VARIA

CONSCIOUSNESS OF SELF, OF TIME AND OF DEATH IN GREEK PHILOSOPHY: SOME REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I do not propose to discuss the ways of thinking about and coming to terms with our awareness of our coming death. I would like rather to discuss a more particular and perhaps unusual problem, that of the relation between our awareness of our death and our consciousness of ourselves. In the following I take four examples: Parmenides, Plato, Epicurus and Plotinus. I sketch the different ways in which these philosophers saw the relation between self-consciousness and death, how they tried to dissipate what seemed to them to be a tension, even a contradiction, between these two parts of our existence. My discussion does not seek to contribute to the philological analysis of specific ancient texts, but proposes rather an attempt to reach an overall view, which might be of a broader interest.

KEYWORDS: ancient philosophy, psychology, temporality, self-awareness, death.

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Perhaps as we get older, the awareness of our inevitable death settles in our minds, slowly, bit by bit. This awareness, I imagine, has been there, from our adolescence. But, with the passing of time – the time which will bring our death – it becomes more and more insistent. I would like to distinguish between this awareness (A) and the ways (B) in which we can try to think about our death: What it is? Why must it be? What does it mean? The answers which we give to these questions may be religious or philosophical, traditional or autonomous: they allow us to come to terms with (A), to accept what we know must be, and, perhaps, be consoled. Thus we might think, if we are educated in the Christian tradition, that death is not the end of us, that there will be life for us after death. Or we might think of ourselves as being

part of the animal world, belonging to cycles of birth and death, accepting our death as part of what it is to be able to be alive (Heraclitus says this far better than I!).

In this paper, I do not propose to discuss the ways (B) of thinking about and coming to terms with our awareness (A) of our coming death. I would like rather to discuss a more particular and perhaps unusual problem, that of the relation between (A) our awareness of our death and (C) our consciousness of ourselves. Let us assume, on the one hand, that plants and (some?) animals live from day to day, in the constant struggle to survive, and that they are not aware of, and do not reflect on the death which time will inevitably bring: they live on a primary level, seeing no further than the present and pressing need to continue to live. We, on the other hand, can become aware of ourselves, aware not only of our long-term prospects, but also of the very fact of our being aware, of thinking, these things. This consciousness (C) includes both awareness of our coming death (A) and of ourselves as thinking about these things. The ways in which we think about death (B) might make the relation between self-consciousness (C) and its awareness of its own death (A) unproblematic. For instance, we can think of ourselves, as conscious beings, as just a certain form of life, which belongs to the general pattern of life, which includes death. However, our self-consciousness (C) may have difficulty with the fact of death: how could we, who think, who can know many things, who can think the past and the future, who find meaning in things, how could *we* be subject to annihilation? It is not so much annihilation as such that is problematic: it is the annihilation of ourselves as conscious of ourselves which may cause difficulty. For it is we, as conscious of ourselves, who give sense to things, and it is the annihilation of ourselves as conscious which seems to destroy the sense of things.

The revolt of self-consciousness in the face of death can take religious forms. Here, however, I would like to suggest that it also marks Greek philosophy and that it is a fundamental aspect of philosophy for the ancient Greeks. In the following I will take four examples: Parmenides, Plato, Epicurus and Plotinus. I would like to sketch the different ways in which these philosophers saw the relation between self-consciousness and death, how they tried to dissipate what seemed to them to be a tension, even a contradiction, between these two parts of our existence. My discussion will not seek to make a contribution to the philological analysis of specific ancient texts, but will propose rather an attempt to reach an overall view which might be of a broader interest.

1. Parmenides

The first and most radical position on the subject was taken by Parmenides. The word 'death' (θάνατος) does not occur in the surviving fragments of his poem. However, Parmenides argues in these fragments in such a way as imply the conclusion that death and self-consciousness are mutually exclusive. It is true that Parmenides does not, strictly speaking, formulate a theory of self-consciousness. But he does speak of thinking, and he stipulates that thinking – *true thinking* – is one with its object, it is identical with its object, "what is", or "being" (fr. 3 Diels-Kranz): thinking and being are one.

