – unless, of course, we grant that there is something over and above that which is corrupting and rotting before our eyes and it is this something that “goes marching on”. Now the Hindu or reincarnationist perspective, in our opinion, is the view that implies the greatest split within the human person. Indeed, one particular body is seen so much a superfluous appendage to the *atman* or soul, that it is possible for the former to be cast aside while the latter, without losing its identity would be able to animate any other material reality, even one of another sex, perhaps a sub-human being, too. The next view is one which implies a little less disjunction between body and soul. At any case, it does not necessarily ask for a commitment to reincarnation. Thereby it would not ask us to maintain that a human soul could indifferently animate any human or sub-human embodiment – which would imply no real positive and active contribution to personal identity from the material element.

The Arguments

The two arguments most commonly rehearsed in favour of the existence of an immortal soul in human beings are (a) the fact that we can form abstract ideas and (b) the fact that we are capable of a total reflection. Aquinas and some others also add a kind of argument from the fact that we seem to have a natural desire for eternal life and such a natural desire could hardly be in vain. Other arguments have also been presented from time to time, but we will not consider them as they are too implicitly bound up with a world-view that comes across – to me, at least – as too oppressive and alien to amore integrated conception of the human person.

The Argument from our Abstractive Ability

It is possible for the human mind, so the argument runs, to form abstract ideas. That is, we can form the notion of justice, love, peace and so on. However, we have no direct experience of any of these things. We do encounter a situation of justice or injustice, we experience the powerful feeling of loving or being loved. We know some concrete occasion of peace coming after conflict. From these we abstract (or “leave out, without denying their existence”) particular individual elements and consider what is most basic or constitutive to these. Mere sense-knowledge cannot provide us with such, for sense knowledge is always of the concrete, the individual. There is also an element of universality and necessity in these ideas (recall Kant).

This would imply that there is in us something over and above matter, which has the ability to transcend or go beyond matter. It is this “something” which will be able to continue to exist over and above matter when the latter has ceased to exist.

It is significant to note that Plato, in his presentation of this argument (Cf. *Phaedo* 70 d 7 – 72 e 2 and *Meno* 84 ff) is more concerned with arguing to the fact of the soul’s pre-existence than to its posthumous survival. Plato, however, has the good grace to make Simmias remark that further refinement is required to make the argument conclusive. Aquinas is more precise and rationally satisfying in his argumentation. We shall sum it up in Copleston’s neat phraseology: “St. Thomas argues ... that the human soul must be a spiritual and subsistent form, because it is capable of knowing the nature of all bodies. If it were material, it would be determined to a specified object, as the organ of vision is determined to the perception of colour...” (*History*, Vol. II, Lo., Burns, 1950, 384. The relevant texts in Aquinas are ST Ia 75, 6 and SCG 2, 79.)

The Argument from Total Reflection

It is an undeniable fact of experience that two of our activities are capable of a total reflection – that is, they can “turn back” (Latin, *re-flectere*) on themselves. These two activities are knowing and willing. When I know, I know that I know and it is also possible for me to will to will. Our sense activities are not “self transparent”, that is, they cannot be “present to themselves”. I cannot see my seeing or hear my hearing, though I can know that I see or hear. Now, it is argued, it is characteristic of matter that it has parts outside of parts and that, as a consequence, one part of it can only be touched by another part. For instance, my body is material: this is borne out of the fact that my right hand lies outside of my left hand, my right foot lies outside of my left foot and so on. Now, I cannot touch my right hand by my right hand – no more than I can see my seeing. In other words, my seeing – just as much as my right hand – cannot “turn back” or make a total reflection on itself. Now the fact that my intellect and will can do this is a sign that they do not have “parts outside of parts”. They are thus not material, that is, spiritual. As such, they have no material parts to fall back into. These “spiritual faculties” then are indication that I have a spiritual soul which, by that token is immortal.

Plato seeks to establish the uncompounded or spiritual nature of the soul in *Phaedo* (Cf. 78 b 4 – 80 e 1.) not so much by its ability to make a total reflection but from the fact that it can survey the invisible and unchanging, imperishable Forms. Hence, it is more like to them than to corporeal things which are visible, changing and perishable. This way of arguing, of course, binds us to accepting the Platonic doctrine of the Forms as well as the pre-existence of the soul. Hence, it is little relevant to us, here.

