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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Death, deathless states, and time-consciousness in Sikh philosophy

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Abstract

This article examines Sikh conceptualizations about death and immortality, focusing on several thematic lines of inquiry drawn from the utterances of the Sikh Gurus (*gurbāṇī*): (i) ordinary or empirical death; (ii) deathless states; (iii) after death? (iv) this life; (v) personhood and the (non-)existence of God. These themes address philosophical issues related to concerns about fear of death, belief in an afterlife, as well as its implications for the nature of self and the concept of God in Sikhism. At the same time, however, the article complicates our understanding of these topics by resituating them within discussions of time and time-consciousness, thereby highlighting the need for a form of logic more conducive to the understanding of death and immortality in Sikh thought.

Keywords: consciousness; death; Sikh philosophy; immortality; death; immortality; time-consciousness; Sikh philosophy; Sikhism

Introduction

Although death and immortality are pervasive themes in Sikh scripture, the development of a coherent philosophical position on death and immortality has remained an elusive task in modern Sikh studies scholarship.[1] One reason for this is that primary sources such as *gurbani* (Sikh scripture)[2] present what appear to be contradictory, if not entirely confusing, images of death and immortality. This ambivalence is reflected in popular Sikh attitudes towards death and dying which, on the one hand, treat death as finalist by emphasizing the intrinsic value of finitude and living an ethical life in constant remembrance of death. On the other hand, the same Sikhs not only tend to retain faith in ideas about an afterlife, specifically transmigration of the soul across innumerable lifetimes (*āvāgavan*), they also eulogize states of deathlessness within the stream of *this life*. How does one make sense of these seemingly contradictory perspectives? Should we take them at face value as evidence of the lack of true philosophy in Asia (King (1999); Van Norden (2017); Park (2019))? Do such contradictions challenge the very *demand* for a coherent model of immortality, and by implication conventional models of the self/person? Or, are there modes of logic, or frameworks of time and temporality, at work within the Sikh texts that allow such contradictions to be justified?

One of the few attempts to negotiate tensions within the Sikh understanding of death is an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Sikhism* (Singh (1986)) by the scholar J. S. Neki who writes

that in Sikhism 'the universal fact of mortality is juxtaposed with immortality (*amarāpad*) as the ultimate objective of life (*parmāratha*)' (Neki (1986), 541). Neki's entry is noteworthy because it presents the perspective on death and immortality not only as a problematic of time and eternity, but also highlights the need to think through contradictions. Thus

> death cannot be apprehended apart from life. Contemplating both together, one truly comprehends the phenomenon of life and death (*maran jīvan kī sōjhī pae*). A significant term used for death is *kāl* which has a dual meaning. It connotes death as well as time. *Kāl* is often denoted as *jamkāl* (*jama = yama* the Vedic God of Death). Day in and day out it gnaws at the fabric of life. But man remains ignorant and perceives it not. (*ibid*., 542)

Later in the same entry Neki presents the aporia of death and time in the following way:

> Death is legitimated by the ends it serves – surmounting the throes of transmigration or sacrifice for an ideal or laying down of one's life in a righteous cause. Such a death carries one beyond the realm of time into the realm of Eternity (*akāl*). Eternity does not signify extended Time, but the state beyond time, and is beyond mortality. Participation in Eternity does not rely hereafter. It is the state of immortality (*amarāpad*) here in life which is liberation (*muktī*) from the throes of Time that signifies the death of Death itself (*kāl kālé*) . . . To attain this state of immortality one need not pass through the portals of biological death. The state can be achieved when one is still alive. To achieve this, however, one has to die to oneself, . . . This state is attainable by contemplating the self by the grace of the Divine:
>
> As by the Lord's favour one contemplates the self
> So one learns to die while still living. (GGS, 935)

Dying to oneself has several kindred nuances in Sikh theology. Spoken, not only in terms of decimation of mind (*man*) and even of egoity (*haumai*), this is also the connotation of dying in Word (*śabda*):

> He who ceases in *śabda*
> his death is blessed. (GGS, 1067)

To his credit, apart from grappling with seemingly irresolvable contradictions, Neki presents a helpful working model for comprehending death, time, and consciousness. Several implications can be gleaned from this model. First, death is not simply 'death' as a finalist event. There appears to be a twofold structure to the death-event. On the one hand, there is ordinary or actual death marked objectively by the demise of the body, and subjectively by fear or anxiety on the part of the dying. On the other hand, there is non-ordinary death whose ontological grounding is radically different from, but nonetheless just as real as, actual material death. As an event non-ordinary death is experienced at the level of the self/ego, following which leads to deathless states (*amarāpad/amritya*), which subsist alongside ordinary time (*kāl*). The experience of deathless states leads to a transmutation of the meaning of transmigration (*āvāgavan*) returning it to the plane of life and lived experience. Second, neither time nor death are reducible to impermanence – understood simply as the arising and passing of time in the everyday sense (*kāl*). While Neki correctly points to a deeper sense of time (*akāl*) and states of deathlessness (*amarapad*) within Sikh philosophy, his translations of these terms as 'immortality' or 'Eternity' inadvertently reduces the multivalent sense of time associated with the original terms into the monovalent sense of ordinary linear time.[3] This epistemic reduction