From this we can easily derive the conclusion that the subject and object of thinking are not different from each other: true thinking thinks itself. Furthermore, if thinking, to be true, can only think "what is", then it follows that it cannot think death. Death is destruction (ὄλεθρος) and the thought of destruction (like the thought of coming-to-be) involves combining "what is" with "what is not" (fr. 8, 6-21). Furthermore, it also follows, not only that there can be no true thought *of* death, but also that *thinking* itself cannot admit of death. What is, cannot not be; true thinking is identical with what is; death involves what is not; therefore thinking, as such, admits no death. Just like its object, "what is", it is indestructible (ἀνώλεθρον) (see fr. 8, 3). Subject to no birth or death, thinking also excludes a past which would have seen our birth and a future time which will bring death (fr. 8, 5-15).

Mortals (βροτοί), however, who know nothing, who are blind and deaf, confuse "what is" and "what is not" (fr. 6, 4-9; fr. 8, 39). Their thinking of death, we can infer from Parmenides' poem, is false opinion, not true thinking. Perhaps, we might speculate, just as true thinking of death is impossible and thinking itself incompatible with death, so also those who think death, not only do not truly think, but also mix death itself into their lives (see fr. 6, 4-9), as Heraclitus had already suggested (fr. 88).

Parmenides' reasoning implies then, I suggest, that thinking (which is self-thought) and death are mutually exclusive, both conceptually and ontologically: you cannot truly think, if you think of death; thinking in itself, in what it is, excludes death. Indeed conceptual and ontological exclusiveness are the same: thinking and its object are the same. Where there is true thinking, there is no death. If we say that philosophy is concerned with thinking the truth, then we can also say that philosophy is opposed to death, it is incompatible with death. Our awareness of our death (A) is a false opinion, not to be reconciled with true self-consciousness (C).

The radical separation between true thinking and death is just part of the larger problem caused by Parmenides' separation of true thought from the world of ordinary experience. Various ways of dealing with this problem have been proposed, of course, by Parmenides' ancient and modern readers. Rather than going into this interpretative problem, I would like to emphasize the idea that death could seem, at an early and important stage in the history of Greek philosophy, to be incompatible with true thinking. Where there is true thought (which includes self-thought), there is no death. Or, to put it another way, where there is true philosophy, there is no death. For Parmenides, the initial awareness of death (A), contrary to what I have suggested in my introduction, cannot be a 'given' of consciousness. It is rather a confused opinion, entertained by many humans, to be evacuated from the thought of the true philosopher.

2. Plato

Another important treatment of the theme can be found in Plato's *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* recounts the death of Socrates, the day of his death. This day does not lie in an obscure and uncertain future, but is clearly and precisely known: it is today.

There can be no vague procrastination in our awareness of Socrates' impending death. If we take Socrates as exemplifying philosophy, then we can say that the text shows the relation between philosophy and death, or rather shows how the true philosopher relates to death. Socrates describes philosophy as the "practice of death" (μελέτη θανάτου, 64a6-9; 81a1-2). But by this he means, not that philosophy is a matter of learning how to yield to death, but rather that the philosopher seeks knowledge; that the body is an obstacle to this search; and that death, as the freeing of soul from the body, gives access to the knowledge which the philosopher has been seeking. All this assumes, of course, that the soul can survive the death of the body and that its objects of knowledge exist independently of the body. The conversation between Socrates and his friends on the day of his death, as told by the *Phaedo*, provides arguments in support of these assumptions. I would like to look in particular at aspects of these arguments which concern more especially the theme of this paper.

The capacity of soul to survive death, to exist independently of the body, is argued in the *Phaedo* on the basis of the soul's function as a principle of life (which excludes death) and as a principle of knowledge. In particular, as regards the latter function, Socrates tries to show that the soul has, as the proper objects of its knowledge, certain realities, the Ideas or Forms (e.g. the Form of Equality, the Form of Beauty), which are incorporeal, non-composite and indestructible (78c ff.). These realities are contrasted with the ever-changing corruptible nature of bodies which as such are subject to destruction. The incorporeal Forms are invisible, known only by thinking, whereas bodies are visible, grasped by sense-perception. Socrates then asks (79b, d9-e1), given this contrast between incorporeal Forms and bodies, to which sort of reality should be assigned the human soul: to the incorporeal Forms, or to bodies? The human body belongs clearly to the general realm of the visible, of bodies, whereas soul is invisible. However soul seems to oscillate between bodies and the Forms. It can become preoccupied and confused by bodily matters (79c). Yet it can also turn away from them and relate by thinking to the incorporeal Forms (79d). Its capacity to have access to the Forms seems to suggest some sort of *similarity*, some sort of natural *affinity* (συγγενέστερον, 79e1) with the Forms. On the basis of this affinity, Socrates can claim that soul belongs much more to the realm of the Forms than to that of bodies (80b). And this means that soul, in thinking the Forms, also takes part in the indestructibility, the immortality of the Forms.

