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**Bondages of Birth and Death :
Emerging Technologies of Freedom on
the Horizon and the Hope of Final Release
from the Foundational Bondage of Mankind**

Birth and Death have defined the situation of mankind for the self-consciousness of man in a way they could not for all other 'living beings' even though they suffer from the same 'limitations', as 'to be a living being' is to be defined in terms of them. Yet, strangely and paradoxically, there seems to be a radical asymmetry not only between the former and the latter, but also between these as conceived and thought of in relation to oneself and everyone else, who is perceived as 'other' to oneself, even when he is granted 'self-consciousness' as is the case with oneself. The 'other' is 'seen' as inevitably confined by the necessities of 'being born' and 'dying' as one sees this happening around one all the time, something that is just not the case with oneself. One cannot see oneself as 'being born', though one has to accept it on grounds that are well known, and yet not 'really' accepted by the 'lived', 'existentially experienced' self-consciousness in man. In fact, one cannot even conceive of oneself as having been anything else than what one 'is', and one is always

surprised to see one's photographs as a child, or a 'growing up' person of later years. Strangely, one does not like one's pictures of 'old age' either, as one lives with the belief that one is ever young or 'youthful' and that 'years' have done nothing to oneself 'really', even when the evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary and is opposed to it.

The same seems to be the case with 'death'. One may imagine oneself 'dying', but one can hardly believe it. One 'lives' in a consciousness which seems to be 'timeless', confined to a 'perpetual present' where the past and the future, occur only as 'ghostly presences', and that too only fitfully and marginally as 'memory' and 'anticipations' projected backwards and forwards by the 'living present' in which one 'lives' and which alone is 'real' as one 'lives' in it.

The 'other' grows 'old' and 'dies', just as children are 'born' and 'grow up', and those who are 'old' are getting 'older', and those who are 'young' do not remain young any longer. This is the experience one goes through even with the pets one has, or the domesticated animals one lives with, not to talk of those who are near and dear to one in a hundred ways, as they have made one's life the way it is.

But it is the body that weakens, decays, gets old and is always subject to illness, disease and disability, and finally 'dies' in a way that no one can bear to see or experience, though everyone has perforce to go through it all, whether one likes it or not. No one is spared; not even a Buddha who is said to have gone in search of 'enlightenment' to find a cure and a remedy for all these when he encountered them 'existentially' for the first time in his youth. Neither the 'Nobel Truths' nor 'the Path' could save him or anybody else, as everyone knows. The tall claims of others to get a 'release' from all these seem as vacuous and vain, as his or any one else's.

Death, however, can at least be a matter of choice, though not freedom from disease or illness or disabilities from which one can try to recover to some extent, as medicine has always promised and achieved through the ages. Death too, if medicine is to be believed, can be postponed and it is said one can be kept 'artificially alive' for long periods, if not for ever, by modern techniques which are getting more and more sophisticated each day.

But who would like to 'live' like that, lying in an Intensive Care Unit, with no hope of getting out of it ever. Even otherwise, people do lie in coma, sometimes for years,

and there are cases of patients lying paralyzed for years, 'living' and yet not living as everyone around 'knows' in despair, hopelessness and helplessness witnessing it all and not knowing what to do about it.

Life-expectancy has increased, but the diseases and disabilities of 'old age' remain and no one knows what to do about it. The distinction between 'young' old and 'old' old, as they do in the U.S.A., is of little avail as whether one is between sixty and seventy-five or seventy-five and above, one has to go through it all and as one knows to his horror that one has become a 'problem' not only to those who were near and dear to one, but also to the society at large and the state which finds the "ageing population" an increasing burden difficult to bear.

The problem of 'ageing' is, thus, different from 'death' and the two should be disentangled if one is to 'think' about the problem at all. The dream of 'immortality' is related to 'dying' and not to 'ageing', for then one would want not just 'immortality', but 'perpetual youth' which is a different thing altogether. One may 'die' when one is 'young' or 'youthful' or in the 'bloom of life', and one need not even be 'ill' for death to occur, as when one is involved in an 'accident', or is killed by someone as happens all the time. But even these are not

necessary, as one may 'die' suddenly, without any ostensible reason whatsoever.

