

# THE PROBLEM OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

## IN LIFE AFTER DEATH

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The problem of personal identity in life after death continues to attract serious consideration in the contemporary Western philosophy of religion. It is intriguing, however, to find that the issue has elicited very little attention in the Islamic philosophical tradition. This is especially, so in view of importance this problem received in the Holy Quran. Neither the Muslim theologians nor the philosophers (with few exceptions, of course) have cared to give a systematic account of the issue in the light of intellectual development of their time. The situation becomes serious when the modern Muslim is forced to face the challenge of recent Western discoveries in this field.

In the West the issue has been formulated in the following way: Does the death of the body destroy the person or does he survive (for a limited or unlimited period) as a continuing self, as a resurrected person either in physical or spiritual form? In other words the problem is that of the continuation or otherwise of the individual personality which can be identified after death. Here, the concept has been treated in a typically materialistic way with the assumption that the old mind-body problem can be resolved in such an interpretation. The identity-thesis is accepted to allow for the existence after death in some form of distinct mental processes, but these are nonetheless bound up with 'this' body or identical with it in the last analysis. What is involved here is the apparent causal dependence of mind over body and the logical indispensability of the body for a possible account of our continuous identity. In the more recent scholarship, body has assumed still greater importance for continuous personal identity.

But, is there an agreed criterion of personal identity? John Hick has mentioned previous-life memories, bodily continuity and psychological continuity of a pattern of mental dispositions.<sup>[1]</sup> Thomas McPherson also points to memory and physical continuity (continuity in space and time). "At

a point we are to decide when we definitely have, or when we definitely have not, a case of 'the same person' in advance in general terms; but we may at least be certain that in trying to settle a difficulty of this kind we must appeal to this particular criterion."<sup>[2]</sup> Taking as an instance George Samsa's transformation into a strange monster from Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, he concludes that in the case of death we undergo an altogether total change. Arguing from monistic theory of Mind/Body/Brain identity, he comes to believe in a total annihilation of the person in the event of death.

How does this criterion of personal identity fare in our normal life? When we say an old man is the same person as the baby born fifty years ago, we believe that the old man has material continuity with the body. Of course, material continuity establishes a one-one relationship --- and that is what Peter Geach seems to require to "rightly identify a man living 'again' with a man who died."<sup>[3]</sup> For him, personal identity depends not on material 'identity' but on material continuity which may not be much different from similarity.

In this context, Williams suggests that 'same memories' should be understood as a claim of exact similarity; but this is not a claim of identity. He says: "The only case in which identity and exact similarity could be distinguished.... is that of the body --- 'same body' and 'exactly similar body' really do make a difference. Thus I should claim that the omission of the body takes away all context from the idea of personal identity."<sup>[4]</sup> So, the upshoot of Geach's argument cited earlier is that unless a man comes to life again by resurrection he does not live again.

Another forceful attack against the idea of life after death has come from the philosophers of language. As long ago as 1921, Ludwig Wittgenstein made a remark about logical peculiarities of the concept 'death'. "... in death ... the world does not change but ceases. Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through."<sup>[5]</sup> Later critics of the calibre of Moritz Schlick and more recently A.G.N. Flew have come to the conclusion that the suggestion that we survive death is self-contradictory. Their theses, however, are not primarily concerned with the question of meaning. W.H. Poteat has made an attempt to bring out the meaning of concept 'death' by linguistically analyzing it with reference to 'self' Or 'I'<sup>[6]</sup>.

Poteat begins with the hypothesis that 'death' in certain of its commonsensually acceptable uses is a logically extended use and is hence an eschatological concept; and that 'I' when it is linked with 'death' in this logically extended use is also logically extended, and hence may be thought of as a kind of meta-concept; and finally that these logically extended concepts require and therefore legitimize and properly function within the structure of what he calls 'myth'. Making it a point of departure that the verb 'to die' cannot be meaningfully conjugated in the past tense first person singular (I died); or if it is it cannot be used; he infers that empirical statements about the death of a self involves in certain circumstances a logically extended though commonsensical meaningful use.

