

## KANT ON THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

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Kant's discussions as to the immortality of the soul or the self may be divided into two parts. In one part, Kant's discussion consists in the criticism of the views of others. It appears in his first *Critique*. Thus, it is sometimes called his *critical* views of the self. It constitutes the negative part of his discussion. In the other part, Kant gives his positive view regarding immortality. This part is mainly contained in his second *Critique*, and is sometimes called his ethical view. It is the positive part of his discussion. This paper is mainly concerned with the negative part of his discussion.

In the critical or negative part of the discussion, Kant primarily challenges the views of the rational psychologists. According to the rational psychologists, the soul is a simple substance. The immortality of the soul can be inferred from the simplicity of the soul. Kant holds that there is a reason why people are interested in the proofs that a man's soul is a simple substance which remains unchanged from his birth to death. If it can be proved that the soul is a simple substance, it will follow that the soul is naturally immortal.<sup>1</sup> There are some proofs offered by the rational psychologists in favour of the conclusion that the soul is a simple substance. Kant puts their argument in the following manner: Every *composite* substance is an aggregate of several substances, and the action of a composite, or whatever inheres in it as thus composite, is an aggregate of several actions or accidents, distributed among the plurality of the substances.<sup>2</sup>

In the first argument it is said that the soul is a substance that differs from a body which is an extended and composite substance. The body is a compound substance which is formed by the combination of its parts. The destruction of a body is possible when the parts of it are disintegrated from one another. Since the soul does not consist of different parts like a body, the destruction of the soul is not possible. The generation and destruction of a composite substance are possible. The soul is a substance which cannot be generated and destroyed in the same way. Hence the soul is immortal.<sup>3</sup> Bennett explains it in a slightly different manner. He says:

...the notion of a composite – or of a thing with parts - is the notion of several items which I somehow apprehend or think as a unity by interrelating them in a suitable way. So my basic notion of compositeness is that of several items which I somehow unite, and this requires

myself, my intellectually or perceptually uniting self, to combine the items into a whole. So I cannot apply the notion of a composite to myself.

4

Secondly, the simplicity of the soul is asserted from its action that differs from the action of a compound substance. Its action is always a complex one. So it can be asserted that the different parts of the action are due to the different components of the substance. 'If a certain property or a certain action is ascribed to a compound substance, this must really mean that the property or the action is itself complex and that one factor in it belongs to one of this components, another to another of the components and so on'.<sup>5</sup> But in case of thoughts, as internal accidents belonging to a thinking being, it is different.<sup>6</sup> For example, 'I understand a whole sentence' - it is a complex action of the soul. Understanding a sentence involves understanding of all the words of the sentence. It means that one must perceive and understand each word in it. It can be said that one's understanding of the whole sentence is composed of the understandings of the several words of that sentence. If it is the case, then it can be suggested that the self is a composite substance. But the rationalists who claim the soul as a simple substance argue against this by saying that if the different words of a sentence are understood by different persons severally, no one would understand the whole sentence. If one word is understood by X and another by Y, still another by Z, then no one would understand the sentence. The sentence along with the different words of it must have to be understood by one and the same self. The suggestion (supposition) that the soul is a composite substance and its cognitive acts are composed of the acts of various parts of it should be rejected. The self must be a simple substance.<sup>7</sup>

Kant refutes this argument on the following grounds. First, he says that the evidence which is shown to prove the soul as a simple substance is empirical evidence. Since, the soul is not an object of our experience, the simplicity of the soul cannot be proved on empirical grounds. Knowledge of the soul is claimed to be necessary a priori knowledge. It must, then, be either analytic a priori knowledge or synthetic a priori knowledge. But Kant argues that this alleged knowledge of the soul is neither analytic nor synthetic. It is not analytic, for 'the concept of the unity of an act of thought is not contained in the concept of being the act of a non-composite substance,'<sup>8</sup> i.e. self. 'Consequently, the necessity of presupposing, in the case of a

composite thought, a simple substance, cannot be demonstrated in accordance with the principle of identity.’<sup>9</sup> According to Kant’s principle, knowledge of the self cannot also be synthetic a priori. It could be synthetic if the self were presented within the spatio – temporal framework. But we do not intuit the self within our spatio – temporal framework. Kant, therefore, concludes that the proposition ‘The soul is a simple substance’ cannot be known in any way. Kant says:

It is likewise impossible to derive this necessary unity of the subject, as a condition of the possibility of every thought, from experience. For experience yields us no knowledge of necessity, apart even from the fact that the concept of absolute unity is quite outside its province.<sup>10</sup>

Now regarding the nature of the self, the question is whether it is a phenomenon or noumenon (thing in itself). The rational psychologists are treating the soul as a thing in itself or noumenon. But to Kant the noumenon is something which is unknown and unknowable. If the soul is unknown and unknowable, then no assertion like ‘The soul is a simple substance’ can be made regarding the nature of the soul. The rational psychologists have inferred the immortality of the soul from the simplicity of the soul. So the ground on the basis of which the simplicity of the soul cannot be accepted, on the same ground the assertion ‘The soul is immortal’ cannot be accepted.