The desire for 'perpetual youth', however, is not very clear as one does not know what it would be to remain 'young', 'stuck' with what one was at twenty, or thirty, or forty, for after that it will be difficult to say that one is 'youthful' still.

The fact is that one does not know what one 'really' wants, though one does know what one does not want. One does not want pain or suffering in any form whatsoever, and even those who are supposed to want them, do so only in certain contexts, and in small doses and because it gives them some pleasure or satisfaction which they do not seem to get otherwise. The 'negative' is sometimes accepted when it is the pre-condition for achieving something 'positive', but even then one wishes that it were not so.

The 'dreams' then, of immortality, perpetual youth and freedom from disease and disability of any kind should be seen differently than they have been up till now. The first two, as analysis shows, are radically misconceived, while the third, though *prima facie* of a different kind, results from the same failure as in the case of the first two, that is, the

deliberate wilful misunderstanding of what 'life' or the fact of 'living' necessarily involves, that is, the cycle from 'birth' to 'death' and, in the process, giving 'birth' to 'others' who with perforce have to go through the same cycle again. It is strange that those who have sought 'freedom' from the cycle of 'birth' and 'death' have not seen that if they really believed in what they say they should not, or rather 'ought' not, bring ^{other} ~~either~~ human beings into being or give birth to them. It is the worst thing they could do, a metaphysical crime in case there could be any such thing, for, by the very nature of the case, one could not have 'freedom' to be 'born' or not and, if 'born', go through the necessary 'bondage' which this cycle involves.

The 'monk' sees this in a certain sense as the ideal of 'celibacy' proclaims this aloud all the world over. But he does not preach it for the 'householder' who must have a progeny, and that too a male one, so that the cycle may go on for ever. The other sex, of course, is necessary for this procreative purpose, but in the monk's perspective this is the primary purpose of the relationship between the sexes, and the role of the woman has to be totally subservient as a willing or unwilling 'means' to this end as the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* proclaims this at the end after all the talk about the *Brahman* and the *Ātman* in between.

The monk, however, ~~does not~~ accept this ^{for himself} for ^{oneself} and if he were to be true to his own 'insight' and 'practice', he would see that what he wants is to stop the cycle of 'birth' and 'death' by ^{evangelical} refraining from the procreative activity itself. He does not want to 'cause' anyone to be 'born', and as he sees this as necessarily involving ^{hetero} heterosexual activity, his main problem becomes how to avoid this, resulting in the total banishment of the 'other', or the Second Sex, as Simon De Beauvoir called it, from his 'world' to the extent it was possible. The disconnection of procreation from sex as in homosexual activities on the one hand, and through t̄antric practices on the other, dissolved the necessary connection between the two, and while the Catholic Church seems to have opted for the former as the recent 'revelations' from the Church in the United States seem to suggest, the Indians seem to have opted for the latter as is evident in the *Buddhist*, *S̄aiv.*, *S̄akta* and *Vaiṣṇava* sects known in the tradition for this.

"Sex without procreation" seems to have been the recipe for getting out of the bondage of 'birth' in human history, many a time, though the 'bondage' of the former was also realised as is evident in the writing and 'life-stories' of the 'counter-current' in the spiritual and religious traditions of

the world. The dissociation between the two has only now been finally achieved due to the 'science' which has tried to understand the linkage between the two, and tried to make man free of the 'burden' of "unwanted procreation" which had plagued humanity earlier.

The freedom from the burden of "unwanted parenthood" has, however, resulted in two new problems whose far-reaching repercussions are slowly unfolding and may, in time, overwhelm humanity or at least pose challenges which will be difficult to meet. The first concerns the erosion of 'discipline' necessitated by the "responsibilities" of parenthood which are long-lasting as they continue indefinitely, extending even to the children of one's children, and sometimes even beyond them. The second concerns the inevitable extension of the feeling of 'burden' to the very idea of 'parenthood' and the desire to be 'free' of that bondage altogether. Slowly, women everywhere just do not want to go through the long travail of 'motherhood' that involves prolonged disability due to years that are needed to conceive and nursing and nurturing a baby to adulthood. One or two children are felt to be more than enough, and as science unfolds the possibility of 'surrogate motherhood', or the possibility of having children without going through the

usual processes centered in the woman's body, it is unlikely that women would still prefer to have children the old way, when they can avoid it altogether.

