



The Meaning of Death

Ez ist nieman gotes rîche wan der ze grunde tôt ist.
Meister Eckhart (Pfeiffer ed., p. 600)

The meaning of death is inseparably bound up with the meaning of life. Our animal experience is only of today, but our reason takes account also of tomorrow; hence, insofar as our life is intellectual, and not merely sensational, we are inevitably interested in the question, What becomes of "us" on the morrow of death. That is, evidently, a question that can only be answered in terms of what or who "we" are now, mortal or immortal: a question of the validity that we attach on the one hand to our conviction of being "this man, So-and-so" and on the other to our conviction of being unconditionally.

The whole tradition of the *Philosophia Perennis*, Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, makes a clear distinction of existence from essence, becoming from being. The existence of this man So-and-so, who speaks of himself as "I," is a succession of instants of consciousness, of which no two are the same; in other words, this man is never the same man from one moment to the next. We know only past and future, never a now, and so there is never any moment with reference to which we can say of our self, or of any other presentation, that it "is"; as soon as we ask what it is, it has "become" something else; and it is only because the changes that take place in any brief period are usually small that we mistake the incessant process for an actual being.

This holds good as much of the soul as of the body. Our consciousness is a stream, everything flows, and "you can never dip your feet twice in the same waters." Moreover, considered individually, every stream of consciousness has had a beginning, and must therefore have an end. Even

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if we assume that an individual continuity of consciousness can survive the dissolution of the body (as would not be inconceivable if we suppose the existence of a variety of substantial supports not all so gross as, but rather more subtle than, the "matter" that our senses normally report), it is evident that such a "survival of personality," still involving a duration, affords no proof that such an existence must last forever. The universe, however many different "worlds" (i.e., loci of compossibles) it may be thought of as embracing, cannot be thought of apart from time; we cannot, for instance, ask What was God doing before he created the world? or What will he be doing when it comes to an end? because the world and time are concomitant and cannot be thought of apart. If we suppose that the universe has had a beginning, we also suppose that it will come to an end when time and space are no more; and that will mean that whatever exists in time and space must come to an end sooner or later. We emphasize this point because it is important to realize that the spiritualist "proofs" of the survival of personality, even if we should grant their validity, are not proofs of immortality, but only of a prolongation of personal existence. To presume a survival of personality is only to postpone the problem of the meaning of death.

The whole tradition of which I am speaking assumes, then, and in this respect agrees with the "materialist's" or "nothing-morist's" opinion, that for this man So-and-so, having such and such a name, appearance, and qualities, there is no possibility of an immortality; his existence under any conditions is an ever-changing one, and "all change is a dying." It is held, alike on grounds of authority and reason, that "this man" is mortal, and that there is "no consciousness after death." Whatever has been born must die, whatever is composite must break down, and it would be idle to grieve over what is inherent in the very nature of things.

But the matter does not end here. It is true that nothing by nature mortal can become immortal, however long or short a time it may endure. The tradition, however, insists that we should "know our self," what and Who we are. In confusing our intuition-of-being with our consciousness-of-being-So-and-so, we may have forgotten ourselves. The case is, in fact, one of amnesia and mistaken identity. Let us recall that a "person" is primarily a mask and assumed disguise, that "all the world's a stage," and that it may have been a rather childish delusion to have assumed that the *dramatis personae* were the "very persons" of the actors themselves. From the point of view of our tradition, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* is an

absolute *non sequitur* and argument in a circle. For I cannot say *cogito* truly, but only *cogitatur*. "I" neither think nor see, but there is Another who alone sees, hears, thinks in me and acts through me; an Essence, Fire, Spirit, or Life that is no more or less "mine" than "yours," but that never itself becomes anyone; a principle that informs and enlivens one body after another, and than which there is no other that transmigrates from one body to another, one that is never born and never dies, though present at every birth and death ("not a sparrow falls to the ground . . ."). This is a Life that is lived *dove s'appunta ogni ubi ed ogni quando*, a place without dimensions, and a now without duration, of which empirical experience is impossible, and that can only be known immediately. This Life is the "Ghost" that we "give up" when this man dies and the spirit returns to its source and the dust to the dust.

Our whole tradition everywhere affirms that "there are two in us"; the Platonic mortal and immortal "souls," Hebrew and Islamic *nefesh* (*nafs*) and *ruah* (*ruh*), Philo's "soul" and "Soul of the soul," Egyptian Pharaoh and his Ka, Chinese Outer and Inner Sage, Christian Outer and Inner Man, Psyche and Pneuma, and Vedantic "self" (*ātman*) and "self's Immortal Self" (*asya amṛta ātman, antah puruṣa*)—one the soul, self, or life that Christ requires of us to "hate" and "deny," if we would follow him, and that other soul or self that can be saved. On the one hand we are commanded, "Know thy self," and on the other told, "That (self's Immortal Self) art thou." The question then arises, In whom, when I go hence, shall I be going forth? In my self, or its Immortal Self?

On the answer to this question depends the answer to the question, What happens to man after death? It is evident, however, from what has been said, that this is an ambiguous question. With reference to whom is it asked, this man or the Man? In the case of this man, we can only answer by asking, What is there of him that could survive otherwise than as an inheritance to his descendants? and in the case of the Immortal, only by asking, What is there of him to die? If in this life—and "once out of time, your chance is gone"—we have remembered our Self, then "That art thou," but if not, then "great is the destruction."

If we have known that Man, we can say with St. Paul, "I live, yet not I, but Christ in me." Whoever can say that, or its equivalent in any other dialect *der einen Geistsprache*, is what is called in India a *jīvan-mukṣta*, a "free man here and now." This man, Paul, announced his own death; the words "Behold a dead man walking" might have been said of him. What of him remained to survive when the body ceased to breathe, but

Christ?—that Christ who said, "No man hath ascended into heaven save he which came down from heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven"!

"The kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead" (Meister Eckhart, Evans ed., I, 419). So, in the same Master's words, "the soul must put itself to death." For what else does it mean to "hate" and "deny" ourselves? Is it not true that "all Scripture cries aloud for freedom from self"?

Come l'uomo s'eterna? The traditional answer can be given in the words of Jalālu'd-Dīn Rūmī and Angelus Silesius: "Die before you die." Only the dead can know what it means to be dead.