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suggests that translation cannot be assumed to be a transparent process in which meaning is smoothly transferred across languages, or that there is a single normative logic that allows us to make sense of complex terms such as *akāl* within an anglophone consciousness. This leads to a third point, namely, that the twofold nature of death poses resistance to being comprehended or represented within forms of logic that (i) cannot tolerate contradiction, (ii) can only operate within linear, everyday time, and (iii) pose as normative.[4] Neki's entry avoids this line of questioning. By adopting Eternity/immortality as suitable translations he settles for a safer option that provides a coherent meaning for death. Having said that, he also draws on Sikh scripture, which directly implicates the self or ego in the construction of a dualistic or *oppositional* consciousness of time and death, one that must be destroyed through the process of self-overcoming. This raises a different question. Are there alternative forms of logic corresponding to *non-oppositional* modes of time-consciousness that are perhaps more conducive to a Sikh philosophical understanding of death and time?

In what follows I address the questions raised above by fleshing out some of the strands of analysis highlighted by Neki before branching out into other areas of inquiry initiated by the reflections on death and time. I shall focus on the following lines of inquiry devoting a section to each: (i) ordinary or empirical death; (ii) deathless states; (iii) after death? (iv) this life; (v) Personhood and the (non-)existence of God. The discussion in each of these sections reflects the broad ethos of *gurbāṇī*, that is, the utterances of the Sikh Gurus and the Bhagats as compiled in the Guru Granth Sahib. My aim is to develop a more holistic structure for, and offer some further speculation on, the understanding of death and time in Sikh philosophy which both addresses and complicates the concerns of this special issue.

Ordinary death – ordinary mind – *kāl*-centrism

In a somewhat unusual meditation on life and death the late twentieth-century exegete of Sikh philosophy, Sant Singh Maskin turns the usual fearful approach to death on its head, asking why we constantly ask for more life, and why not more death (Maskin (1986), 49–51). 'Why do we fear death and not life?', he asks. To answer this question Maskin asks the reader to examine the relationship between death and sleep. We fear death, he argues, because it permanently breaks the thread of conscious memory comprising our sense of self, but we don't fear sleep because we anticipate waking up and reconnecting life to worldly attachments that sleep temporarily dissolved. Drawing on and adapting a well-known discourse from the Mandukya Upaniṣad which maps consciousness into the four states: waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep, and release,[5] Maskin's point is that the waking state, and the life that one returns to after sleeping each night, is in fact an illusion. The waking state of consciousness represents a forgetting of the true nature of reality, in which life and death are intrinsically intertwined. Instead of fearing death, we should fear illusory attachment to life. Forgetfulness of death is to be feared more than death itself (*ibid*., 50).

Maskin, of course, derives his argument from the philosophy of Guru Nanak, which traces this forgetfulness of death to the individual's tendency to immerse itself in a very particular existential and conceptual orientation towards ordinary or everyday time, which for the sake of argument will be referred to here as *kāl*-centrism, where *kāl* is the Sanskrit and Punjabi word used interchangeably for time and death. This tendency can be described as one in which *kāl* alone defines the nature and limits of the time-consciousness in which death is experienced by the self. Nanak highlights this existential orientation in separate compositions that examine *kāl* both from a cosmological perspective and from a psychological perspective. In the context of this article, we can refer to the scriptural sources of these two perspectives as the Four-Yugas hymns[6] (corresponding

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to a cosmological perspective) and the Four-Watches hymns (corresponding to a psychological perspective) respectively (GGS, 74).[7]

In the Four-Yugas hymns Nanak rejects classical Indian ontology with its cyclical-hierarchical model of time based on the rotational rhythms of the Four Ages of the World (*satyā-yug* > *tretā-yug* > *dvāpar-yug* > *kāl-yug*). Nanak folds the first three ages into *kāl-yug*, thereby privileging a notion of time without cyclic recurrences, and with life span as we know it, as the framework and ground of mundane life and death. However, the temporality of *kāl* is inherently complex, being much more than the simple passing away of instants, because it is associated with two contradictory characteristics of time and self. The first is the conventional notion of impermanence as the forward movement of moments, where time simply passes out of existence and favours a mode of self that gravitates towards identity-production. The second characteristic is an eternally regenerative time, which gives birth to new moments in the very instant of the passing of the old, and favours a mode of self that intrinsically associates difference. This aporetic aspect of *kāl-yug* is well illustrated in Nanak's Four-Watches hymn, which depicts human time as a four-stage progression from pre-birth, through birth, childhood, adulthood (with its attachment to transient things of the world), old age, and death. The four-stages in turn correspond to the emergence and development of individual self-consciousness for which Nanak adopts the term 'my nomad friend' (*vanjaria mitara*) as a metaphor for the individual self as it travels through the time of its life. At the nomad-self makes its way through life, its faculty of mind generates a static identity which shields it from the existential suffering of time and death, but does so in a way that constantly objectifies death, removing it from its own sense of self (Mandair and Shackle (2005); Mandair (2022b)). Death comes, says the nomad-self, but *not yet*, *there is still time for me*. The point of the drama is that ordinary mind, or everyday time-consciousness, does everything to buffer its present from experiencing the ever-presence of death. By prolonging the buffer against time-as-death, ordinary mind induces *forgetfulness* of death.

