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Short Dialogue on the Indestructibility of Our True Being by Death

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by Rudolf Dircks

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Short Dialogue on the Indestructibility of Our True Being by Death.

Thrasymachos. Tell me briefly, what shall I be after my death? Be clear and precise.

Philalethes. Everything and nothing.

Thras. That is what I expected. You solve the problem by a contradiction. That trick is played out.

Phil. To answer transcendental questions in language that is made for immanent knowledge must assuredly lead to a contradiction.

Thras. What do you call transcendental knowledge, and what immanent? It is true these expressions are known to me, for my professor used them, but only as predicates of God, and as his philosophy had exclusively to do with God, their use was quite appropriate. For instance, if God was in the world, He was immanent; if He was somewhere outside it, He was transcendent. That is clear and comprehensible. One knows how things stand. But your old-fashioned Kantian doctrine is no longer understood. There has been quite a succession of great men in the metropolis of German learning ——

Phil. (aside). German philosophical nonsense!

Thras. —— such as the eminent Schleiermacher and that gigantic mind Hegel; and to-day we have left all that sort of thing behind, or rather we are so far ahead of it that it is out of date and known no more. Therefore, what good is it?

Phil. Transcendental knowledge is that which, going beyond the boundary of possible experience, endeavours to determine the nature of things as they are in themselves; while immanent knowledge keeps itself within the boundary of possible experience, therefore it can only apply to phenomena. As an individual, with your death there will be an end of you. But your individuality is not your true and final being, indeed it is rather the mere expression of it; it is not the thing-in-itself but only the phenomenon presented in the form of time, and accordingly has both a beginning and an end. Your being in itself, on the contrary, knows neither time, nor beginning, nor end, nor the limits of a given individuality; hence no individuality can be without it, but it is there in each and all. So that, in the first sense, after death you become nothing; in the second, you are and remain everything. That is why I said that after death you would be all and nothing. It is difficult to give you a more exact answer to your question than this and to be brief at the same time; but here we have undoubtedly another contradiction; this is because your life is in time and your immortality in eternity. Hence your immortality may be said to be something that is indestructible and yet has no endurance — which is again contradictory, you see. This is what happens when transcendental knowledge is brought within the boundary of immanent knowledge; in doing this some sort of violence is done to the latter, since it is used for things for which it was not intended.

Thras. Listen; without I retain my individuality I shall not give a sou for your immortality.

Phil. Perhaps you will allow me to explain further. Suppose I guarantee that you will retain your individuality, on condition, however, that you spend three months in absolute unconsciousness before you awaken.

Thras. I consent to that.

Phil. Well then, as we have no idea of time when in a perfectly unconscious state, it is all the same to us when we are dead whether three months or ten thousand years pass away in the world of consciousness. For in the one case, as in the other, we must accept on faith and trust what we are told when we awake. Accordingly it will be all the same to you whether your individuality is restored to you after the lapse of three months or ten thousand years.

Thras. At bottom, that cannot very well be denied.

Phil. But if, at the end of those ten thousand years, some one has quite forgotten to waken you, I imagine that you would have become accustomed to that long state of non-existence, following such a very short existence, and that the misfortune would not be very great. However, it is quite certain that you would know nothing about it. And again, it would fully console you to know that the mysterious power which gives life to your present phenomenon had never ceased for one moment during the ten thousand years to produce other phenomena of a like nature and to give them life.

Thras. Indeed! And so it is in this way that you fancy you can quietly, and without my knowing, cheat me of my individuality? But you cannot cozen me in this way. I have stipulated for the retaining of my individuality, and neither mysterious forces nor phenomena can console me for the loss of it. It is dear to me, and I shall not let it go.

Phil. That is to say, you regard your individuality as something so very delightful, excellent, perfect, and incomparable that there is nothing better than it; would you not exchange it for another, according to what is told us, that is better and more lasting?

Thras. Look here, be my individuality what it may, it is myself,

“For God is God, and I am I.”

I— I— I want to exist! That is what I care about, and not an existence which has to be reasoned out first in order to show that it is mine.

Phil. Look what you are doing! When you say, I— I— I want to exist you alone do not say this, but everything, absolutely everything, that has only a vestige of consciousness. Consequently this desire of yours is just that which is not individual but which is common to all without distinction. It does not proceed from individuality, but from existence in general; it is the essential in everything that exists, nay, it is that whereby anything has existence at all; accordingly it is concerned and satisfied only with existence in general and not with any definite individual existence; this is not its aim. It has the appearance of being so because it can attain consciousness only in an individual existence, and consequently looks as if it were entirely concerned with that. This is nothing but an illusion which has entangled the individual; but by reflection, it can be dissipated and we ourselves set free. It is only indirectly that the individual has this great longing for

existence; it is the will to live in general that has this longing directly and really, a longing that is one and the same in everything. Since, then, existence itself is the free work of the will, nay, the mere reflection of it, existence cannot be apart from will, and the latter will be provisionally satisfied with existence in general, in so far, namely, as that which is eternally dissatisfied can be satisfied. The will is indifferent to individuality; it has nothing to do with it, although it appears to, because the individual is only directly conscious of will in himself. From this it is to be gathered that the individual carefully guards his own existence; moreover, if this were not so, the preservation of the species would not be assured. From all this it follows that individuality is not a state of perfection but of limitation; so that to be freed from it is not loss but rather gain. Don't let this trouble you any further, it will, forsooth, appear to you both childish and extremely ridiculous when you completely and thoroughly recognise what you are, namely, that your own existence is the universal will to live.

Thras. You are childish yourself and extremely ridiculous, and so are all philosophers; and when a sedate man like myself lets himself in for a quarter of an hour's talk with such fools, it is merely for the sake of amusement and to while away the time. I have more important matters to look to now; so, adieu!