

Philosophy of Death in Early Antiquity (Maria Dimitriadou, Pedagogue)

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1. ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY CONCERNING DEATH

Unlike other living creatures, human beings alone are endowed by God with reason and we alone are aware of our mortality and death. Accordingly, we alone have the ability to think deeply about it. If we journey back in time we see that, depending on people's education, social class and interests, they investigated a variety of problems. Everyone thought about death, though, regardless of education, class or interests.

As the outstanding expression of what moves our human nature, art touched on this subject from very early on. Through poetry, music, painting, sculpture and architecture our innate awe of death was expressed, revealing our human nature, which is indissolubly linked to it. Thinkers in every period have attempted to provide an explanation of the event and the essence of death, the existence or otherwise of the life hereafter and the meaning of the present life.



If we

garner some of the views which have been expressed over successive periods, we can see the labyrinth of human thought and philosophy, the great need and thirst in the human soul to know the truth. This part of our review focuses on the world of antiquity, which set the bounds of philosophy and has been the foundation stone for almost all the later philosophical currents, outside Christianity.

1.1. The early age

The two most important works of early antiquity, the Iliad and the Odyssey, provide important details concerning the doctrines of death and the soul at that time. From the point of view of the Olympian religion, people at the time of Homer called death the twin brother of the imperturbable god of Sleep. Death was therefore considered to be a different form of sleep. From this simile, it's clear that there was faith in the immortality of the soul, in other words, the belief that people died as regards their material being, but not their spiritual one. Homer (800-724 B.C.) places value only on the present life and calls death an evil which takes away the joy of life. Through death, the soul is separated from the body and is taken to the utter wretchedness of Hades, where it moves around as an immaterial wraith. It also appears that the gods doled out rewards and punishments as they saw fit: rewards to the best of the good and punishments to the worst of the bad. From the 7th or 6th centuries B.C. the Ancient Greek realm began to be influenced by another view of death, the Orphic myth. Its supporters believed in the existence of the soul and its divine origin. They ascribed less value to this life and human existence, however. Their view was that the soul was a 'divine stranger' which descended into this sinful world and was imprisoned in the body. For them, death was liberation and a return

to the spiritual homeland. After a short stay in the spiritual world, however, it returned, through the process of transmigration, to the bodies of other persons, animals or plants in order to continue to be purified. Similar ideas were propounded by Heraclitus (544-464) B.C. and Pythagoras, who also believed in the reincarnation of the soul.

According to Saint John Chrysostom, Orphism managed to disdain life as a gift of God and people as personalities and His creations who have a sublime purpose. It also disparaged God by believing that the essence of the divine, the soul, could pass into irrational beings. He came to the conclusion that Orphism had nothing healthy to say about death, God or the creation.

Be that as it may, reincarnation is an idea which is prevalent over wide areas, such as in the East, for example, with the ancient philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism surviving to this day. The fundamental teaching of both of these is that death allows the soul to return to true life. The present life is an illusion and a hindrance to the true one. They cultivate living death, through efforts to mortify the passions and to grow ever closer to nirvana, that is, complete serenity and happiness.

(to be continued)