On the above reading of the Four Watches hymn, it is possible to offer some speculation about the nature of time and death. First, forgetting of death develops paradoxically due to the self's method of recounting or narrating the time of its life. The narration is such that it spatializes memory within sequential linear time (*kāl*), which in turn constructs consciousness into isolated present moments which are nevertheless connected because they are part of a network. Second, by contracting the time of one's life into isolated present moments, self-consciousness is split into disconnected identical moments, so that time is experienced within three distinct modes (*tīn guna* also known as *trai-kāl* or threefold-time as past-moment, present-moment, and future-moment, all of which are separate from each other), and where this threefold division of time is a central characteristic of *kāl*-centrism. Third, the three modes of time generate the illusion of a continuous forward motion of time, and with it the illusion of a distinct self who controls the succession of moments and synthesizes past, present, and future into a time-consciousness centred on the present moment. This self-positioning inserts a sense of distance between the self as subject and the objective world.

In short, the ultimate goal of the meditation induced by the Four Watches of the night is not only to enable the mind itself to witness the progressive development of *kāl*-centric consciousness through life's various stages, but, as a consequence of such witnessing, to discover that the true nature of this 'progressive development' into a fully formed ego (what we moderns call self-consciousness) was premised on a regressive *forgetting* of a more complex, deeper, and more expansive nature of time-consciousness, which Nanak refers to as *akāl*. In other words, the point of the meditation is to reveal the true nature of reality as the unicity of *kāl* and *akāl*, a oneness in which both are equally real and coexistent while being ontologically different.

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Thus, while *kāl*-centrism provides a framework for the self to act, albeit within the limits of ordinary time, paradoxically, the very exercise of that freedom results in a progressive contraction of the self into an identity-formation. This leads to an important, though double-edged, question. If the point of the meditation is to obtain release from the iron-grip of *kāl-yug*, how does one achieve this while continuing to remain within everyday time (*kāl*), that is, within the time of the world, and therefore within the world itself? Stated differently, if time is the time of life, and a full release from the time of life is death, *how does one die while living in the time of life*? It is here that Nanak and other contributors to Sikh scripture point us towards the notion of deathless states (*amritya*, *amarāpad*) which release us by turning death against itself (*kāl kālé*) – paradoxically causing the death of death.

Deathless states

How can I die when I've already died to myself?
Only they die, over and again, who don't contemplate oneness.
People say: 'he died, she died, but not me. . .'
Kabir says: attain deathlessness by killing ego. (GGS, 327)

Attesting to deathlessness as an actual state of existence, verses such as the above open up the tantalizing possibility that death, or more specifically the kind of death that is feared, may not be all there is. The question, however, is whether the deathless state is simply a negation of empirical, ordinary death, which happens to all of us, to everything that comes into existence. Do such references to deathlessness not contradict the earlier realization of death as a singular event, or the realization of impermanence as a universal empirical phenomenon? Either there is death or there isn't. Death either happens as an event we can all attest to, or it doesn't. It is here that Kabir – an important contributor to the corpus of Sikh scripture – points to something that further complicates the notion of deathlessness as an actual state:

We all grieve when others die . . .
But I'd grieve only *if I had to live forever*. (GGS, 325; emphasis added)

The message here – 'I don't want to live forever' – seems fairly clear in its rejection of immortality as something to be desired. But even if we assume that deathless states are not the same as endless life, why would endless life be any worse than physical death?

Closer scrutiny of verses such as the above, or others which state 'I don't want to die as the world dies' (GGS, 325), suggests that by rejecting endless life for deathless states, Sikh philosophy is registering a concern for a certain kind of death by actively changing the orientation of our desire from a desire for endless life or permanence of the *kāl*-centric mode of existence, towards a deathless state that opens up a richer, more complex mode of time. They ask us to shift our desire from corporeal death (which everyone suffers) towards an incorporeal death or 'dying to self'. While there is a conventional death feared by everyone, there is also a more authentic death triggered by dying-to-self or ego annihilation – and it is this authentic, incorporeal death that results in states of deathlessness, referred to variously as *amarāpad*, *amritya*, *akāl*. While these terms all appear to be simple negations of time (*kāl*), this confusion only arises if we consider them as binary conceptual oppositions, as shown in Table 1.