It seems then that our capacity to think, to grasp the proper objects of knowledge, involves the exclusion of death. However, Plato's position does not seem to be as radical as that of Parmenides. In thinking the deathless, the Forms, we manifest a proximity to, not an identity with, the deathless; by thinking we take part in the deathless, but we are not identical with it. We can also, as souls, turn to the body and become involved in its processes, hovering near it after death. In this case our souls do not appear to die, but attempt to carry on a dismal existence in relation to the body (108b). Or they can share, through thinking the Forms, in the deathlessness of the Forms. We can, it seems, think death, but we can also, in thinking the deathless, share in it.

Plato has other arguments in support of the idea that soul is immortal. In particular soul, as a principle of life, seems to exclude its opposite, death (see 106b). And he takes up the theme of the immortality of the soul again in other dialogues. But if we limit ourselves here to the question of the relation between thought and death, then it seems that his position is comparable to that of Parmenides, even if he is less radical. In so far as we think the true objects of knowledge, we take part in what is without death. True thinking excludes death. But we can also think *of* death, an awareness (A) which, when conceptualizing death (B) as the separation of immortal soul from the body (67d), no longer stands in contradiction to true thought, as it did in Parmenides. So, in Plato, as in Parmenides, true thinking excludes death, and philosophy leads us to this deathlessness.

Allowance being made for the many important differences separating Aristotle's philosophy from that of Plato, I think that we can say that what Aristotle suggests at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X, 7) is essentially similar. There he calls us to share in the life of the gods, the immortals, as far as possible:

> One should not follow the advice of those who say 'Human you are, think human thoughts', and 'Mortal you are (θνητόν), think mortal' ones, but instead, so far as is possible, you should immortalize (ἀθανατίζειν)! And do everything with the aim of living in accordance with what is highest of the things in us. (1177b31-34, transl. Broadie/Rowe, slightly modified)

The highest thing in us is intellect, and it is by the perfection of thinking, by knowing (θεωρία), that we can take part in immortality. As we learn in the *Metaphysics* (XII, 7 and 9), the activity of the divine is thinking, a perfect unity of subject and object, self-thought.

3. Epicurus

In Epicurus we find what we might assume is a quite different way of relating consciousness to the awareness of death. Our awareness of our coming death (A) can be conceptualized in ways (B) which bring great anxiety to our lives: we may fear in anticipation the pain which our death, we think, will involve; we may be terrorized by what we think might happen afterwards, punishments inflicted on us by the gods. Epicurus wishes to free us of these false conceptions of death which cause such anxiety, to substitute for them *true* conceptions of death which will bring us peace. Thus, in showing that the gods - if they exist - are not concerned with our affairs and will not therefore intervene as judges of our lives, punishing us for what we did, Epicurus removes one false conception which contributes to our fear of death. He also removes another such false conception, the idea that our souls are immortal or that they will survive death: No! Souls, like everything else in the world, are congeries of atoms which will dissipate and be dissolved. This also applies to thinking: thinking, as well as sense-perception, will simply dissolve and be no more. There is nothing left of us in death. So death is nothing to us: while we live, death is not there; when death is there, we are no longer:

> Death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not (οὐκ ἔστι), and the latter are no more. (*Letter to Menoikeus* 124-125, transl. Bailey)

Thus the practice of correctly conceptualizing our awareness of death will preserve us from all sorts of false notions which terrify us. I would add that the correct conception of death, as we are aware of it, involves no incompatibility with our self-awareness as thinking beings: a correct knowledge of what we are as thinking beings will easily fit with a correct conception of death. True thinking is not incompatible with death; it is incompatible only with false notions of death. So we could apply Plato's description of philosophy, as a preparation for death, to Epicurus, but as a means of expressing a very different position: philosophy prepares us for death, because it teaches us what we are, how we are constituted, how this involves death, and what precisely death is.