The problem of 'bringing up' children would still remain, but if the emerging trends are any indication, the whole thing would more and more be taken out of home and become the responsibility of 'professionais' in institutions who are trained for the job. The increasing taking over of the functions that traditional family as ^{an} institution used to perform would radically affect the institution itself as it would become redundant in an essential sense and bereft of the responsibilities of 'parenthood', men and women will not understand why the institution of 'marriage' should continue in its old form. The restriction^s on 'sexual relations' to those alone whom one had 'married' are bound to be seen as increasingly meaningless, as they were primarily there to ensure the 'parenthood problem' resulting in the notion of 'my child' or 'my wife' or 'my husband', where the feeling of 'mine' or 'possession' was more important than the 'relationship' itself. Those who would value the 'relationship' may still opt for an 'old-fashioned' style of living, but 'social pressures' would be against them.

There, however, would be the problem of the 'transition' as the 'new babies' born in the 'new way' may have an 'acculturation' of a very different kind, a problem which does not seem to have been thought of by those who are engaged in developing various kinds of 'bio-technologies' based on what is now called "bio-informatics". The distinction between these and those produced by what is called 'robotics' would presumably lie in that the former would show all the characteristics of being 'human', that is, being capable of feelings, emotions, sentiments, 'I-ness' with gender differences, linguistic ability and 'freedom' involving a sense of being an 'agent' who owns 'responsibility' for what he or she does. *which the latter need not necessarily have*

It may be said that if this is so, what exactly is gained by the radical changes ^{that are} ~~there~~ ^{made} being promised by biotechnology. The promises by gene-therapy, gene-line therapy and ^u ^u ~~eng~~anics, that is, the selection of 'hereditary material' outside the 'human accidentality' do not promise any radical change in the human condition except the possible elimination of some troublesome diseases and congenital malformations and disabilities, which surely are welcome indeed. But, how far this can be carried on is not clear. Nor is it very clear if the psychological propensities and properties

can be the subject to genetic manipulation, and whether the problem of coherence and compatibility between divergent mental properties, even when they are considered 'desirable', can be solved in principle. At another level, the problem posed by 'mutation' on the one hand and the particularistic or atomistic presupposition of determination by 'genes' on the other, can ever be solved. In any case as the baby, however, produced, would have to grow in the socio-cultural world of the adults, the problems would presumably remain the same as now. The only difference perhaps would derive from the realisation of Plato's 'dream' on the one hand, and the overcoming of Freudian and Adlerian 'determinations' on the other, as there will be no 'parenting' to have 'Oedipus' or any other, complex' deriving from that situation, and no sibling rivalries to give rise to 'inferiority' or 'superiority' complexes, as Adler thought. The strong emotional ties, generated by 'living' in a family would probably disappear and man become 'free' of those 'bondages' that result from it.

But the fact of 'being born' without one's choice would still remain and there seems no solution to it unless man makes a 'metaphysical' choice not to bring 'babies' into the world, something that he can reasonably do with the

'technologies' that he already has, and those that are emerging on the horizon at present.

The 'bondage' of birth is, however, radically different from the 'bondage' of death, as ^{with so} ~~where~~ one can do little about the former, one can certainly do 'something' about the latter. Men have taken their own 'lives' and the 'lives' of others, since time immemorial and recently, the 'suicide bomber', has innovatively combined both in his person. But all these have done it either for a 'cause', or 'self-interest', or because 'life' has not been what they would have liked it to be. In case it were otherwise, they would have chosen to live. And, no society as far as we know, has accepted 'suicide' or 'free and willed decision to give up life' as a normal choice for human beings to make, even when they are in full possession of their faculties. Yet, there seems little reason for this except perhaps the idea that one's 'life' is not one's own, and that 'others' have a claim on it, particularly as it may still contribute to their 'well-being' which may be seen as a 'social', 'political' and 'moral' obligation. At another level, 'life' itself may be seen as providing an opportunity for earning fresh 'merit' and 'atoning' for the past 'misdeeds', as the 'theory of *karma*' seems to have implied in the Indian tradition.