As Table 1 suggests, there is no opposition intended between the states. Rather, they are connected via the performative operation called 'dying to self' or ego annihilation

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Table 1. Juxtaposing death and deathless states

kāl	*akāl*
mrytiya	*amritya*
maranā	*amarāpad*
corporeal death	incorporeal death
empirical death	deathless states
contracted time-consciousness	limitless time-consciousness

(*haumai maranā*), which far from being mere metaphor, refers to a self-transformation, a radical shift or expansion of the self beyond its contracted state within ordinary time. Ego annihilation is not a literal death of self/ego but its attainment of a more expanded time-consciousness, which is described as deathlessness because it removes the conceptual limits within which death is normally understood or experienced. More importantly, as far as this article's central theme is concerned, ego annihilation can be considered a *conceptual* operation, albeit one that follows a logic of non-oppositionality which brings about certain effects that are absolutely real, but not registered in empirical, everyday time (*kāl*). Rather such events are registered in a different mode of time, a time without limits or measure which takes place *within the self*, known as *akāl*.

To reiterate what was briefly noted above, *akāl* does not transcend or negate ordinary time (*kāl*). Rather, *akāl* coexists with *kāl*. Such coexistence is not only a conceptual operation that disjunctively associates two different ontologies corresponding to *akāl/kāl*. More importantly, the coexistence manifests – one could say it takes form, it is actualized – as an entirely real mode of being-in-the-world (or state of mind) of an individual who is freed (*mukt*) from the limits of ordinary time-death (*kāl*) while participating in the stream of life (*jivanmukta*). Such individuals who can create a balance between ego production and ego-loss are known as *gurmukh*.

Let me briefly summarize the key points emerging from the above. The deathless state (*akāl/amarapad/amritya*) is neither an eternity in time, nor a time beyond mortality. Rather, the deathless state is accessible only through mortality. From the standpoint of 'normative' or causal logic (the law of non-contradiction, for example) the actuality of something like a deathless state may sound meaningless. This doesn't mean, however, that it cannot be explained or become part of philosophical discussion. Rather, what is required for any meaningful explanation of self-death or dying-to-self is a willingness to embrace a paradoxical or non-oppositional logic.[8] Within the contexts of many early Indian philosophies and in the more recent literatures comprising Sikh philosophy, while such a logic is rarely named in the formal sense,[9] it is nevertheless assumed to be woven into the fabric of life itself, bringing awareness of death into the self-conscious ego at the very moment it is born. Thus, from a non-oppositional perspective we can therefore say the following about *akāl*: (i) it is a time-consciousness that negates itself in the moment it is born, but this negation does not kill it, rather it lives on constantly reproducing itself anew as an eternal self-differentiation; (ii) *akāl* is not separate from *kāl*, nor does it transcend *kāl*; these are not two different or opposing realities, rather they are part of the oneness of all reality even though that oneness is distorted as it is refracted through the oppositional time-consciousness that we call ego; (iii) in Sikh philosophy of religion, the nature of *akāl* as eternal self-differentiation better describes the nature of divine agency (*purakh*); thus from the standpoint of devotion *akāl purakh* is the closest we come to naming 'God'.

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After death?

My treatment of death (*kāl*) and deathlessness (*akāl*) in Sikh philosophy thus far might lead us to conclude that: (i) death is final, which explains why people fear death, but (ii) it is possible to face death, to turn it against itself causing the death of death (*kāl kāle*) by accessing an expanded non-contracted state of consciousness; and that in view of this (iii) the ethical stance to adopt is to maintain an attitude of courage and ever-ascendant optimism (*chardi kāla*) in the face of death and dying. On the face of it, this may sound like a finalist attitude, the notion of deathlessness notwithstanding. However, such finalism is complicated by several verse compositions by the Sikh Gurus which suggest that death does not end with the dissolution of the body; indeed, that consciousness or memory survives the physical body. A commonly quoted source is the following:

> *Coming together, we become separated.*
> After separation we come together again
> many lifetimes we've lived, only to die again and again.
> After each death, life began a new
> time and again we become father, sons, preceptors.
> Countless the species in which we took birth
> before coming to this body . . .
>
> (GGS, 176)

In the absence of closer scrutiny, verses such as these seem to fold Sikh philosophy, and its perspective on death and the afterlife, back into classical Indic (Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu) theories of rebirth vis-à-vis an emphasis on countless cycles of birth, death, and transmigration of consciousness. All the ingredients for a theory of transmigration seem to be here: eternal coming and going, the 84-*lakhs* of birth, death, and rebirth or *avagavan*, *samsara*, *karma* and *mokhsa*, not to mention the fact that all these terms as well as belief in rebirth are prevalent in popular Sikhism.

Two factors, however, cast doubt on the assumption that Sikh philosophy simply follows Jain, Buddhist, or Hindu ideas of rebirth. First, there is relatively little in the way of philosophical speculation about rebirth and transmigration theory in the large corpus of exegetical texts and commentarial traditions of Sikh philosophy. The broad framework of birth/death/rebirth is certainly there in the primary and secondary source texts as well as in popular practices. But it appears more as a mythic backdrop, an inheritance or cultural milieu, rather than a topic of doctrinal or philosophical importance. Second, if the argument about the nature of self, in relation to life, death, and deathless states is correct, it does not make sense suddenly to begin talking about the *survival* of self/soul after death, or indeed its transmigration. In short, Sikh philosophy of religion has tended to be either silent or non-committal on the issue of an afterlife.