Another recent trend is to reinterpret the concept 'immortality' in a sense confined to the kind of life a person is living. The exponent of this approach is D.Z. Phillips. His attempt, in essence, is to avoid the real issue of personal survival after death in the belief of immortality. " ... it would be foolish to speak of eternal life as some kind of appendage to human existence, something which happens after human life on earth is over."<sup>[7]</sup> He goes on: "Eternity is not an extension of this present life, but a mode of judging it. Eternity is not more life, but this life seen under certain moral and religious modes of thought"<sup>[8]</sup> As far as religious mode is concerned "eternal life for the believer is participation in the life of God."<sup>[9]</sup> in the light of his relationship to "beliefs in the iri Fatherhood and Love of God.' Here, the immortality of the soul refers to the "state an individual is in relation to the unchanging reality of God. It is in this way that the notions of the immortality of the soul and eternal life go together."<sup>[10]</sup>

It is in the face of this contemporary attitude towards the concept of immortality that the Islamic view has to be evaluated. The Quranic picture of personal immortality can be roughly drawn up as follow: God created man from earth, into it shall he return and from it shall he be brought out again. There shall be an interval (Barzakh) for everyone after death till the day of Resurrection when the dead shall be raised up again. As God produced the first creation so shall he create again? Every resurrected person shall remember his past deeds. Anyone who will have done an atom of evil shall see it. They shall also be able to recognize one another, though each will have too much concern of his own to be able to be of help to others.

In other words death leads to destruction of this body but the soul survives. It stays at the stage of Barzakh (interval) till it is resurrected with a new body. So, our present body is perishable while the soul lives for ever, projected in the form of a different body. This view is reinforced by tying it up with moral justification of human actions. It may be pointed out here that beliefs in life after death and consequently, reward and punishment, do indeed give a new perspective to life and a new meaning to one's conception of moral values. What is more, it provides a quite realistic idea of man's unique individuality which makes it impossible for one individual to bear the burden of another. His reward and punishment follow the mode of his action.

Such a view of personal immortality, no doubt, invites all sorts of criticism from positivists as well as linguistic philosophers. As pointed out by Sidney Shoemaker,<sup>[11]</sup> the view of immortality as an embodied existence is liable to more serious objections than the dualistic one. This prospect encouraged some Muslim theologians and philosophers to interpret Quranic verses in such a way as to deny the possibility of embodied existence in life after death. They stressed metaphorical and symbolic language of the Quran which according to them should not be taken literally. They also denied the physical nature of Hell and Heaven and conceived them as states of man's soul (mind). Al-Ghazali stands out among those who challenged these philosophers and tried to maintain the original meaning of the Quranic verses without becoming too literal. But his main work is not concerned with the problem of personal immortality as such. The early Muslim thinkers, under the influence of Greek rationalism, appear to have stretched symbolic meaning of the Quran to an extent which the revealed book itself refuses to accept. They failed to appreciate that attributes of God, the truth of revelation, the angels, resurrection, paradise, hell, etc. are not meant to be brought into the realm of demonstrable truth. We can only reconstruct the picture of these 'realities' by remaining within the perspective suggested by the Holy Quran.

It is, of course, easier to give an account of personal immortality on the basis of disembodied existence (as does Iqbal, a contemporary interpreter of Islam). For him, "to exist in pure duration is, to be a self and to be a self is to be able to say 'I am'".<sup>[12]</sup> 'Continuous and increasing tension to receive and interpret fresh stimuli is its vital characteristic. It is this state of tension which

makes the self immortal.<sup>[13]</sup> For Iqbal the self is the criterion or standard of personal identity which has to maintain itself in a constant state of tension to attain immortality. “I regard immortality as an inspiration and not something eternally achieved. Man is a candidate for immortal life which involves a ceaseless struggle in maintaining the tension of the ego”<sup>[14]</sup> So, personal immortality is not a state but a continuous process. Yet “... when the ‘I’ ripens into a self, It has no danger of dissolution”<sup>[15]</sup>