However, my summary of Epicurus' account of death is not complete. Even if we understand that death, when we are no longer, does not concern us, and that there is nothing to fear from death or from an afterlife, the thought that death will come to us, one day in the future, can still worry us: How long do I have? What should I do with the time left to me? In other words, the temporal dimension which is included in our awareness of our coming death can bring further anxiety.

Epicurus also deals with this temporal dimension. We should not live in the past or for the future, he tells us, but in and for the present:

> We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone joy: life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us, in being busy, dies. (*Gnom. Vat.* 14, transl. Bailey slightly modified)

Living in the present is linked to Epicurus' conception of human happiness as consisting of pleasure. The highest pleasure is a state of freedom from pain and from anxiety. This pleasure is that of the present moment. We should therefore live for the present moment, not postponing our happiness for some hypothetical future, or mourning a happiness of the past: there is no happiness if it is not happiness *now*.[1] Thoughts of past pleasures or anticipations of future pleasures can help in strengthening pleasure now, or in counteracting the pain we might feel, now. Happiness is essentially linked to the 'now', since happiness is pleasure. What this means is that time, in the ethical domain, is transformed: there is only one time for happiness, the present moment of pleasure. Since the gods (if they exist) should be conceived as enjoying perfect, uninterrupted happiness, they live a life of undying 'nows'. To the extent that we are happy, now, we live this life of the gods. And it is through philosophy, through the cultivation of correct thinking about ourselves and about the

[1] See Hadot 2008, 42–51.

world, that we can live in this way. We live as the immortals live, if we live our happiness now, philosophizing.[2]

Thus we attain a certain immortality through thinking. This is not the immortality of a limitless temporal duration, but the immortality of the divine life at the present moment. I think that this might be the meaning of a saying attributed to Metrodorus, Epicurus' close disciple:

> Remember that, being mortal by nature and having a limited time to live, you have ascended, through discussions about nature, to the infinite and eternal, seeing 'things that are now and are to come and have been'. (*Gnom. Vat.* 10, Bailey transl. slightly modified)

Perhaps we should remember this past experience as a way of bringing joy to our present.

So it seems, after all, that true thinking, cultivated by philosophy, involving self-knowledge and knowledge of nature, reaches immortality, escaping death. But this is the immortality of a divine life lived at the present moment. It is the quality of life that matters, not the quantity of days that it lasts. And, of course, this knowledge includes true conceptions of our nature, our temporal limits and our death.

4. Plotinus

Finally, I would like to come to the philosophy of Plotinus. As a good Platonist, Plotinus holds to the immortality of the soul, which he seeks to prove in *Ennead* IV, 7. In this treatise, having argued against the positions of the Epicureans, Stoics and of Aristotle, Plotinus concludes in ch. 10 that our soul is akin (συγγενής) to divine and immortal things. If we want to know our soul, in its true nature, then we should remove everything that is extraneous to it, stripping it of everything which has been added to it. If one does this, what will one see?

> He will see an intellect which sees nothing perceived by the senses, none of these mortal things, but apprehends the eternal by its eternity, and all the things in the intelligible world, having become itself an intelligible universe full of light [...] so he will often think that this was very well said: "Greetings, I am for you an immortal god" [Empedocles fr. 112], having ascended to the divine and concentrating totally on likeness to it. (*Enn.* IV, 7, 10, 32-40, Armstrong transl.)

The divine, the immortal in soul, is its reason. When it relates itself to body, to a body, lower psychic functions emerge (emotions, passions), generated by bodily life. But, for Plotinus, reason is the essence of soul: it is what is left when all that which is associated with bodily life is removed from the nature of soul. Indeed, according to a notorious doctrine which Plotinus proclaims in *Enn.* IV, 8, ch. 8, part of us, our intellect, remains in the intelligible world, even if our soul is involved and preoccupied with material concerns. Philosophy helps us recover our consciousness of our life as

[2] See Diogenes of Oenoanda fr. 125.IV Smith (a fragment perhaps from a letter of Epicurus to his mother).

intellect in the intelligible world. This life is a life of self-knowledge which is also knowledge of all eternal intelligible truths. Thus concentrating ourselves on the life of intellect, we live as the immortal, the divine, in which there can be no death.