A notable exception, however, is the twentieth-century theologian and philosopher Jodh Singh whose influential work *Gurmat Nirnai* (*Treatise on Sikh Philosophy*, 1932) devotes an entire chapter to *avagavan* and karmic theory. In his attempt to present the Sikh (*gurmat*) viewpoint within a comparative perspective, and while grappling with classical Indian philosophies such as Sankhya, Buddhism, Purva Mimansa, and Jainism, Jodh Singh assiduously avoids any speculation about infinitely prolonging life after death. Rather he adopts a transcendental empiricism to refocus the concept of *avagavan* firmly onto the terrain of immaterial naturalism, specifically the body–mind complex. In short, rebirth theory is resituated into *this* time, *this* life, *this* world – with the caveat that 'this' also refers to the immanental time-consciousness of *akāl* as it intersects with the body–

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mind complex. Thus, instead of speculating about the next life, or any other life outside this world, for Jodh Singh it is the body-mind complex that becomes the locus of karmic effects.

The key to this juxtaposition of the time of an actual body-mind with *akāl* is to remember that *akāl* is neither a negation of time, nor a transcendence of time. It is immanental time, a time-consciousness that coexists simultaneously with the time of the body. Or, better still, the body-mind complex is the site of two simultaneously coexistent orders of time: *kāl* and *akāl.* The difference between the two is that while individuals live and develop in ordinary linear time (*kāl*) with actions that reproduce identity frameworks, the same individual can choose whether to live in accordance with an expansive time-consciousness that revolves around dying-to-self, or ego-loss. What is different here are the kinds of repetitions enacted by self/body; one repeats as identity, the other repeats as self-differentiation. To summarize: Jodh Singh's refocusing of *avagavan* within the body-mind complex, signals an alternative to the mythic, classical Indic framework of time in which *avagavan* means the infinite prolonging of life in other material and non-material forms.

This life . . . and 'secular faith'

Thus far we have established that instead of talking about death and immortality (or any opposition between them) the Sikh philosophical system presents death as a twofold event. I use the word 'event' to indicate the twofold nature of time. There is empirical, ordinary death which happens to a body in time (*kāl*), and in this happening the successive isolated moments that constitute the existence of the body are brought to an end. Such an event is an accident in the sense that it is triggered by something that happens to the body, for example, illness, disease, old age, murder. The tri-modal linear or contracted notion of time in which ordinary death takes place is governed by the laws of cause and effect, hence, from the Sikh perspective, it is an accident, as will become clear in the next paragraphs. As the person dies, what dies with him or her is the tri-modal linear contracted personal consciousness which constituted his or her self. In Sikh philosophy this model of personal contracted consciousness is known as *manmukh* (self-centric mind). From the perspective of the *manmukh* who remains trapped within a personalized field of consciousness, the event of death is only seen and experienced as an empirical event, which in turn gives rise to an incomplete and delusionary image of time and death. Sikh philosophy points to a radically different time which cannot be articulated or expressed in the spatialized logic of cause and effect, because its moments are qualitatively connected with every other past, present, and future. This mode of time is the limitless, *un*contracted time that an individual consciousness expels in order to become a person, that is, to establish a personal consciousness (someone who can say 'I am', 'this consciousness is mine'). This non-personal time-consciousness which corresponds to the psychic formation 'I am not', or the 'not-I', does not come to an end in the event of the body's death. Rather it coexists with *kāl*-time, and with personal contracted consciousness, but is attainable only by breaking out of the field of consciousness. Instead of a promised rebirth after empirical death, as the state of deathlessness, *akāl* promises an eternal rebirth of each moment, in the very instant of her passing, but this rebirth happens in the stream of life and is therefore simultaneously coexistent with *kāl*. Paradoxically, by turning death against itself, *akāl* signals not the end, but the constant restarting of life in a new vein, and is the ultimate affirmation of life as death, and death as life.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it might be asked whether, and how, this twofold and paradoxical system of death/time has any relevance in the context of ordinary lived

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experience, let us say, for the 'average Sikh' who may not have any interest in abstract philosophical explanations. Can it teach us anything of value in the world? What use is it?