Aquinas, in his disputed questions *On Truth* (I, 9; cf. The translation of Robert Mulligan, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1952, 42) develops the argument along the lines we have sketched out above. He writes: “... the most perfect beings, such as, for example, intellectual substances, return to their essence with a complete return [we have rendered this idea as “total reflection”, above]: knowing something external to themselves, in a certain sense they go outside of themselves; but by knowing that they know, they are already beginning to return to themselves, because the act of cognition mediates between the knower and the thing known. That turn is completed inasmuch as they know their own essences ... And right after this, the Angelic Doctor feels constrained to quote the anonymous author of *The Causes*, “A being which is such as to know its own essence returns to it by a complete return.”

Plato vs Aristotle on the Soul

In the Platonic vision, the body is something harmful to the soul. It is its prison and hence should have no part to play in the afterlife. As we have said, it is easy to save life after death, if we are prepared to barter away as integrated understanding of the unity of the human composite. In Christian *Weltanschauung*, however – especially in the light of the Incarnation – the body is seen in a much more positive, a healthier light. In other words, a definitely more integrated and unified understanding of the human person is called for. Now, Aristotle, unlike his erstwhile master, had such an approach to reality. He viewed matter in general and the body with much more sympathy and appreciation. Aristotle, rather than Plato, seemed more amenable to the development of Christian doctrine, so thought Aquinas. But this very strong point in the Stagyrte favour presented a chink in that self-same armour. Let Copleston summarise the problem for us: “St. Thomas rejected the Platonic Augustinian view of the relation of the soul to body and adopted the Aristotelian view of the soul as form of the body. ... The question then arises whether the closeness of the union between soul and body has not been so emphasised that the possible subsistence of the human soul apart from the body must be ruled out. In other words, is not the Aristotelian doctrine of the relation of the soul to the body incompatible with personal immortality? If one starts with the Platonic theory of the soul, immortality is assured, but the union of the soul and body is rendered difficult to understand; whereas if one starts with the Aristotelian theory of the soul, it might seem that one has to sacrifice immortality, that the soul is so closely bound to the body that it cannot subsist apart from the body.” (Op. Cit., 383.)

To put it another way, Aquinas’ Christian convictions seemed to demand of him an impossible task: the integration of two revealed truths which seemed to be mutually exclusive: an integrated view of the human composite (which included also a positive understanding of the body) plus total personal immortality. How Aquinas was able to reconcile these two views is a testimony to his creative thinking and is a further instance of how he was no mere passive student of Aristotle, reproducing parrot-like his master’s voice.

Aquinas’ Contribution

St. Thomas’ insightful offering to the problem was the famous distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic dependence. True, he remarked, knowing and willing can transcend or abstract from matter. But they need matter to get started. I cannot, for example, form any abstract idea or build up the notion of anything supersensible without first passing by way of matter. I can only arrive at the notion of God or First Cause by seeing, hearing, smelling, touching or tasting the tangible things of this world. Or, to take another example, I can only form the notion of truth, (an abstraction), starting from my sense perception of some true sensible data. Thus, my spiritual activity of thinking (and, it can be shown, of willing, too) is at least indirectly dependent on matter for its functioning. He called this *extrinsic* dependence. The spiritual activities of knowing and willing (and consequently their spiritual principle, the human soul) are dependent on matter only for the *beginning* of these activities. For their continuance and completion they can carry on without the help of matter – they can “transcend” it, as we say. Our other human activities – those we have in common with animals (sensitive life and locomotion) and plants (nourishment, repair, growth and reproduction) – however, are intrinsically dependent on matter; they involve matter all the way through, i.e., for the beginning, continuance and completion of their activities. Now we apply the famous metaphysical principle of “as is the operation so is the agent”. Humans have some activities (operations) which are only extrinsically dependent on matter – i.e. require matter only to start off; subsequently, they can carry on without matter. Therefore, the agent of these actions – in effect our spiritual soul – only needs matter to begin its existence.

Thereafter it can continue to exist without matter, that is, when the matter element, at death, decomposes. Hence there can be life after death. A more detailed presentation of these arguments – in not so many words, of course – can be found in *Summa Theologica*. (ST, Ia, 75, 6 as well as in SCG 2, 79 and *On the Soul* a 14, c.)

