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Immortality: A Dialogue

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by T. Bailey Saunders, M. A.

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Immortality: A Dialogue. (1)

(1) Translator's Note. — The word immortality — Unsterblichkeit — does not occur in the original; nor would it, in its usual application, find a place in Schopenhauer's vocabulary. The word he uses is Unzerstörbarkeit — indestructibility. But I have preferred immortality, because that word is commonly associated with the subject touched upon in this little debate. If any critic doubts the wisdom of this preference, let me ask him to try his hand at a short, concise, and, at the same time, popularly intelligible rendering of the German original, which runs thus: Zur Lehre von der Unzerstörbarkeit unseres wahren Wesens durch den Tod: Meine dialogische Schlussbelustigung.]

THRASYMACHOS— PHILALETHES.

Thrasymachos. Tell me now, in one word, what shall I be after my death? And mind you be clear and precise.

Philalethes. All and nothing!

Thrasymachos. I thought so! I gave you a problem, and you solve it by a contradiction. That's a very stale trick.

Philalethes. Yes, but you raise transcendental questions, and you expect me to answer them in language that is only made for immanent knowledge. It's no wonder that a contradiction ensues.

Thrasymachos. What do you mean by transcendental questions and immanent knowledge? I've heard these expressions before, of course; they are not new to me. The Professor was fond of using them, but only as predicates of the Deity, and he never talked of anything else; which was all quite right and proper. He argued thus: if the Deity was in the world itself, he was immanent; if he was somewhere outside it, he was transcendent. Nothing could be clearer and more obvious! You knew where you were. But this Kantian rigmarole won't do any more: it's antiquated and no longer applicable to modern ideas. Why, we've had a whole row of eminent men in the metropolis of German learning —

Philalethes. (Aside.) German humbug, he means.

Thrasymachos. The mighty Schleiermacher, for instance, and that gigantic intellect, Hegel; and at this time of day we've abandoned that nonsense. I should rather say we're so far beyond it that we can't put up with it any more. What's the use of it then? What does it all mean?

Philalethes. Transcendental knowledge is knowledge which passes beyond the bounds of possible experience, and strives to determine the nature of things as they are in themselves. Immanent knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge which confines itself

entirely with those bounds; so that it cannot apply to anything but actual phenomena. As far as you are an individual, death will be the end of you. But your individuality is not your true and inmost being: it is only the outward manifestation of it. It is not the thing-in-itself, but only the phenomenon presented in the form of time; and therefore with a beginning and an end. But your real being knows neither time, nor beginning, nor end, nor yet the limits of any given individual. It is everywhere present in every individual; and no individual can exist apart from it. So when death comes, on the one hand you are annihilated as an individual; on the other, you are and remain everything. That is what I meant when I said that after your death you would be all and nothing. It is difficult to find a more precise answer to your question and at the same time be brief. The answer is contradictory, I admit; but it is so simply because your life is in time, and the immortal part of you in eternity. You may put the matter thus: Your immortal part is something that does not last in time and yet is indestructible; but there you have another contradiction! You see what happens by trying to bring the transcendental within the limits of immanent knowledge. It is in some sort doing violence to the latter by misusing it for ends it was never meant to serve.

Thrasymachos. Look here, I shan't give twopence for your immortality unless I'm to remain an individual.

Philalethes. Well, perhaps I may be able to satisfy you on this point. Suppose I guarantee that after death you shall remain an individual, but only on condition that you first spend three months of complete unconsciousness.

Thrasymachos. I shall have no objection to that.

Philalethes. But remember, if people are completely unconscious, they take no account of time. So, when you are dead, it's all the same to you whether three months pass in the world of consciousness, or ten thousand years. In the one case as in the other, it is simply a matter of believing what is told you when you awake. So far, then, you can afford to be indifferent whether it is three months or ten thousand years that pass before you recover your individuality.

Thrasymachos. Yes, if it comes to that, I suppose you're right.

Philalethes. And if by chance, after those ten thousand years have gone by, no one ever thinks of awakening you, I fancy it would be no great misfortune. You would have become quite accustomed to non-existence after so long a spell of it — following upon such a very few years of life. At any rate you may be sure you would be perfectly ignorant of the whole thing. Further, if you knew that the mysterious power which keeps you in your present state of life had never once ceased in those ten thousand years to bring forth other phenomena like yourself, and to endow them with life, it would fully console you.

Thrasymachos. Indeed! So you think you're quietly going to do me out of my individuality with all this fine talk. But I'm up to your tricks. I tell you I won't exist unless I can have my individuality. I'm not going to be put off with 'mysterious powers,' and what you call 'phenomena.' I can't do without my individuality, and I won't give it up.

Philalethes. You mean, I suppose, that your individuality is such a delightful thing, so splendid, so perfect, and beyond compare — that you can't imagine anything better. Aren't you ready to exchange your present state for one which, if we can judge by what is

told us, may possibly be superior and more enduring?

Thrasymachos. Don't you see that my individuality, be it what it may, is my very self? To me it is the most important thing in the world.

For God is God and I am I.

I want to exist, I, I. That's the main thing. I don't care about an existence which has to be proved to be mine, before I can believe it.

Philalethes. Think what you're doing! When you say I, I, I want to exist, it is not you alone that says this. Everything says it, absolutely everything that has the faintest trace of consciousness. It follows, then, that this desire of yours is just the part of you that is not individual — the part that is common to all things without distinction. It is the cry, not of the individual, but of existence itself; it is the intrinsic element in everything that exists, nay, it is the cause of anything existing at all. This desire craves for, and so is satisfied with, nothing less than existence in general — not any definite individual existence. No! that is not its aim. It seems to be so only because this desire — this Will — attains consciousness only in the individual, and therefore looks as though it were concerned with nothing but the individual. There lies the illusion — an illusion, it is true, in which the individual is held fast: but, if he reflects, he can break the fetters and set himself free. It is only indirectly, I say, that the individual has this violent craving for existence. It is the Will to Live which is the real and direct aspirant — alike and identical in all things. Since, then, existence is the free work, nay, the mere reflection of the will, where existence is, there, too, must be will; and for the moment the will finds its satisfaction in existence itself; so far, I mean, as that which never rests, but presses forward eternally, can ever find any satisfaction at all. The will is careless of the individual: the individual is not its business; although, as I have said, this seems to be the case, because the individual has no direct consciousness of will except in himself. The effect of this is to make the individual careful to maintain his own existence; and if this were not so, there would be no surety for the preservation of the species. From all this it is clear that individuality is not a form of perfection, but rather of limitation; and so to be freed from it is not loss but gain. Trouble yourself no more about the matter. Once thoroughly recognize what you are, what your existence really is, namely, the universal will to live, and the whole question will seem to you childish, and most ridiculous!

Thrasymachos. You're childish yourself and most ridiculous, like all philosophers! and if a man of my age lets himself in for a quarter-of-an-hour's talk with such fools, it is only because it amuses me and passes the time. I've more important business to attend to, so Good-bye.