

Of Life, Death & Salvation

Chapter Six: Agony & Ecstasy

„Das Sterben ist der Augenblick jener Befreiung von der Einseitigkeit einer Individualität, welche nicht den innersten Kern unsers Wesen ausmacht, vielmehr als eine Art Verirrung desselben zu denken ist: [...] Der Friede und die Beruhigung auf dem Gesicht der meisten Todten scheint daher zu stammen. Ruhig und sanft ist, in der Regel, der Tod jedes guten Menschen.“

„Death is the moment of setting us free from the oneness of an individuality, which does not constitute the central core of our being, but should rather be thought of as a form of going astray: [...] The peace and calm on the faces of most dead people appears to originate from this. The death of every good person is, as a rule, calm and soft.“

The fear of death is inborn, everybody has it, even the animals, which intellectually cannot know death; but it is only the other side of the will of life: when the will of life is inborn, then also the fear of death! But in the end this fear of death is irrational, because the benefit of life is very meager and if somebody could knock on the graves and ask the dead if they want to live again, they would shake with their heads saying no.

But why are we so afraid of death? If you really understand Schopenhauer then one sees that he is absolutely not just a hopeless pessimist, but rather that he is a realist comforting us with his insight and wisdom about life and death as we can read in his wonderful *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*. So why are we so afraid of death – is Schopenhauer asking –, when we already experienced it, namely in the state before we were born?! The seeming nothingness after death is not different from the nothingness before birth, but from the latter state we are not afraid! And as Epikur said: death is not concerning us: when we exist, then there is no death, and when is death, then we don't exist. To have lost something which cannot be missed, is nothing bad.

Some people say they are not afraid of death but of dying, but also these people are wrong, but why? Because even the violent death can't be painful; severe injuries are normally not felt, only after a while, and then they are quickly lethal. Also dying of age is nothing to fear of, because with age the days pass quicker and quicker, the events lose their significance, everything is fading; a very old man is just a shadow of himself, what can death really destroy there? In the end it doesn't matter, dying violently or deceasing of age, death will finally be a release anyway and the peaceful look on the faces of the most dead people is probably an expression of that.

In Schopenhauer's view Christianity is, concerning the issue of death, a fear spreading, irrational and propagandistic religion like Islam and Judaism, whilst the latter one is the source of all these religions. These monotheistic world religions teach us that we recently did come out of nothing, therefore we were an eternity nothing, but in the same breath we will be everlasting in the future – this is the same as we would teach that one is throughout the work of another one, but should be responsible for his deeds in all eternity, as Schopenhauer is reflecting. Further he is writing:

„Wir finden nämlich die Lehre von der Metempsychose (Seelenwanderung – Anm. d. Ver.), aus den urältesten und edelsten Zeiten des Menschengeschlechts stammend, stets auf der Erde verbreitet, als den Glauben der großen Majorität des Menschengeschlechts, ja, eigentlich als Lehre aller Religionen, mit Ausnahme der jüdischen und der zwei von dieser ausgegangenen (Christentum und Islam – Anm. d. Ver.) [...].“

"For we find the doctrine of metempsychosis (reincarnation – authors note), stemming from the most ancient and most noble times of the human race, always spread throughout the world, as the faith of the great majority of the human race, yes, actually as the teaching of all religions, with the exception of the Jewish and their two other descendant religions (Christianity and Islam – authors note) [...]."

It is astonishing and sad that these three religions have destroyed the old pagan faith of rebirth and the unity of the cosmos nearly everywhere in the world – but for how long is Schopenhauer asking? So nowadays in Europe the large majority of the people sway between the opinion that death is the ultimate extinction OR that we are with neck and crop totally immortal – both are equally wrong!

All living things are the representation of a single will, of which our individual personality is just a phenomena – we cannot be totally destroyed! Anybody who wants to live and is affirming the will of life won't die anyway, because the will of life is eternal presence; we see this when we realize that past and future are just a dream in our mind, and if we weren't able to think there wouldn't be past and future anyway, like in the constant dreamlike state of the animals; they mentally don't care about death at all.

So in a way we are captured in life, therefore also in constantly recurring pain and suffering. Salvation is only achieved, so Schopenhauer, firstly by denying the will of life, but also by awareness of the unity of all beings, and further by asceticism as well as contemplation of art. This was the way of all sages who fully or partly denied the will of life; but they didn't killed themselves because suicide just destroys the individual phenomena of the everlasting will; this means if you kill yourself because you cannot endure the pain of life any longer, but subconsciously still affirming the will of life, then you get reborn anyway and nothing has changed...

One thing I deliberately excluded from the list about achieving salvation, because I can bridge with that to the next chapter: every sage also searched for loneliness and reclusion – and this is another important aspect of reaching salvation in the view of Schopenhauer.