But, as Plotinus indicates in *Enn*. I, 4, 4, 33, the wise man "knows what death is". The context of this statement is the ethical evaluation of death, the judgement that death – the death of loved ones, one's own death - is of little ethical significance to the wise man,[3] who lives an eternal life as intellect. But we can suppose that the wise man also knows death as a natural phenomenon, knowing death, like Socrates in the *Phaedo*, as the separation of soul from the body. Plotinus' wise man will know that soul has a natural function in illuminating and caring for the body; that this function is limited in time; that the body as the instrument of the soul can break, like the musician's lyre (I, 4, 16, 20-29); that in due course soul will be freed of the body and will be able to live its life, if it is purified, as intellect in the eternal and divine. This life is what Plotinus identifies as happiness in *Enn.* I, 4, chs. 3-4. This happiness is lived, not in time, but in an a-temporal 'now', where there is no non-being (the past, which is no more; the future, which is not yet). This 'now' is the totality of being, eternity, which finds its image in the fragmentation and dispersal of time (*Enn*. I, 5, ch. 7).[4]

In Plotinus, then, self-consciousness reaches full self-knowledge in the knowledge which soul attains of itself as intellect, as part of the intelligible world of eternal truths. The soul which has this self-knowledge also knows its functions in ordering bodily existence and the limits of these functions, which includes the death of the body which is intrinsic to these functions. The deathlessness of soul relates to its life as intellect, beyond time, in an a-temporal 'now'. In comparison with this life, the termination of soul's duties to the body is of little importance to what would make our happiness. Our awareness of our coming death (A), correctly thought (B) with respect to what death is, what it means to us, what we are as intellect, fits well with our consciousness of ourselves as intellect (C): death does not concern us, to the extent that we are intellect.

Conclusion

I have sketched a variety of positions taken by ancient Greek philosophers with regard to the relation between our awareness of our coming death (A) and our consciousness of ourselves as thinking beings, as capable of knowledge (C). In the case of Parmenides, it seems that these (A and C) are incompatible and irreconcilable: true thinking, true knowledge, does not admit of death, either in what it is or in what it thinks. Our coming death cannot be truly thought: it can only be a false opinion. Philosophy, as the practice of true thinking, stands in contradiction to death. In the other cases, those of Plato, Epicurus and Plotinus, various ways of reconciling (A)

[3] See Plato, *Rep*. III, 387d.

[4] See Linguiti 2007, 19-49; L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* : "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present." (6.4311)

and (C) can be found, whereby our awareness of our coming death (A), if thought correctly (B), can fit with our consciousness of ourselves, as thinking, as knowing (C). In the cases of Plato and Plotinus, in our existence as rational souls, as intellect, we share in the immortal and live a life free of death. Our death is a separation of soul from the body, which does not affect the immortality of soul. Death is just part of the natural existence of body; it frees soul to live the deathless life of knowledge. Philosophy opens the door to immortality and relativizes the importance of death. Curiously, Epicurus reaches a comparable resolution of the problem, albeit on the basis of very different arguments. Thinking correctly (B) about death and about what we are removes the fears generated by false conceptions of death and its consequences. In thinking and reaching knowledge of ourselves and of nature, we give ourselves the means for living a life of happiness, which is eternal in that it is lived fully and completely in the present moment and is comparable to the life of the gods. Even in Epicurus, through self-knowledge and knowledge of nature, we enjoy a kind of deathlessness, which, however, is not that of an infinite temporal extension. This taking part in deathlessness includes a true understanding of our coming death and of the fact that, in comparison with our present joy, it is of no concern to us. Curiously, in Plotinus, temporality and death also contrast with a deathless 'now'. But in Plotinus this 'now' transcends time. In general, then, I think we can say that for these ancient Greek philosophers, the perfection of our capacity to think, to know, in philosophy, is the way in which we can transcend death. Furthermore, for Plato, Epicurus and Plotinus, philosophy also helps us to understand, accept and evaluate our death for what it is.

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