To complete the picture, we might also cite St. Thomas' other argument in favour of life after death, based on the natural desire for it: "Natural tendency cannot be frustrated. But we notice that men desire ceaseless existence. This desire is rooted in reason, for since to exist (*esse*) is in itself desirable, any intelligent being who knows existence as absolute and not merely as relative, must desire existence as absolute and forever. So it is evident that this is not a vain desire but that man, inasmuch as his soul is intellectual, is incorruptible." (*On the Soul*, a 14, c.)

Critical comments

As we have pointed out, it is in his handling of the ticklish question of life after death, beginning with the more integrated Aristotelian conception of the human person, that Aquinas revealed his own creativity and originality. As Van Steenberghe has so aptly summed it up: "to formulate his own psychology in Aristotelian terms, it was necessary [for Aquinas] to go beyond Aristotelianism itself." (L. Johnston (tr), Louvain, 1955, 186.) In fact some of the earlier critics of Aquinas, like Scotus and Cajetan, faulted him on this point in that he was not following Aristotle faithfully (Pandikattu 2011).

I think no one can deny that Aquinas offers the finest rational demonstration for life after death, a proof which is more attuned with the Christian positive understanding of the body. However, I think we must remind ourselves in all fairness that Aquinas' proof is ultimately based on an interpretation of matter, its nature and limits. And this interpretation is precisely that – *an* interpretation, not the only one, and like most (all?) interpretations it is not subject to rational proof. For Aquinas is assuming that matter can never transcend: if the embodied, materialised human person can transcend, it is only because there is in her/him something over and above matter that can enable her/him to do this. But what if one were to subscribe to a more dynamic vision of reality – one in which matter *at a certain level of complexity can* transcend, without there being any need to postulate a spiritual soul to account for this and which would be able to survive the material decomposition of the body? Of course, this dynamic vision of reality and its corresponding conception of matter and the human person is no more rationally provable either. Interpretations, as we know from hermeneutics, are not the fruit of rational proofs or refutations. Consciously or no, we "opt" for that particular interpretation of reality or an aspect of it which "clicks with", harmonises or resonates with the various values I have integrated into my personal life and *Weltanschauung*.

As for the "natural desire" argument, its strength will obviously depend on the reason one holds why so-called "natural desires" cannot be in vain. On what grounds do we claim that "nature" won't put in us an ineluctable desire for the impossible? And are we sure that the desire for immortality is "natural"? Could it not be wishful thinking, a survival or primitive superstition, etc.? All this would need to be established before we can take this argument seriously, however strong an "invitation to believe" it affords us

3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit after continuing with a phenomenological study of death, we have tried to see the positive and nihilistic understanding of the possible life after death.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is 'total reflection.'?

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2. What is "extrinsic dependence"?

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3.8 KEY WORDS

Necrobiosis refers to the death and replacement of individual cells throughout life. Indeed, except for the nerve cells, all the cells of an organism are constantly being replaced. For instance, new skin cells form under the surface as the old one die and flake off.

Necrosis is the death of tissues or even an entire organ. This may or may not cause somatic death. During a heart attack, for instance, a blood clot cuts off circulation of the blood to part of the heart. The affected part dies, but the organism continues to live – unless, of course, the damage has been severe.

Dies Irae: Literally it means, "Day of Wrath." It is a medieval Latin hymn describing Judgment Day, used formerly for the masses for the dead

Weltanschauung: World-view or a comprehensive view of the world and human life.

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UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON REBIRTH AND RESURRECTION

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
 - 4.1 Introduction
 - 4.2 Origins on the theory of rebirth (or reincarnation)
 - 4.3 Plato on reincarnation
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 - 4.5 Implications of Reincarnation Theory
 - 4.6 Critical Response on Rebirth
 - 4.7 Concluding Remarks on Reincarnation
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 - 4.9 Key Words
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To ask meaningful questions not only about life after death, but also about life before death.
 - To understand appreciate resurrection and reincarnation.
 - To encourage the students to develop a personal conviction on life after death.
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4.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit focuses on two significant understandings of life after death: rebirth and resurrection.