For Iqbal, “it is the ego’s effort to be something that he discovers his final opportunity to sharpen his objectivity and acquire a more fundamental ‘I am’...”<sup>[16]</sup>

What does Iqbal mean by ‘I am’? Is his ‘ego’ the ‘self’ (mot) of Descartes by which ‘I am is what I am’?<sup>[17]</sup> Not precisely. For Iqbal, unlike Descartes, is also concerned with the survival of consciousness and he cannot be subjected to exactly the same criticism that is applied to Cartesian dualism. While it is very difficult to find any principle of individuation in Descartes, this is not the case with Iqbal whose position is rather similar to that of Fichte. He seems to be saying: “The ego posits originally and simply its own being,”<sup>[18]</sup> but for him ego’s act, though affirming himself, does not make him subject and object at the same time.

Iqbal’s use of ‘I’ like Fichte’s seems to suffer from a certain grammatical confusion. The question is largely that of meaning. The word ‘I’ cannot possibly be employed in the -sense of a name representing a particular person. The ‘I’ in Iqbal’s ‘I am’ cannot be said to refer to something particular. But, can this purpose be served by converting ‘I’ into ‘it’ as Russell does. For him, since ‘I think’ creates problems, it is in the fitness of things to say that ‘It thinks in me’ just as we say ‘it rains here’. As Vesey points out: “The, word ‘I’ is no more used to name a person than the word ‘here’ used to name a place.”<sup>[19]</sup> It is much more informative to say that ‘John thinks’ as does ‘It rains in London.’ Hence, self-identification in the sense of ‘I am’ itself is illusory and cannot give meaning to view of personal immortality.

Another difficulty arises when Iqbal accepts immortality “as a fact among other facts.”<sup>[20]</sup> This claim takes him into the manifold problems of verifying and testing of religious statements. These apparently unsurmountable difficulties remain unsolved even in Hick’s peculiar notion of ‘verification in

principle' who says: "What we rightly seek, when we desire the verification of a factual proposition, is not a demonstration of the logical impossibility of the proposition being false (for this would be a self-contradictory demand), but such weight of evidence as suffices, in the type of case in question, to exclude rational doubt."<sup>[21]</sup>

What is actually meant by 'testability in principle'? Broadly speaking whatever one person claims to know through non-sensory perception can be tested by someone else who has developed the faculty to a certain degree. It is claimed by Lesser that practical limits of such a testability are no greater than those encountered in testing scientific observation and ordinary perception.<sup>[22]</sup>

But while stressing that the check is possible in principle he fails to take account of differences of opinion among the recipients of such knowledge and the small number of people claiming such knowledge. This fact puts severe constraints on the degree of probability achieved through such tests.

Even if one were to believe that the demand for testability in principle is met in Hick's argument, it does not follow that any mental life there might be left over after one's bodily death would be sufficient for personal identity. For, if the 'post-mortem' existence is to be counted as personal, it will involve embodiment of some kind or other. For, a human personality conceived of as completely disembodied would obviously lack the social experiences (as understood in this life) necessary for maintaining individual personality.

Hick's main argument boils down to the claim that the notion of having experiences in a resurrected body existing in a desperate realm of space is an empirically meaningful notion. But the problem is, as pointed out by Edwards, whether the notion is empirically meaningful now.<sup>[23]</sup> And the answer is obviously in the negative if Hick is to maintain his overall position. As Edwards puts it: "The difficulty is that the verifying experience could be had only then, whereas the problem to which Hick addresses himself is whether assertions about then are empirically meaningful to us now. Since verifying experiences are available only then, presumably we must conclude that the whole matter is meaningless to us now."<sup>[24]</sup> For Hick must "already make reference to the very conceptions whose factual intelligibility is in question."<sup>[25]</sup>

Similarly, Iqbal's quest to put revelation to the test of reason operates on a rather weak ground. His application of intellectual and pragmatic tests to religious assertions do no more than to point out different meanings attached to religious concepts. Same is the case with many other Muslim rationalists who have tried to bring about harmony between reason and revelation.: Iqbal, I however, appears to have realized the impossibility of his position and in his later works laid greater stress on the non-rational character of religion.