Fortunately, these questions can be addressed by pointing to something that Sikhs do in everyday practice. They greet each other, and non-Sikhs are invited to greet them, with the invocation: *sat sri akāl*. Although most Sikhs use this phrase casually in the sense of saying 'hello' or 'good day', its meaning is philosophically far richer than this. Roughly translated *sat sri akāl* means: reality is *akāl* (un-timely/beyond-within ordinary time). By stretching the English meaning, it can be rendered as conveying a range of meanings which can be reduced to two main contenders. The first follows the modern reformist trend of rendering *akāl* as a name of God, hence *sat sri akāl* can mean: 'God is Real'. However, as noted earlier in my opening discussion of Neki's entry, this theological rendering follows the modernizing trend of Sikh reformers which misleadingly interpreted the meaning of *akāl* as the 'One beyond time' or as 'Immortal/Eternal Being', in the sense that God's essential attribute is defined by an infinitely extended time and hence by immutability (Mandair (2009)). However, this peculiarly modern translation of *akāl* also diminishes its ontological significance by suggesting it refers to something ideal, metaphysical, that does not belong to this world, or this life. Pre-and post-modern strands of Sikh philosophy, however, suggest that *akāl* signifies a time that is not beyond ordinary time, but coexistent simultaneously, and is as real if not more real than *kāl* insofar as it refers to a time-consciousness that can be accessed only by expanding one's consciousness. *Akāl* therefore signifies a creative mode of time that is immanent within ordinary everyday time, and it is this sense which is invoked by the social greeting.

By highlighting an everyday social greeting such as *sat sri akāl* (reality is *akāl*), my point here is twofold. First, and contrary to how it might seem, invoking the temporality of deathless state (*akāl*) is actually a way of affirming *this life*, of this mortal existence, here and now, as well as life that is yet to come. Second, this non-oppositional affirmation presents a more complex understanding of finitude and mortality than what is offered either by secular humanist theories of time or by religious ideologies that devalue *this time* in *this life*. As an example of the former, it may be helpful to briefly consider the perspective presented by Martin Hägglund in his book *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. Hägglund defines finitude as the 'sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about' (Hägglund (2019), 5), a sense that is at the heart of what he calls 'secular faith'. For Hägglund, 'secular faith' means being 'devoted to a form of life that is bounded by time' (*ibid*., 6), and he contrasts it with 'religious forms of faith' espoused by 'all world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity)'. Religions, he argues, devalue finitude by emphasizing that the most 'desirable form of life is eternal rather than finite' (*ibid*.). Earlier on he writes that 'the thought of my own death . . . is utterly painful. I do not want to die, since I want to retain my life and the life of what I love. At the same time, I do not want my life to be eternal. And eternal life is not only unattainable but also undesirable, since it would eliminate the care and passion that animates my life' (*ibid*., 4).

Hägglund's deployment of the catch-all category of 'world religions' is problematic, not least because he seems unaware of a substantive scholarly literature which has shown that the category of 'world religions' was in part constructed by an imperializing knowledge machine whose engine was driven by philosophical orientalism with a debilitating legacy.[10] Space precludes me from engaging with other religious worldviews, so I restrict my remarks in the remainder of this article to a Sikh philosophical perspective. While his lack of enthusiasm for eternal life sounds close to similar statements by Nanak and Kabir noted above, Hägglund's standpoint on the nature of impermanence operates according to a very different understanding of time. From the perspective of Sikh philosophy, by restricting life (and death) to the field of consciousness Hägglund is making the same mistake as any *manmukh* might make. With his awareness restricted to a highly

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contracted field of consciousness, the *manmukh* is trapped not only by fear of death but also by a restrictive understanding of time as a tri-modal succession of instants, one after the other, as endless impermanence.

From the Sikh perspective, while eternity is also *not* to be desired, the kind of impermanence of which Hägglund speaks merely prolongs the pain/suffering/fear of death, which the self is burdened to carry. By contrast, the logic expounded by *gurmat* turns death against itself by breaking through the field of consciousness, which in turn enables access to *akāl* time-consciousness. Not only does this 'breaking-through' describe the practical aspect of dying-to-self, the structure of the self that remains following the breach of ordinary consciousness opens the self to the deeper, more creative, non-oppositional structure of time, which cannot be measured but only *felt* as the intensity of emotions, passions, or affects.

This difference between the two perspectives can be further probed by considering the issue of mourning the loss of a loved one. For Hägglund the 'lover who is mourning his beloved' (in this case C. S. Lewis grieving the death of his wife Joy Davidson) 'is devoted to a relationship that requires time to be what it is . . . The temporality of love is intrinsic to the positive qualities of being with the beloved' (*ibid*., 40). 'It is the end of such a temporal life that one mourns when the beloved is lost.' According to Hägglund, Lewis's mourning illuminates his central thesis, which distinguishes between 'living on (prolonging a temporal life) and being eternal (absorbed in timeless existence)'. Lewis's desire for his 'beloved to come back' at the same time makes the idea of 'eternal life . . . unattainable as well as undesirable' (*ibid*., 42).