4.2 ORIGINS ON THE THEORY OF REBIRTH (OR REINCARNATION)

A belief in reincarnation has been shown to be part of the institutionalised eschatology of tribal people in different parts of the world. Even today, traces of such views are found as far apart as among the Igbo tribe of South East Nigeria and the natives of the Trobriand (or Kiwira) Islands, of the coast of New Guinea just off the North-Western tip of Australia. It is certain that rebirth theories flourished among the tribal, non-Brahmanic religious in the Gangetic region of ancient India, in pre-Aryan times. Scholars have observed that the documented evidence of rebirth or – more accurately – karmic eschatology in Vedantic and Buddhistic texts in our country reveal not so much the earlier pre-Aryan conceptions but the attempt to accommodate it to the religious convictions of the fair-skinned invaders from the North. Indeed, the Rig-Veda, the oldest of all ancient Indian texts, makes no mention of reincarnation at all. Rather than lose ourselves in a maze of hypotheses and conjectures, however, we shall begin our study of reincarnation with a glance at the earliest textual evidence: the writings of Plato in the West and the ideas expressed in the later Vedas in the East.

4.3 PLATO ON REINCARNATION

There is a most convenient extract from Plato's *Timaeus* which gives us, in a nutshell, his doctrine on the subject: "The Demiurge created as many souls as there are stars, and then laid down the

laws by which their destinies would be governed: At the first birth, the conditions of all souls will be equal so that there will be no disadvantaged among them; entering into Time and distributed throughout the universe, these souls will take on the nature most capable of honouring the gods. However, human nature being dual, superiority must be deemed to reside in the virile [i.e. male] sex. Once souls have been implanted in bodies, and the person's actions have resulted in either losses or gains... he who has lived right will mount towards the particular star assigned to him to dwell there in a condition of happiness that conforms to the state of his soul. However, he who has failed the test will be reborn again, changing his nature for that of a woman. If, in this new nature, the soul does not cease and desist from malice, it will be reincarnated continuously into animal bodies according to the nature of its vice. Through such continued metamorphoses, it will never see the end of the penalties it must suffer. Having made known to souls these dispositions of the laws by which their destinies would be governed definitely not foreknowing the malice to which any of them might become prey – the Demiurge then thrust the created souls into Time, disturbing them throughout the earth and moon.” (Plato).

Some Comments on this Text

There are, of course, other texts of Plato, scattered references here and there, but this, in our opinion, is the most concise summary of his views so we shall confine myself to them. We note, just for the record, that Plato – like most of the ancient classical thinkers – thought that the moon (like the other planets) was inhabited, along with the earth. The souls which would “take on the nature most capable of honouring the gods” refer to human nature. In other words, they would animate intelligent human beings who alone would be capable of believing in the gods and raising up altars in their worship. There is a strong dose of male chauvinism evident, here – which is also to be found in Indian conceptions of reincarnation. All humans were supposedly male at the onset. Reincarnation in a woman's body was the result of a *fall*. In Greece, as in India, to be born as a woman is the consequence of a fault committed in a previous existence. A further degeneration would be rebirth as an animal. As Plato puts it in *Phaedo*: “Those for whom gluttony, excess and passion for drink have been regularly indulged without any effort being exerted to master these vices will no doubt see their souls implanted in the bodies of donkeys or similar beasts.” The strong apologetic thrust of the theory of rebirth is already in evidence from this text. Over again, Plato is reminding us that humans are not justified in blaming the Deity for their unhappy state. If we find ourselves in a miserable condition, it is because of our conduct in a previous existence.

4.4 INDIAN TEXTS ON REINCARNATION

The three great religions of India – Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – all share a common set of eschatological features. They can be summed up as follows:

- (a) A theory of rebirth that postulates a cyclical theory of continuity, so that death is merely a temporary state in a continuing process of births and rebirths.
- (b) A theory of *karma* that postulates that one's present existence is determined for the most part by the ethical nature of one's past actions.
- (c) A theory of the nature of existence known as *samsara*, which included all living things in the cycle of endless continuity.

(d) A theory of salvation (*nirvana*), the salient characteristic of which is the view that salvation must involve the cessation of rebirth, and must therefore occur outside the whole cycle of continuity or *samsara*.