All these, however, make it 'conditional' as one may become a 'burden' or a 'liability' or even a 'positive hinderance' to the life of others, as often happens when one grows older, or infirm, or suffer from incurable ailments, or develops habits that are obnoxious to others. And, as for the theory of *karma*, it is doubtful if one will earn more merit or demerit by living longer as the chances are weighted more in favour of the latter than the former and, in any case, it becomes increasingly difficult to get rid of the habits one has acquired and start a fresh chain of actions to change the situation radically in a different direction. As for reaping the fruits of any past *sancita* or *kriyamāna* actions, one may as well postpone them to other *bhoga-yonis* which the theory promises, particularly when one is tired of doing '*karma*' in this '*karma-yoni*' which already has gone on too long for one's taste.

There is thus no 'real' argument for the denial of the 'right' to leave life, or not to live, if one wants to do so. It should be treated as the most fundamental 'right' of all, as it is this 'freedom', ontologically grounded in the ultimate choice between 'being' and 'non-being' which is another name for 'coming into being' and 'ceasing to be' or, as they call it, 'birth' and 'death'. At another level, it is the most 'personal'

and 'private' right as, ultimately it is 'my' life and it is 'I' who 'live' it and have to go through this process of 'living' and all that it entails, with only the 'freedom' that I can choose its cessation if I so like, something that seems to be the distinguishing mark of 'being human' as no other living species displays it, or can display it in principle as it depends on self-consciousness which he alone possesses. In this sense, then, it may be regarded as his defining characteristic, confirming that if something is really 'mine', I should have the 'right' to give it up also.

The notion of 'mine' on which the idea of 'right' depends involves, as Kant sees, the notion of 'thine' which is coordinate to it and without which it would make no sense, as my 'right' has to be accepted by 'others' along with the obligation to see that it is respected and its 'realisation' facilitated and ensured, just as it is mine to 'see' that their 'rights' are equally respected, facilitated and ensured. This is the idea and the ideal of a 'civil society' constituted by 'free' beings who are self-consciously so, and hence are aware of their own 'freedom' along with that of 'others' and the realisation that neither their own freedom nor that of others could ever be realised without this reciprocity of mutual obligatoriness which is the essence of the 'moral' being of

man that provides the foundation for the idea of juridical rights that can be enforced by the civil authority of the society and the political authority of the state.

The 'reciprocity' and "mutual obligatoriness" that is involved in the notion of 'right' exemplified in the ideas of 'mine' and 'thine' has undergone a serious questioning recently by the extension of the notion of 'right' to 'animals' who *prima facie* need not have the feeling that they have a 'right' to anything or a corresponding obligatoriness towards the 'rights' of others, as they do not 'live' in a 'world' constituted by the notion of 'right' which seems to be confined to human beings as they alone appear to possess a 'moral sense' that involves not only the awareness of the 'other', but of one's obligations to him or her also.

The relation between 'morality' and 'law' or '*dharma*' and '*vyavahāra*' is complex and it is difficult to say when something that is regarded as 'morally right' also becomes 'legally' so. The 'obligation' to all 'living beings' has been known to man since times immemorial, but it did not take a 'legal form' except very recently, for various reasons. And, even now it is not 'unconditional' as it not only excludes all those who are considered 'dangerous' or 'inimical' to

mankind, but also pets as when they turn against one or others as is the case, for example, with dogs gone mad.

In fact, the notion of 'right' has never been extended to all human beings even in one's own community, let alone those who are considered as 'aliens' or 'strangers'. Its recent extension to cover all humanity as embodied in the *United National Declaration of Human Rights* is more the expression of a pious hope than an actuality as is evident in the way the powerful nations such as the USA or the UK have behaved recently in Iraq. The point is that a truly civil society is yet to be formed and it is doubtful if it can ever be so formed, given the contradiction between 'freedom' and 'morality', even though the latter is based on the former and would be meaningless without it. The attempt to resolve the contradiction by formulating legal enactments to punish those who 'misuse' their freedom is already an admission of failure as it reveals the inadequacy or bankruptcy of the sense of morality in the community or the person concerned.