The Holy Quran supports the view that statements about life after death are not empirically verifiable now but refuses to suspend judgment on this crucial matter. It is considered within the purview of God's unlimited powers to effect, then, a new creation continuous with We created you. Will ye then admit the truth? Have ye seen that which ye emit? Do ye create it or are we the Creator?

We mete out death among you, and we are not to be outrun, that we may transfigure you (change you're Form) and make you what ye know not.

And verily ye know the first creation.”

(LVI: 57-62)

But, is the phenomenon of life after death not meant to be perceived now? The occurrence is to take place then and normal criteria of verification cannot be applied now. Then, is Quranic concept of the Hereafter based on a mystery beyond the grave? This is, however, not the case. For, according to the Holy Quran, life after death has its beginning in this life though peculiar circumstances of human life keep most people oblivious of this 'fact'. One feature of resurrection is said to be a complete removal of this veil of ignorance, for human perception will then be clearer with no material limitations to obstruct it. Recent tests on people with near-death experiences seem to support this view.

There is, in the Holy Quran, an elaborate outline explaining its concept of immortality. It includes a stage by stage development of human personality as if it were going through a process of attitude formation. And the process is said to start in this earthly life. The Holy Quran speaks of the growth of

spiritual life as if it corresponds to the physical one in its developments. The stages of physical life are spoken of as (i) state of being in the earth; (ii) that of being in the mother's womb, and (iii) one in which the child is born. On the spiritual side the growth starts while man is still bound by physical limits and at this level he remains more or less unconscious of this development. With death he enters the second stage, that of Barzakh and spiritual life takes a definite form with some sort of realization that a change has taken Place. A final development is brought about with the resurrection when one attains a clear consciousness and a total awakening to 'the great truth.'

This full awakening and complete consciousness is made the criterion of personal identity by the Holy Quran. Awakening to a new spiritual experience immediately after death, the evil doer as well as the righteous become conscious of fruits their actions in the first life are reaping. There are verses suggesting that the 'dead' are even conscious of what they have left behind, and this establishes some sort of link between the two 'lives.'

This connection is emphasized by distinguishing between two types of resurrection---- the spiritual resurrection and the great Resurrection of the dead. The spiritual resurrection is spoken of as one brought about by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and seems to be put forth as an argument or evidence for the great Resurrection. The point is made clear by mentioning the 'self-accusing soul' which marks the first step towards spiritual development in man. For when evil is done without 'the voice of conscience' asserting itself, it is a sign that the man is spiritually dead.

So, the cause of immortality is taken up on the basis of its relevance to actual life we live. Assuming that life has a purpose and good and evil must have their reward, resurrection is made a workable principle of life. Indeed, it makes life a serious concern and conducive to unlimited capacities of man. At the same time it urges him on to a life higher and still higher. So, it is in the fitness of things that human actions in this life should be the basis of resurrected person's identity.

It is made very clear in the Holy Quran that angels have been appointed to record the good and evil deeds of man:



Alike of you is he who hideth the saying and he who noiseth it abroad, he who lurketh in the night and he who Goethe freely in the daytime.

For him are angels ranged before him and behind him, who guard him by Allah's command.

Lo! Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts."

(XIII: 10-11)

And again,

"Nay, but they deny the judgment.

Lo! there are above you guardians (angels), Generous and recording,

Who know all that ye do."

(LXXXII: 9-12)

So, a sort of inner self --- a parallel form is being built all along man's career in this world. It is this inner self constituting his deeds and recorded by 'guardian angels' that assumes a definite form after death and shapes first the body in barzakh and then develops into the body in Resurrection. There is nothing to suggest in the Holy Quran that the present impure body will continue to exist or be resurrected after death in the same form. It is clearly asserted, on the other hand that it will be a new creation, devoid of all carnal impurities. Yet, though 'dust returns to dust', there is with God a 'writing' that preserves that is essential to development in the next life.