The “typical text” that we would cite to exemplify this (no doubt, we can supplement this with other extracts from our study of Indian Philosophy) is from the *Chandogya Upanishad*: “Those who in the village reverence a belief in sacrifice, merit and almsgiving – they pass into the smoke (of the funeral pyre); from smoke, into the night; from the night, into the latter half of the month: from the latter half of the month, into the six months during which the sun moves southward, into the world of the fathers; from the world of the fathers, into space; from space, into the moon. That is King *Soma*. That is the food of the gods. The gods eat that. After having remained in it as long as there is a residue (of their good works), then by that course by which they came they return again, just as they came, into space, from space into wind. After having become wind, one becomes smoke. After having become smoke, he becomes mist. After having become mist, he becomes cloud. After having become cloud, he rains down. They are born here as rice and barley, as herbs and trees, as sesame plants and beans. Thence, verily, indeed, it is difficult to emerge, for only if someone or other eats him as food and emits him as semen, does he develop further. Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here – the prospect is indeed that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the womb of a Kshatria, or the womb of a Vaisya. But those who are of stinking conduct here – the prospect is, indeed that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine or the womb of an outcast (*candala*)” (*Chandogya Upanishada*, 5.10.3-7).

Some Comments on this Text

As with the Platonic *Timaeus* text, we hasten to add that we have chosen this as a typical or representative text out of several possibilities. One can cite many references to reincarnation in the various Upanishads, from the *Gita* and from other Indian religions. But this is a fairly detailed presentation and so should suffice for our purpose. What strikes one, first of all, is the incorporation of the system of caste into the whole theory with the result that a divine sanction is given to a vested-interest interpretation of a social structure which implies being wedded to a very oppressive status quo. Reincarnation in various sub-human forms is upheld clearly over here.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. How diverse is the belief in rebirth?

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2. What are the common eschatological features of Indian religions?



4.5 IMPLICATIONS OF REINCARNATION THEORY

Reincarnation, like all views upholding the afterlife is not a scientific truth that can be proved. Neither can it be disproved, in my opinion. However, before we enter into this aspect of the question, it would be good to ask ourselves what are the various philosophical implications of the theory of reincarnation – first, in general, and then with which special reference to the philosophy of the human person. Positively, it seems to me that reincarnation upholds a certain holistic vision of things. It recognises that there is a certain basic inter-connectedness between humans and all of reality. It is significant that karma and reincarnation is held to be pervasive even in an atheistic world-view. Karma, in such cases, is seen as a kind of cosmic law that binds all of reality together. “As you sow, so shall you reap”: this is guaranteed, not by the intervention of some divinity who restores order, but the very structures of the cosmos. However, it certainly involves a dichotomised conception of the human person. The real self is not at all embodied: it is something deeper than that, something that can cast off the bodily element and assume a totally different body without any difficulty. Our particular embodiedness is something really alien to us. It’s like putting on or taking off a shirt or a dress which is not part of me at all.

I am not saying that an integrated understanding of the human person is rationally provable while a dichotomised one is not. It is true that we experience a tremendous psyche-somatic union in the human person but it is possible, while not denying this phenomenon, to interpret it – as Plato and reincarnationists do – as not necessarily obliging us to uphold such an integration. What I’m saying is that it doesn’t seem to me that reincarnation is compatible with a philosophy of human person that implies an integrated understanding of the human person. This, of course, is in no way a “refutation” of reincarnation.

4.6 CRITICAL RESPONSE ON REBIRTH

Reincarnation theory is basically an attempt to respond to the scandal of suffering in this world. Particularly it seems to offer some kind of explanation as to why some children are born mentally retarded or blind or in some way deformed: it’s all a punishment for fault in previous existence. And so too when the poor get poorer and the rich get richer or when those who live decent lives are trampled underfoot while the rascals prosper. The former are expiating crimes of a previous life. The latter are being rewarded for the good they did in their earlier birth. And if they are now abusing their power, well, they’ll pay for it in the next round.