The social, political and economic constraints on the actualisation of the moral sense in man and, at a deeper level, even in the apprehension of what is 'good', has not been seen or much discussed in the writings on the subject. Many of the recent extensions have resulted from the loosening of the

constraints, specially because of the replacement of domesticated animal power by inanimate sources and the awareness of ecological dangers emanating from the latter.

The 'moral consciousness' is not given for once and all, just as the conditions and constraints on the practical realisation of values, or the range and depth of their apprehension. Man changes the world and is changed by it all the time, even though the bio-chemical and bio-physical conditions determining and defining his existence remain constant, and thus providing that continuity which makes him realise, however fitfully, that we are all not only human beings but part of the world of 'living beings' and sharing some of the basic characteristics with them. It is the explicit self-consciousness of this that makes him feel 'responsible' for almost everything and therefore feel 'guilty' of all the omissions and commissions in his world.

The responsibility and guilt associated with the bringing of a human being into existence and 'exposing' him to all the miseries and sufferings necessarily involved in it, can only be mitigated by accepting his 'right to die' and providing at the public level the facilities for an 'honourable' and 'easeful' exit from that bondage of 'birth' and 'living'

about which he cannot do anything as he finds himself 'living' and is not 'responsible' for it.

One may, of course, choose not to be 'responsible' for bringing another human being into the world by undergoing such simple processes as 'sterilisation', but this cannot be a settled policy for the society or the state as the decision has to be that of the individual, even if the state may provide all the facility for it, and society accept it. The same is the case with 'abortion', though there is a lot of discussion and disagreement about its 'ethicality' as, in the opinion of some, it is tantamount to 'murder'.

The problem of taking the life of another 'living being' with or without his agreeing to it, is so complicated that few can think about it with 'detachment' and 'objectivity'. Those who talk about the 'rights' of animals, quietly accept their being 'bred' for being killed to assuage their hunger and 'desire' for the 'taste' that meat alone is supposed to 'satisfy' their palate. As for those who argue about the 'right' of the 'unborn', quickly accept all methods of 'birth control' and restrict the children to the minimum required for maintaining the population within reasonable limits. They accept the idea of 'over-population', but do not 'see' that, on their premises, there can be no such thing in principle.

'Murder' has always been a 'punishable offence' in every society, and retributive justice has always demanded "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth", and even Gandhi's 'killer' had to pay with his life. But 'ritual killing' was at one time accepted in most societies, and 'killing' and 'being killed' in war was considered always an 'honourable thing', ensuring one a seat in heaven with all the 'privileges' and 'pleasures' associated with it. In fact, such 'killing' was not considered killing at all, as it was regarded as 'sacrifice' for a 'cause' or something even 'higher', as in the case of religions. The debate about *ahimsā* in the context of the Vedic sacrifice illustrates this, just as the story of Abraham in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. Even 'self-sacrifice' has been seen in this way, though normally people have preferred to sacrifice others rather than themselves.

'Death', then has been at the center of man's self-consciousness, just as the fact of 'being born' has been. e/ Heidegger caught both in his notions of 'thrownness' and 'being-towards-death', but he does not seem to have known what to do with them. Camus^u dealt with both 'suicide' and 'murder' in his works and Sartre wrote his 'No Exit' and concluded that "Hell is other people". Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy had dealt with the problem earlier. Tolstoy faces the

problem in his *Confessions*, and Dostoevsky deals with the same problem in his novel, *The Possessed*. He also deals with the problem of 'murder' in *Crime and Punishment*. But none of these thinkers see the problem in terms of the 'freedom' in relation to the right of somebody to be born or to die, and the 'obligatoriness' of the society and the polity to ensure these as far as possible. The former was seen as a 'natural inevitability' over which one could have little control and, as for the latter, it was practically the same, though there was an awareness that, in the case of oneself, one could resort to it with strong disapproval from the society at large and from those who were near and dear to oneself. There, however, were always exceptions as in the case of certain religious sects and persons who carried 'self-mortification' to the extreme, as in the case of the practice of *Santhārā* amongst the Jains. The nobility sometimes even 'forced' it to save themselves from a difficult situation, or even accepted it with approbation as in the case of '*Johar*' amongst the Rajput rulers of Rajasthan.