There is nothing wrong with the sentiment Hägglund expresses. Insofar as it evaluates life and death only from within the field of human consciousness, it is how most people might react to death of a loved one, and at a certain level resonates with Sikh attitudes to death, dying, and loss. However, Sikh philosophy (*gurmat*) goes beyond this perspective with two additional steps. First, it implements a critique of the field of everyday consciousness radical enough to show that the limits of this field are determined by a *kāl*-centrism which operates primarily *for-the-self*, perpetuating attachment to the self even as it is wounded by loss and trauma. It is this self-attachment that prevents the individual from deepening her experience of 'this life'. Second, *gurmat* doesn't stop at mere critique, however radical its effects for the field of consciousness, but rather argues for a perspective that is *equally real* and *equally part* of 'this life', albeit one that experiences time differently, because it is based on a different psychic composition corresponding to a deeper mode of time-consciousness (*akāl*). Like Hägglund, the Sikh perspective would also find 'eternal never-ending life' to be equally abhorrent. But the psychic transformation achieved by annihilating self or dying-to-self also changes our time-consciousness from a conventional eternity of time as a constant flow of identical instants (in which trauma and pain of separation is simply repressed producing a negative self which can operate only within oppositional consciousness), towards a different experience and understanding of the 'eternal' as a flowering of time and self. This kind of 'eternity' is experienced by the self through internal differentiation corresponding to a psychic structure that we might call differential or non-oppositional consciousness – one that can associate differences into a self that is internally diverse. This order of time-consciousness (*akāl*) is not outside worldly time, or outside this life. Rather, it is always already part of it; it is a state of consciousness, not a thing or a place. In Sikh philosophy the actual state corresponding to subjective experience of *akāl* is called *viraha*. As a term *viraha* denotes an ecstatic mode of being where 'this life' is always lived in the ecstasy of pining for the beloved, where beloved is not a thing, object, person. Rather the beloved is part of oneself, discovering which one 'becomes divine' in this life. In this sense the everyday Sikh greeting *sat sri akāl* can be seen as an invitation to affirm this life by experiencing its hidden depths.

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Death, personhood, and the (non-)existence of 'God'

While much of this article has presented the death–immortality question in terms of different but non-oppositional modes of time-consciousness (*kāl/akāl*), the writings of the Sikh Gurus also indicate that this mode of time can be correspondingly actualized into two very different forms of agency and personhood: *manmukh* and *gurmukh*. The *manmukh* is motivated by the primacy of self-preservation, material attachment, and spends his or her entire life constructing and maintaining the walls of the self against perceived threats to the unity of its identity and the integrity of its self-consciousness. Because the *manmukh* perceives time as a primary threat, s/he defends against it by constantly objectifying time and death. At the other end of the spectrum is the *gurmukh*, the person who during life breaks through the veneer of self-consciousness by learning and practising the art of dying-to-self. By breaking through the illusory field of consciousness the *gurmukh* can turn death against itself, and by doing so can live life more intensely. The *gurmukh* lives and dies according to the principle of oneness – a oneness that associates differences, whether these are differences internal to her own 'practical identities' or in relation to others. Because the *gurmukh* can enact a simultaneous willing of life and death, s/he is able to 'bear a negative relation' to the various crises of the self. What this means is that's/he can live positively with crises and failure throughout life and keep going. Such a person acts from the first person and third person simultaneously, learning how to become pure witness. In Sikh philosophy such agency is known as *akāl purakh*, which is normally translated as 'immortal person' or immortal being, or simply 'God'. But as noted earlier these renderings are misleading, not least because '*akāl*' does not equate well with a being-in-time, but rather with the death of everyday time, the birth of the un-timely, whereas *purakh* is closer in meaning to spirit or agency, as that which motivates.

Notwithstanding such problems of translating Indic concepts into the anglophone consciousness, the above discussion does nevertheless bring us to a third application of the Sikh concepts of death/immortality/consciousness, namely the (non-)existence of God. Differently stated, the treatment of the concept of death in Sikh thought has implications for understanding the relevance (or not) of theism and atheism as organizing categories for thought. If the twofold structure of the death-event exemplified by the concept of *akāl* creates a breach in ordinary consciousness, this breach is also the point at which the idea of a theistic divine entity becomes relevant, inasmuch as it is the point at which the concept of God comes into existence. A better way to explain this is to listen to two short verses composed respectively by Nanak and Kabir, both of which appear in the Guru Granth Sahib, and are as direct as can be found in this literature:

> **Nanak**:
> When I act in ego, You're not present,
> When You're present, ego is absent.
> Nanak, repeat these words: I am the One, the One is me,
> In Oneness the three worlds are merged. (GGS, 1092)
> **Kabir:**
> When I am, my Beloved is not,
> Now my Beloved is here, and 'I am no more.
> By saying You, You, I have become you,
> The 'I am' is in me no longer. (GGS, 1375)

Clearly there is an inverse relationship between the non/existence of God and the human self. The formula can be reduced to simple terms: when I am, God does not exist. For God

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to exist, my self or ego must disappear. It is not difficult to see that this formula relating God to self corresponds closely to the relationship between deathless states *akāl/amara-pad/amritya* achieved by dying to the self, and the event of turning death against itself (*kāl kāle*). From this perspective God is not an immortal entity, but the point at which life and death are absolutely in union. This is why there is no privileged 'Name' for God in Sikh scripture, which instead emphasizes the concept of *nām* signifying the supreme vibration/relation that is achieved when the self-effort of dying-to-self comes into equilibrium with the production of the self. The result is *nām*: the vibration/relation corresponding equally to subjective consciousness and the objective cosmos; as a word, *nām* signifies a state of oneness of creation. From this perspective neither theism or any of its varieties (monotheism, pantheism, panentheism) nor indeed atheism or anatheism, make much sense, not least because the standpoint of self-death, the death of oppositional time/eternity, makes those of us who continue to deploy oppositional concepts into complete and utter babblers.