Thus a sense of order is maintained and the feeling of outrage which was aroused at the plight of the apparent innocent is somewhat mollified. They are not so “innocent” after all. And if they humbly submit to their lot, their situation will improve in their next birth. However, this view, as we have seen, stifles quite effectively any social concern or consciousness: it does seem inadvisable to go to

the aid of such people, much less encourage them to revolt against the injustices they are undergoing. If they rebel against their punishment or if we seek to mitigate their lot, this will not help them in the long run. For they will have to pay the penalty still, carrying it over to their next life, together with the further fault of rebelling against *dharma*, the cosmic order. Of course, we are not unaware of heroic social reformers and deeply committed persons like Baba Amte and, of course, Gandhiji. But it is a fact that for quite some time, the popular understanding of rebirth in India has dampened many a flame of social concern. Finally, I do feel still a sense of outrage that one be suffering pain and punishment for crimes that he or she can no longer remember – for at least the vast majority has no recollections of former life. This fact alone offsets whatever ‘mollification’ the theory might have set in, as referred to at the beginning of this paragraph.

But some do remember, we are told. And from time to time we read in the popular press – sometimes even in serious journals, very cautious of all sensationalism – startling accounts of people who recall a previous life or seem to recognise a place they’ve never visited before. Many of us have, at some time or the other, the uncanny feeling that “this place seems vaguely familiar” or this entire event is coming across to me as a repeat performance. True, many “recollection” stories fall apart under close study and can be shown up for the frauds that they are. But there still remains the baffling residue, not to mention the personal experiences referred to above. What shall we make of these? Perhaps the case of Bridey Murphy is the most famous “reincarnation” story on record. But there are many others, some even more impressive and well-documented, which are not so well known. Some of these can be found by consulting a most interesting study by a doctor, Ian Stevenson, MD, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1974).

In the first place, let us emphasize that there is no metaphysical impossibility about reincarnation – provided one accepts a more or less dichotomised understanding of the human person. It is a bit difficult to explain how a human soul (at least, in the traditional Christian conception) could be animating a sub-human reality. It is easier to accept subsequent human incarnations. But this would involve a lot of things to be ironed out concerning what constitutes identity and the self, leaving aside the usual complications that result from the Platonic or Cartesian splitting up the human person into some kind of a “ghost in a machine”, as Koestler wryly dubs it.

Then how do we explain the admittedly minimal but genuine-seeming “recollections”? Here, we have to begin with an admission of colossal ignorance. There is extremely little that we know of our real psychic powers and para-psychology is still in its infancy. Who knows, there may be simpler explanations than reincarnation to account for all these weird experiences and, it seems to me, more reasonable to rule out all possibility of such, before we accept the reincarnation hypothesis with all its comparatively more far-fetched presuppositions and implications. It has been suggested that our (“astral”?) bodies emit radiation or “waves” and that many of these remain “in vibration” long after we are dead – in the case of certain magnetic or powerful personalities, for ever. May be there are such “waves” that can be picked up with the right instrument, more or less along the same lines as our radio or television aerial. And perhaps some of these have been picked up somehow or other by sensitive people who lived many years – even centuries? – after the stored in their subconscious.

Of course this “explanation” is studded and shot through with all manner of “maybes”, “perhaps”, “somehows” and so on. But then the reincarnation explanation is equally a hypothesis and all “scientific” attempts to account for it fall back on an equal number of wild guesses, suppositions and ventures into the dark.

4.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON REINCARNATION

Reincarnation theory – originally perhaps no more than an offshoot of early attempt to grapple with the issue of mortality – immortality – was given a particularly ethical twist in India by the addition of the doctrine of *karma*. In India we have seen that it is quite compatible with an atheistic viewpoint. It does not necessarily imply belief in a presiding deity of reward and punishment. Whatever, we can hardly speak of reincarnation as a single monolithic view and there are even variations within the Indian theme. It is also a rather cosmopolitan notion, as we have seen. Julius Caesar, in his Gallic Wars, reports (rightly or wrongly) that such a view was taught by the old Druids. We also know that the view was also held by the pre-Socratics, the Pythagoreans to be precise.

Many people have claimed that they find in reincarnation an intellectually satisfying answer to the baffling question of evil. In fact it creates more difficulties than it solves. In the last analysis, however, my rejection of this doctrine is based on the fact that it doesn't "click with" me and my values – in fact, it positively jars with them. That I cannot rationally refute the view does not result in any loss of sleep, for me. After all, it cannot be rationally proved either. And since when have rational proofs or refutations been the basis of our deepest convictions, anyway?