But these were sporadic instances and had nothing to do with the notion of 'right', both of the 'self' and the 'others' which we have been talking about. It has nothing 'heroic' or 'extraordinary' about it, but instead a plea for recognition of

'something' that follows inevitably from the 'self-consciousness' in man when it reflects about itself in the context of the presently available and 'emerging' technologies promising a little more freedom to man in relation to 'birth' and 'death' than ever before. Slowly, but surely, man is coming to terms with the new technologies in relation to 'self-perpetuation' which are presenting him daily with new alternatives which, at times, give him even the delusion of playing 'God' in respect of himself.

It has been different with the 'freedom' in respect of 'dying', though there have been half-hearted attempts to provide 'exit' facilities, which have been 'aborted' by legal measures taken against them. There has, of course, been a blot of discussion about 'e^uthanasia' or 'mercy-killing', but it too has run against insurmountable legal problems.

Yet, once the 'desirability' is socially accepted, the legal hurdle can be got over as has been the case with other issues relating to 'birth' or 'procreation' in the context of the human species. One would, of course, have to wait for this, but the very fact of prolongation of life through all the means at the disposal of medical science today may force people to face the perennial question regarding the 'meaningfulness' of life once more, a question that self-consciousness had asked itself

since it became conscious of the cycle of 'birth' and 'death' which structures all living beings, including man also. Indian thought has shown this awareness in the acutest form, yet it has succumbed to the temptation to which all other thought had given way, that is, the hope of some form of survival after death. The desire for some form of 'immortality' or *amṛtva* was combined with the desire for 'freedom' from the cycle of 'birth' and 'death', or *mokṣa*, forgetting that the cycle belonged to all the "living world" and had nothing specific to man, as they thought. The 'freedom' in respect of 'birth' and 'death' is the prerogative of man alone in the world as we know it, and even if 'something' survives as some evidence seems to suggest, it has little relation to the question whether 'death' occurs as a 'free choice' or because of the factors over which one has no control.

The question of being responsible for the 'birth' of another human being is different and has to be considered not only in the context of personal 'right' alone as even if the 'right' to have children is accepted, it cannot be considered on a par with the 'right' to one's life if one finds oneself 'living' or the 'right' to cease to live, if one so decides. The 'right' to give 'being' to other human beings would, thus, have to involve both metaphysical and 'public' considerations for its

'justification'. How does one view 'life' in the context of 'reality' as a whole would determine one's attitude to a certain extent, just as the provision of 'empirical' conditions and opportunities for growth of the individual or individuals one has brought into being, ^{and} as many of these have increasingly become "public responsibilities" the ^{state} _^ has to come into the picture as it already has done in the context of what is known as 'population policies'. Children have to be cared, educated, trained in skills, provided employment and given all kinds of assistance when they 'retire' and get old. This whole process has a 'public' and a 'private' aspect, the latter 'known' only to the 'existentially experiencing' individual who finds life becoming increasingly 'meaningless', as he gradually ceases to be "socially useful" and a 'burden' to himself and others because of disabilities that are involved in the 'ageing process' which seems inevitable and which one has to go through, whether one likes it or not.

Thus, even if 'life' is seen in positive terms and the 'world' as a "vale of soul-making", providing an 'opportunity' for creativity to occur and love to bloom and friendship to breathe its fragrance all around, it all has to end in "meaningless loneliness" as loved ones go, and friends depart and creativity ceases, and, what is worse, they all may still be

there, 'feeling' the same as one does oneself, and not even be able to be 'alone' with that which one thought was 'real', or rather 'reality' itself.

'Life' and 'Death' are thus essentially asymmetrical and 'freedom' from the 'bondage' of one has to be seen differently from the 'bondage' to the other. The emerging technologies promise a new freedom to man. What is required is only a change in the age-old attitude to these which is bound to happen once the situation of man begins to be seen differently from the way it has been seen up till now.