

MEETING DEATH AS A FRIEND

By N. Sri Ram *

One of the most famous Dialogues of Plato, which has attracted more attention than any other, is that in which he depicts the death of Socrates. There were a few friends present during the day, the evening of which saw his passing, and this Dialogue takes the form of a conversation which took place on that last day. It started with arguments on the pre-existence of the soul, in the course of which different ideas were advanced with regard to its nature. This part of the discussion ends in the affirmation of its immortality. The points discussed seem to me to be well worth considering by us, even today.



As his friends entered the prison, Socrates was seen rubbing his leg, which had just been freed from its bonds. The remarkable thing about his conduct, as he met his friends, was that he did not make any complaints; there was no particle of pitying his own condition; he just remarked on the extraordinary alternation and connection between pleasure and pain in life. He said that till then there had been

an experience of pain, but now that he was freed from the bonds, immediately there was pleasure. If any one of us had been in his situation, I wonder what kind of feelings or thoughts we would have entertained on such an occasion.

Of course, Socrates was anticipating his death. Then the conversation proceeds and various ideas are exchanged, and when the time came towards the evening, he received the cup of poison that he was to drink, readily and calmly, it is said, in the easiest and gentlest possible manner. When it takes effect he coolly describes the advance of death over his body, from the feet upwards, stage by stage. It is quite an extraordinary scene; there is no account of any event quite like that.

Apparently the conversation went on for hours. After discussing the nature of the soul, Socrates explains what are the ends sought by a true philosopher, and why death is welcome to him. The statements made are not assertions but merely a discussion of ideas, of possibilities, and inferences to be drawn from them.

* In accordance with modern practices, some of the language has been modified to make it gender-neutral. Department of Education. February 2006.

The suggestion was put forward by one of the friends that the soul may be conceived to be of the nature of harmony. If the body can be compared to a lyre or lute, the soul could be the music produced by it. This view, though it invests the soul with a dignity and nature which can possess both depth and beauty, does not give it an independent status. The view advanced seemed to propound what one would call an epiphenomenalist theory, that is, the body is the actuality, various activities take place in it, particularly those of the brain, and the soul, though possessing a nature of harmony, is merely a product of those activities, perhaps only of such of them as could conduce to this result. But when the instrument is broken there would be no more music. There was objection on these lines.

Another idea put forward, of a similar nature, suggested the mechanical analogy of a fire. One might think of the fire as the consciousness in man, animating the body; when the body is dissolved, the fire is extinct. This idea is like the thinking in the Southern School of Buddhists, but they would probably say it is fire mixed with smoke, which is dissipated.

These arguments are not without interest. When we consider how things could be, whether a particular view is warranted, what view can reasonably be taken, then the traversing of such ground is not without instruction and value.

In Nature so many things take place, like the rising and the setting of the sun, in a way which is the contrary of the actual facts. The argument that the soul or the mind—for the moment putting the two together—is merely a kind of image reflected from activities in the material field of the brain, though plausible, may also be contradictory of the facts. What seems to be the case at first sight may not be the basic or underlying truth.

Socrates overcomes the objections to the idea of the soul being immortal. As a matter of fact, in another Dialogue Plato singles out these objections as being at the root of all “irreligious philosophizing,” though he was so logical that he could not have assumed that what is seemingly religious is true. What is true may be considered religious, but what is in accordance with religion as it happens to be may not be true.

The arguments advanced for pre-existence of the soul are ideas which have since become famous as part of the Platonic philosophy. There was reference to the ancient belief that a soul which is born into this world has come back from another world to which we go at death. Of course that is a concept widely accepted in India, but it also existed in ancient thought among other peoples. The suggestion was that the dead come from the living; the living come from the dead. It is a phenomenon of cyclic occurrence, like sleeping, waking, and sleeping again, and is in accordance with the truth or rule in Nature that opposites are generated from one another. Dying and being born are a pair of opposites. But how they are linked, so that the one event brings the other in its train,

was apparently not gone into further. Plato has a way of sometimes throwing out an idea that is deeply suggestive and arresting, and then leaving it to others to pursue it further by themselves.