There are not lacking even people who find "proof texts" for reincarnation in the Bible. The most commonly cited one is from the New Testament (John 9:2). Of the old born blind, Jesus' disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this human being or his parents that he was born blind?" This is often cited as biblical evidence in favour of reincarnation. After all, if the disciples could think that the human being was possibly born blind because of his sins, when else could the poor fellow have sinned but in some former life, some previous incarnation? However, this type of argument betrays a bit of ignorance about Jewish culture. Many Jews believed in prenatal sin, that is, they held that it was possible for a person to sin while s/he was yet in her/his mother's womb. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions* also seems to favour this view. However shocking – perhaps even amusing. – such a view may be to us, we should try to understand what motivated such a theory. It was a clumsy attempt to explain precisely how babies could be born blind or crippled or lame. Since many Jews upheld the view that all suffering is punishment for sin, the idea of someone being able to sin right "from the formation of the embryo" was a consistent enough explanation.

Summing up, we cannot deny that the doctrine of reincarnation, however uncertain may be the place and the "how" of its development played an important part in the evolution of human thought concerning the afterlife. As Edmund Robillard says in his popular booklet *Reincarnation: Illusion or Reality?* (1982): "In the domain of religion, it is possible to say about the doctrine of reincarnation what we might say about the Ptolemaic theory in the domain of astronomy: both are admirable syntheses containing many of the observations and discoveries of man down the ages. Without Ptolemy, in fact, Copernicus would never have been possible. Without the doctrine of reincarnation, Mann points touching upon the survival of man after death might have remained in the dark, and consequently even the doctrine of the resurrection might have found acceptance more difficult."

I would not go so far as to imply that reincarnation theory is a kind of *praeparatio evangelica* for the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection which, I think is what Robillard is doing. But it has certainly helped to keep some kind of conviction in the after-life in the forefront of human

longings. In my opinion, however, it is the more rationally demonstrable notion of the immortality of the soul that has played for the Resurrection the role that Robillard had assigned to Reincarnation.

The phenomenon of dreams and of imagination, wherein our minds (souls?) seem to be able to emerge from our bodies and wander elsewhere, even taking some weird form, is for Robillard, the common human experience that suggested reincarnation theory to the ancestors of many nations. We may think there is an even more common and scientific basis for the doctrine. This is the phenomenon of the seasons and of day and night. The seasons, as well as day and night, follow each other in a regular cycle of birth and death. Seasonal deaths and rebirths are more strikingly evident in cold climates, where after the barrenness of winter, nature comes to life again in spring. But the same thing happens even in our country with the cycle of sowing, reaping and harvesting. Day dies in the face of night but come to birth again. What could be more natural than to imagine (especially if one subscribes to a holistic vision of things) that, as it is for nature, so it is for the human person: there is a chain of birth, death and rebirth? That is why so many ancient people had a cyclic, rather than a linear understanding of time.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Name one positive implication of the theory of rebirth.

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2. What are some scientific bases for rebirth?

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4.8 ESTIMATE ON CONCEPT OF RESURRECTION

Resurrection of the body is the Christian belief. This little phrase can now be understood in all its implications, after the study on Aquinas' view of the afterlife. As regards the afterlife, there is no need to profess belief in the immortality of the soul. That is something natural to the soul and can be proved rationally, according to the traditionalistic scholastic approach. But the destiny of the

body after death is a different matter. At death, the body corrupts while the soul lives on. A special divine intervention is required, whereby it is resurrected – not merely resuscitated (the distinction will become clearer in the next section). That this will come to pass is an article of faith, based on Christian Scripture, which may be interpreted in the traditional sense (Desbruslais 1977).

Until the body is raised, of course, the souls of those who have died will be deprived of their necessary counterpart. The Christian doctrine of the Assumption of Mary is to be understood precisely in this context. It has been defined that God has made an exception in Mary's case. All other human beings must wait for the Last Day when their souls will receive a "glorified" body, but until then each individual person is, in a very real sense, incomplete. By a special divine intervention in Mary's case, her body was saved from corruption and was taken up (Latin, *assumptio*) into heaven already *before* the Last Day – an anticipatory grace. Of course, when one upholds a more holistic vision of the human person, all these dogmas need to be rethought so that their personal relevance and meaningfulness can be established. Such details, interesting and important though they may be, are beyond the scope of this treatise, here.