Whether it is the same body or a new creation, it is not made the criterion of personal identity in life after death. Apparently, the outer self, the physical body, perishes in the event of death, while the inner self, the spiritual body lives on and forms the basis of the higher life in Resurrection. The inner self is, in effect, man's 'book of deeds' which is sufficient to identify him in the hereafter:

"Read thy book (of our own record), Thy soul sufficeth as reckoner against thee this day."

The book is the collective impression of deeds done by man in this life which is not perceptible to our physical senses but which does have a kind of reality. And the change affected through a special act of God at the time of resurrection shall render it clearly visible to man. That will form the basis of identification in the hereafter.

This well-argued case of personal immortality as presented by the Holy Quran may still be brought within the purview of what is called the empiricist objection of being beyond verification. How do we know that all this 'plan' is going to take a concrete shape? The Quranic answer to this objection is that certain things are 'secrets' that shall be made known only after death... 'things which no eye has seen, nor has ear heard, nor have they entered into the heart of man'.

So, the question is that of making a vital decision on the basis of faith. It is a question of either/or. There is no solution of the problem, only a way out. That is, at least in the present state of our knowledge, to consider the idea of personal immortality as a matter of attitude. For, the alternatives do not lie just between some prolongation of this temporal life span and a temporally bounded life viewed from the timeless character of God's eternity. It is a belief in life after death, both viewed as facts. To take the concept 'resurrection' as meaning anything else takes the whole context away from the real issue. It depends on personal faith of the individual to believe in personal immortality and accept the accompanying consequences of such a decision.

### Notes and References

Note: *For references to the Quranic verses, their translation and interpretation please see Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall.*

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<sup>[1]</sup> J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, London, 1976, pp. 306-307.

<sup>[2]</sup> T. McPherson, *Philosophy of Religion*, London, 1965, p. 149.

<sup>[3]</sup> P. Geach, *God and the Soul*, London, 1969, p. 26.

<sup>[4]</sup> B.O.A. Williams, "Personal Identity and Individuation", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LVII (1956-7), p.241.

<sup>[5]</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, 1933, p.185.

<sup>[6]</sup> W.H. Poteat, "I will die/An Analysis", *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 9, 1959, pp. 46-58.

<sup>[7]</sup> D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, London, 1970, p.48.

<sup>[8]</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>[9]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.54-55.

<sup>[10]</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>[11]</sup> S. Shoemaker, "Immortality and Dualism", in *Reason and Religion*, ed. S.C. Brown, London, 1977, pp. 259-281.

<sup>[12]</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Sh. M. Ashraf, Lahore, 1977, p.56.

<sup>[13]</sup> M. Iqbal, "Introduction " to *The Secrets of the Self*, Lahore 1964, p. xvi.

<sup>[14]</sup> M. Iqbal, "McTaggart's Philosophy" in *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, ed. S.A. Vahid, Lahore, 1964, p.122.

<sup>[15]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>[16]</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, cit., p. 198.

<sup>[17]</sup> Rene Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. E. Anscombe & P.T. Geach, London, 1954, p.32.

<sup>[18]</sup> G. Vesey, *Reason and Religion*, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>[19]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>[20]</sup> M. Iqbal, "Immortality" in *Stray Relections*, ed. Dr. Javid Iqbal, Sh. Ghulam, Lahore. 1961.

<sup>[21]</sup> J. Hick, "Theology and Verification", in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 58.

<sup>[22]</sup> A.H. Lesser, "Eastern and Western Empiricism and the 'no-self' Theory", in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 15, No.1, 1979, p. 56.

<sup>[23]</sup> Rem B. Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, Harcourt, New York, 1972, p.347.

<sup>[24]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 347-348.

<sup>[25]</sup> Kai Nielsen, "God and Verification Again", *Canadian Journal of Theology*, Vol. X I, No. 2, p. 137.