Notes

1. By modern Sikh studies I refer to Sikh studies as it has been established in the Western academy where English is the dominant medium of scholarly discourse and representation.
2. Verses from the central Sikh scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, will be referenced as 'GGS' along with the relevant page number. All translations are my own.
3. The translations of terms such as *akāl* and *amarāpad* as 'immortality' and 'eternity' repeat a familiar trend within modernist Sikh scholarship of translating through secular frameworks which radically reduced their ontological multivalency.
4. These three points essentially refer to the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC). See Heidegger (1992).
5. See for example, Radhakrishnan (1990).
6. Compositions in the Sikh scripture that highlight the Four-Yugas include:
   Asa di Var (GGS, 470):
   Satjug satu teta jaggi duapar pujachar.
   Tino jug tino dirai kali keval nam adhar.
   Gauri Bairagan, Ravidas (GGS, 346 v.11):
   Satjug treta duapar bhanijai kalijug uttamo juga mahe.
   Ahe karu kare su ahe karu paee koi na pakariai kisai thai.
   Asa M5 (GGS, 406 v.7):
   Jug chare nam uttam shabad bichare.
   Kali mai gurmukh uttaras par.
7. For a translated version, see Mandair and Shackle (2005), 24–25.
8. In the Sikh scripture and similar poetic there is no formal name for such a logic. It is simply assumed. However, given that we are translating into an anglophone consciousness, and effectively into a Anglo-European philosophical idiom that goes by the name 'philosophy of religion', it is helpful to think of examples of logic within the context of Western philosophy that uphold and endorse meaningful paradoxes and contradictions, and in doing so enable contradictions within the Sikh texts to be more easily comprehended. The example that immediately comes to mind is Graham Priest's notion of dialetheism. According to Priest,

> a dialetheia is a pair of statements, A and ∼A (its not the case that A), which are both true. Alternatively, and equivalently given a natural assumption about how negation works, a dialetheia is a statement, A, that is both true and false. *Dialetheism* is the view that there are some dialetheias. A dialetheist holds that some contradictions are true, not (necessarily) that all contradictions are true. (Garfield and Priest (2021), 1)

According to Priest,

> [d]ialetheism countenances the violation of the Principle of non-Contradiction (PNC): the thesis that non contradiction can be true. The PNC has been high orthodoxy in Western philosophy since Aristotle's badly flawed but highly influential defense of it in the *Metaphysics*. While there have been some important Western philosophers who rejected the PNC- Hegel is the most obvious example- these have been but isolated voices, at least until recently. (*ibid*., 2).

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Applying Priest's argument to the Sikh philosophy of death and time, one might say that ordinary death and deathless states present examples that are contradictory and from the standpoint of the PNC bring truth into question. While I would not go so far as to say that these examples are dialetheic in the formal sense, nevertheless, in a context in which Sikh thought is being translated into an anglophone consciousness, dialetheism makes it possible to say that both of these contradictory states (death/deathlessness) are equally true and to hold that 'some of these contradictory aspects reveal profound truths about the nature of reality and human existence, truths that would be inaccessible to one limited by the bounds of consistency' (*ibid*., 7), and, I would add, by the demand for coherence. It is for this reason that I prefer to refer to the term 'non-oppositional logic'.

9. A counter-argument here might be that exegetes in certain traditions such as Nagarjuna's Madhyamika Buddhism operated with a notion of two truths which gave rise to terms such as *samvrti-satya* (ordinary or conventional truth) or *paramartha-satya* (ultimate truth), for which one can find slightly different formulations in the Sikh texts, as for example in the relationship between *kāl/akāl* which denote two contradictory modes of time and being, although both are equally true, as discussed in the main argument of this article. One could also cite the *catuṣkoṭi* or 'four corners' framework deployed by Buddhist and Hindu philosophers. Jain philosophers developed a seven-corner framework (*sapta-bhaṅgī*). These frameworks endorse a thought-process according to which 'a statement may be true (only), false (only), both, or neither' (Garfield and Priest (2021), 6). My point here is (i) that these are not formally named logics like the 'PNC' or 'dialetheism', so one has to be careful in equating them, and (ii) that especially within the context of Sikh philosophy (which derives its thought-process from what are considered to be 'revealed utterances' or *gurbani*) the logic is implicit rather than a formalized system.

10. See, for example, Hallaq (2018); Masuzawa (2005).

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