All along we have opted for a more holistic vision of the human person, one that sees her/him as one integral reality. We have praised the Thomistic understanding which, thanks to the notion of the extrinsic dependence, was able to rescue the Aristotelian conception of human being, a far more balanced and unified grasp of the human reality than Plato's. But we have felt constrained to point out that there is still a dichotomised element that persists in the viewpoint of the Aquinas. And there is also the assumption that matter and spirit are, fundamentally, poles apart: between them there is an unbridgeable abyss (Desbruslais 1977). But, what if we hold a more dynamic vision of reality? What if we were to agree with Teilhard and others of his like that matter is "solidified spirit", that when matter has attained a sufficient level of complexity, it is able to transcend and consciousness emerges. Is there no way at all to maintain life after death when we hold such a unified conception of the human person? (Pandikattu 2011).

Resurrection and Resuscitation

This is one of the preliminary clarifications we must go into in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. Though some people might use the two words, resurrection and resuscitation, interchangeably as if they were straight synonyms, it is good to be precise in distinguishing them. The word "resuscitation" is currently used in medical circles to refer to the revival of a patient who had previously been pronounced clinically dead. Many modern hospitals have more or less sophisticated equipment to assist the more traditional "resuscitation techniques" such as artificial respiration, mouth-to-mouth breathing and the like. A person who has been "resuscitated" is one who has been, as it were, returned to this level of ordinary human existence where one is still subject to pain, discomfort, disease ... and finally death. In this sense, as in the Christian understanding, it would be more accurate to speak of Jesus having "resuscitated" (not resurrected, as is commonly said) Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9: 18-26; Luke 8: 40-46) and Lazarus (John 11). Resuscitations were not unknown in the Old Testament. The prophet Elisha resuscitated the son of the Shunamite woman (II Kings 4: 32-26).

The "new life" of Jesus at the Resurrection is considered to be something unique in Christian belief. A very bold and quite different claim is made about his return from death. It is a far nobler and higher level of life that he assumes now, something that has little (nothing?) in common with our life here and now and gives us a hint as to what kind of life awaits our

“glorified selves” beyond the grace. He is able to appear and disappear, pass through closed doors and so on. Yet, somehow, he is no mere ghost: it is not merely Jesus’ “immortal soul” that the Apostles’ encounter. For he eats with them, he is not merely seen and heard by them: they can touch and handle him. This is the account given in the Gospels written about Jesus’ life. These facts that the gospel writers are saying about the resurrected Jesus is totally different from the activities of the resuscitated people given in the same scripture.

The notion of resurrection is acceptable, as a belief, only to one who accepts the biblical revelation. For one who doesn’t, these claims would make no sense. Yet, could it be a mere matter of blind faith is the question to be raised. Any faith should have a critical and reasonable basis. Faith cannot be justified on grounds of pure reason alone. However, ‘fideism’ (i.e. the assertion that faith is “blind” and must be swallowed without questioning) is unacceptable. Rationalistic attitude and reasonable basis (not an absolute proof) to faith are called for. In Christian history itself we find St. Paul as much as the early Christians, experienced a tremendous resistance to belief in the resurrection of Jesus from would-be converts. They made ‘resurrection’ the cornerstone and central dogma of their Christian faith and life, emphasising something objective about it. They did not have anything in their culture or the cultures known to them to provide the raw material for their belief in it. It could hardly have been “invented” by them, even if they’d wanted to, for they lacked the background cultural ingredients out of which to fabricate it. So Christian understanding of it is claimed to be a fact.

4.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have dealt philosophically with the twin theories of rebirth and resurrection..

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is ‘resuscitation’?

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2. Give two reasons to indicate that resurrection might have really taken place?

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4.10 KEY WORDS

Resuscitation: Unlike resurrection, resuscitation refers to the revival of a patient who had previously been pronounced clinically dead.

Ghost in a machine: it is the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's derogatory description of René Descartes' mind-body dualism. Arthur Koestler has written a book by the same title in 1967.

4.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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