Another argument referred to an idea which Socrates had previously propounded, that all real knowledge is reminiscence, a remembrance in the physical brain. The soul must have existed and had knowledge of a particular type, before it was united with the body, and the evidence for this is that we understand such things as justice, beauty, equality of spirit, and so on, and these ideas are not derived from sense-perceptions. Therefore, these must have been already within the knowledge of the soul. Sense-perceptions—the hearing of sounds, seeing that something is red or black, that something else is tall or short—are all comparative ideas. Merely from these perceptions one cannot develop ideas of beauty, justice, morality, and so forth. Therefore, such knowledge and ideas must have a different source. Further, if the soul existed previous to birth and independently, then it cannot die with the body.

Socrates also expressed the view that the soul cannot have a nature which is compounded of several factors, for then its condition would change. It must have a nature which is unchanging. Even though one soul may be more developed than another, their essential nature must be the same. A compound of varying factors or elements is liable to change, whereas that which is simple, monadic, must remain essentially the same.

The further statement was made that whatever its other attributes, the soul must have a nature of life. It cannot be an abstraction, a projection of the mind. This linking of life and soul, obviously important in the series of ideas put forward, was capped by the statement that the soul must be of the same nature as the Deity to warrant belief in its immortality. Only the Divine can be immortal, and that which is not Divine must be mortal.

Socrates then exhorts his friends to acquire virtue and wisdom in this life. The moment of his death was approaching, but he continued to talk freely and easily as he might on any other day of his life. He said: “The genuine philosopher is one whose mind is directed to truth and virtue.” The word *philosopher*, and also the word *philosophy*, have become rather changed in their meaning since those old days. Nowadays we think a philosopher is one who analyzes and argues at great length, sometimes endlessly, his particular thesis; the life he lives has nothing to do with his intellectual skill and activity; but this was not the view taken of old. In the literal meaning of the word, philosophy is *love* of truth, and love always implies action. Truth, if its nature is such as to evoke love, must make an important change in oneself, turning one’s interest from things of the sense, which are ephemeral, mere enjoyment and pleasure, to things noble and true. That was the ancient concept of a philosopher.

Because his mind is directed to truth and wisdom, the philosopher, said Socrates, is one “who is willing and ready to die.” Therefore, death is not unwelcome to him. That is how he explained his cheerfulness at the prospect of departing from this world. But he also said, it is not right to commit suicide. His argument against suicide is rather curious: In this world we are in a kind of prison, living under great limitations. It is a world in which ignorance predominates rather than wisdom. But we must not escape from it before we are given permission to do so. The exit from the prison may be exceedingly welcome, but we should not take it upon ourselves to abscond. The statement was also made that one has no proprietary right over his body. This would not be the general view held by most people. But we have the responsibility of using the body rightly and maintaining it in good condition, which is precisely the view expressed in *At the Feet of the Master*.

Because death is welcome, and the mind is directed towards truth and virtue by the philosopher, for such a person philosophy becomes really a preparation for death—a striking idea. Some scholars have interpreted the Greek words as meaning, “Philosophy is really a meditation on death,” which does not seem to me to be in consonance with Socrates’ easy way of taking it. Another rendering is much more understandable, namely, when the life is properly lived, directed towards those ends which are the ends of the soul (not the desires of the body), then philosophy or “the life of a philosopher is but one long rehearsal of dying.” One may live a happy life, but it can also be a process of death—which may need explanation.

Socrates explains that the multitude, the common folk, is ignorant of the sense in which the philosopher welcomes death. It does not mean that he wants to get rid of the body, but he has a friendly feeling towards death. He has this feeling because he sets no great store on the gratification of the physical appetites. Most people estimate the value of things by the pleasure which they afford, but the aim of the philosopher is to free oneself as much as possible from the domination of the body. He is engaged in tending the soul, giving attention to those matters which are of interest to the soul, such as truth, virtue, and so on. In so doing, the philosopher has already separated himself from the body. As he has given up all attachment to the pleasures which come to a person through the body, death is nothing but an exit through an open door. The things which nourish the soul are the right, the good, the true, the beautiful, and so on. Socrates said: “He nearly approaches to death who cares nothing for the pleasures through the body.” One may enjoy the pleasures that come while they are there, but need not hanker for them. By dismissing them from the field of one’s concern and interest, one most nearly approaches death. It is in that sense that the philosopher desires death, even while he is alive. This is akin to J. Krishnamurti’s teaching, although he does not speak of death as a welcome exit, but of dying here and now to one’s past and all experience as it comes.