Again, the hypothesis that ‘The soul is a simple substance’ is refuted in the following way. The Idea of the self is a simple Idea, no doubt. But from this premise it does not follow that the soul is a simple substance. ‘But the simplicity of the representation of a subject is not *eo ipso* knowledge of the simplicity of the subject itself...’<sup>11</sup>

C.D. Broad in explaining Kant has criticized the second argument, offered by the rational psychologists to prove that the soul is a simple substance, in the following manner. To Broad, the argument that the different parts of a complex action are due to different components of a substance is a faulty argument. The complex action need not be due to the different elements of the substance, but may be due to the whole substance. For example, Broad considers the action of a chemical compound, chloroform, which produces the loss of consciousness. He holds that the loss of consciousness is not possible owing to the different components of chloroform, e.g., carbon, hydrogen, etc, applied separately. It can take place owing to the combination of all the properties of which chloroform is composed. Again, to Broad, the argument

that if different persons understood the different words of a sentence severally, no one would understand the sentence is completely irrelevant for the purpose. This argument would at most show that if a human soul is considered as a compound substance, it does not consist of a number of other selves interrelated in the same way in which the selves of different individual beings are interrelated.<sup>12</sup> It leaves open the possibility that an individual self is a compound substance whose components are not selves. So the argument is useless.

If the arguments of the rational psychologists in favour of their thesis that 'The soul is a simple substance' are fallacious then the view that the soul is immortal cannot stand.

Kant next considers the argument of Moses Mendelssohn. 'The standard argument for the indestructibility of the soul has been from its simplicity'.<sup>13</sup> The soul cannot be destroyed into pieces, because it has no parts. This is not, however, Mendelssohn's argument. He argues that as a simple substance the cessation of the soul would have to be a *sudden* cessation, and this is unintelligible, because it violates the law of continuity of time. '... there would be no time between a moment in which it is and another in which it is not - which is impossible'.<sup>14</sup> Hence the cessation of the soul cannot be admitted. In other words, the soul is immortal.

Broad has explained the argument in the following manner. To Mendelssohn, since the soul is a simple substance, it cannot, like a composite substance, cease gradually i. e., part by part; so if it ceases it must cease *suddenly*. But then, as Broad points out, in the moment  $t_1$  one can say 'The soul exists now', and after that in the second moment  $t_2$  it is false to say this. In  $t_2$  it will be true to say 'The soul does not exist now'. But before  $t_2$  it was false to say this. So the assertion which is true in  $t_1$  is false in  $t_2$  and the assertion which is true in  $t_2$  is false in  $t_1$ . Now the question is whether  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are the same moment or different moments. If  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  be the same moment, then both the statements that 'The soul exists now' and 'The soul does not exist now' would be true at the same time. This violates the law of contradiction. So it cannot be said that  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are the same moment. Now suppose that  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are different moments. If so, then, since time is continuous, there must be a time between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . In this intermediate time both the propositions 'The soul exists now' and 'The soul does not exist now' would be false. But these conflicts with the law of

excluded middle.<sup>15</sup> This explains Mendelssohn's view that the sudden cessation of the soul is impossible.

But Kant argues that even if the soul is simple, the gradual cessation of it is possible. Material objects have extensive magnitude. A simple substance must have intensive magnitude, though it lacks extensive magnitude. A sensation like light or sound has an intensive magnitude. It can become less and less in degree till at last it becomes zero. The intensive magnitude in the case of the soul would be degree of consciousness. For consciousness itself always has a degree. It is present in a high degree when one is alert and attentive and in a low degree when one is drowsy. Just as we can perceive the diminishing degrees of a sound, so we can understand the gradual loss of consciousness. In this way, through gradual loss in the degree of consciousness, the soul might ultimately cease to exist. In that case it would go out by 'elanguescence',<sup>16</sup> Kant opines: the supposed substance - the thing, the permanence of which has not been proved - may be changed into nothing, not indeed by dissolution, but by gradual loss (*remissio*) of its powers, and so, if I may be permitted the use of the term, by 'elanguescence'.<sup>17</sup>

Though Kant has presented the previous arguments to show the theoretical untenability of the view that the soul is immortal, still in the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself he has said that a valid argument for the immortality of the soul might be constructed if ethical facts are taken into account. To quote Kant:

Yet nothing is thereby lost as regards the right, nay, the necessity of postulating a future life in accordance with the principles of the practical employment of reason, which is closely bound up with its speculative employment.<sup>18</sup>

To Kant, the immortality of the soul is not theoretically justifiable. Still he admits that the soul is immortal on moral grounds. He has thus denied knowledge in order to make room for faith.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. C. D. Broad, *Kant : An Introduction*, ed., C. Lewy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York, 1975, p. 261.
2. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans N.K. Smith, Macmillan and Co., Ltd, London, 1973, A 352.
3. Broad, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
4. J. Bennett, *Kant's Dialectic*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 82.
5. Broad, *op. cit.*, p. 255
6. Kant, *op. cit.*, A 352.

7. Broad, *op. cit.*, pp. 255 – 256.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
9. Kant, *op. cit.*, A 353.
10. *Ibid.*, A 353.
11. *Ibid.*, A 355.
12. Broad, *op. cit.*, pp. 256 – 257.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
14. Kant, *op. cit.*, B 414.
15. Broad, *op. cit.*, pp. 262 – 263.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
17. Kant, *op. cit.*, B 414.
18. *Ibid.*, B 424