The philosopher whose interest is centered in virtue and wisdom thereby purifies his intelligence, so that it is free of all taint, of every alien element. It is the purification of one's whole nature which brings about one's spiritual independence, and that is the real freedom or *Mukti*. *Mukti* is not literally mergence in the Logos; before there can be the merging of the human spirit in the Logos, the human being has to free himself from their bonds or attachments.

To express the same truth in another way: It is really the discarding of one's past, of all attachments arising from it, that changes a person into a new Being. The entity which is functioning at present is a creature of the past, he has come along a line of continuity, and he has within his nature and constitution many things derived from his past and its experiences. To be transformed into a new being is to be clear of the past, so that it no longer dominates, eclipses or directs the present.

This kind of dying makes life really more vital, less clogged and burdened, so that all perceptions are more acute, and the intelligence becomes intense, concentrated and flame-like. It is in a state of purity within oneself that one attains the highest quality in the functioning of every aspect of his Being. Every substance in its pure state exhibits its full potency.

The statement was casually made that philosophy is the highest music. Socrates said that he had a persistent dream in which he was told to apply himself to music, and as he understood that philosophy is the highest music, he was devoting himself to philosophy. The concept of philosophy being the highest kind of music becomes clearer in the light of the statement made previously with regard to the nature of the soul as being a form of harmony. The objection previously raised, that when the instrument is broken there can no longer be any music, was met by Socrates with the remark that the soul may exist, although it may or may not have an instrument. It is rather interesting that in one of the lectures which Dr Annie Besant gave in her atheistic days, she used precisely this simile. She said that though the lyre is broken, the music may still be in existence.

Socrates put forward as a reason for being willing to die, that we would be well off where we go, under good masters and with friends. People like to be in congenial surroundings. If a person has really devoted their life to philosophy, they may be sure that they would be well placed. They will be happy in proportion to the purity of their mind, which is also an important truth.

Happiness is not to be confused with pleasure; it comes from purity of mind and heart and arises naturally; we do not need to seek it at all. So Socrates said that if individuals have devoted themselves to virtue and wisdom, they may entertain the firm hope that the greatest good will befall them in the other world, which is in accordance with the teachings in theosophical books.

There was one other point made which is worthy of note. If we are ever to know the nature of anything in its essence, know the very truth of it and not merely the form, the appearance, the outer wrapping, we must be separated from the body and contemplate the things themselves by the mere soul. It is only the soul-vision, knowledge of the soul, which can give the essence of truth with regard to anything in existence.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* refers to “the knowers of the essence of things.” The essential quality of a thing being what makes it different from everything else. The essence, the thing in itself, can be known only through the soul, and never through the senses. While we live we approach nearest to the knowledge of that essence when we hold no intercourse or communion at all with the body, except for what absolute necessity requires; that is, when we cease to be dependent upon the body, to be influenced by its appetites, urges and passions. In other words, the whole aim and study in philosophy in the old meaning of that word, is the deliverance and separation of the soul from the body, and this can be attempted and achieved even while a person is living in this world. It is not something which has to take place by a process of Nature, but can be brought about through one’s own clear intelligence.

When there is freedom from dependence on the body, when this change comes about in its completeness, then death and life are the same to the real man, the real man being the soul; whether he lives or dies makes no difference to him. This also reminds one of the sentence in the *Gītā*: “The wise grieve neither for the living, nor for the dead.” That is to say, there is the possibility of coming to an internal condition or state in which whether life is lived in the physical body, which has been called a prison, or outside that prison, it is all the same. The soul uses the body as an instrument, without attachment to it.

This particular Dialogue is full of illuminating ideas to everyone who tries to understand these matters: the nature of the soul, of life in this world, the ends most worth striving after, the new meaning which death can acquire, and the possibility of facing this event with coolness and even welcoming it.

This article has been reprinted from the book *Seeking Wisdom* by N. Sri Ram.

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