Socrates understanding of death

Inspired poetry and prophecy tell us many fine things. But we cannot easily understand what these things tell us. Thus, even when the messages we have achieved through such means seem very clear, we must never suppose that we are in a position to claim to know that what we are told is true. In the case of stories about the afterlife, we are told wondrous things about our souls migrating to another place, where at last we might encounter real judges, whose judgments are the products of wisdom rather than prejudice and unjustified opinion. Can we be certain that such stories are true? We cannot.

There surely is some truth here, given where we can suppose these stories come from. But what exactly that truth might be we do not know. Might death simply be extinction after all, like an endless sleep? Yes, and here is why: The gist of the afterlife stories, at least in Socrates' account, is that the afterlife is nothing for a good person to fear. And some might suppose that Socrates is not really arguing that death is a good thing but only that virtue should not be renounced in the face of death. My thesis, by contrast, is that Socrates' argument ought to be taken at face value: he really is arguing that death is a good thing. I defend this thesis by showing that his argument is seriously defensible: there are rational replies to the stock objections.

In his defense speech, Socrates ridicules those who act shamefully out of what he regards as an indefensible fear of death. According to Socrates, we should not fear death, and " those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken." (Apology 40c) Socrates makes two arguments for this conclusion: first he says that " To fear death..

. is to think one is wise when one is not…” (29a); second, he says that “.

.. there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things…” (40c).

The gist of Socrates’ argument seems to be this: Either death is the very end, in which case it will be like sleeping, which is nothing to fear, or else it is not the end, in which case the soul will go someplace else. Of course, all we have to go on is what the poets say about the afterlife, in which case – at least in the way Socrates reconstructs the account – Socrates again has nothing to fear. In the one case, if death is nothingness, then it is utterly without perception, which is like a dreamless sleep. But there are few days and nights, even for the rich and powerful, which would be “ better and pleasanter” than a night of dreamless sleep (40d6). Moreover “ all time will appear to be nothing more than a single night” (40e3–4). Thus such a death is a “ wonderful gain” (40d1–2).

In the other case, if death is a migration of the soul to another place, “ and the stories are true that all the dead are there,” then death is an unsurpassed good (40e5–7), an “ inconceivable happiness” (41c3–4). For whoever goes there will escape the “ so-called judges of this world” and find the “ true judges, ” and will meet sages and heroes, and- “ the greatest thing”- Socrates can continue to cross-examine people to see who are really wise and who merely think themselves so. The conclusion, in either case, is that death is “ something good” (40c4–5). The most common objection is to the premise that death is one of two things, for it seems that death might be

any number of things; hence Socrates is unjustified in restricting the options to two.

The problem is this: How can Socrates dare to have such well-defined beliefs about the afterlife if he is so ready to admit that no one knows what may come after death and that any confidence about this issue must be counted as “ the most blameworthy ignorance”? Do his beliefs about the afterlife reveal Socrates himself to be guilty of “ the most blameworthy ignorance”? In the Apology (T7. 20), Socrates claims that no one knows what follows death, and surely there would be a contradiction if we ever find him in some other passage claiming to know what happens after death. But he never does this; even in professing his beliefs in an afterlife, he never claims to know that there is an afterlife. Now it might reasonably be thought a weakness in Socrates’ argument that it assumes that, if we cannot know our post mortal fate, if we have “ no adequate knowledge of things in Hades” (29b5), we cannot know that death is a bad thing; for, after all, we do know that death deprives us of many things we value, that it causes suffering to those we love. And that alone is sufficient to make it bad. This weakness must be admitted.

But it is surely remediable. Even if death is, for these reasons, a bad thing, it would still be irrational to abandon out of fear of death the very thing that made life good and worthwhile. Second, and perhaps even more important, we are now in a position to see even more clearly why Socrates would regard it as “ the most blameworthy ignorance” to fear death, as he says it is in T7. 20. For if what Socrates tells us is true and death is either of the two things he counts as possibilities, neither one counts as something to be feared.

Accordingly, to act in shameful ways out of a fear of death is truly “ the most blameworthy ignorance.

” I am more tempted by a pious reply. On the hypothesis that death is nothingness, it follows that human beings are mortals. Hence to be dead is central to our nature; indeed it is life that is the wonderful anomaly, as Pindar saw in characterizing us as “ ephemerals” and “ dream of shadow” (Thomas & Nicholas 1989). Being dead, then, will after all turn out to be the condition most appropriate to our nature.

I see no problem in attributing such an understanding of our place as mortals to Socrates. And on such an understanding Socrates is justified, I think, in saying death is or is like a great pleasure. Socrates gives a defensible argument that death is something good. People fear death, Socrates seems to suppose, because they fear extinction. But when he reviews what this might be like, he finds that even this would be a “ great advantage.” Could the gods tell us this, by having our poets and philosophers speak of wonderful experiences in the afterlife? Why not? If they perceive that these stories will best reassure us about death and it is such reassurance they wish to convey to us, there is no reason that they cannot formulate their reassurance in such a way.

Socrates’ attitude to death and his behavior in the face of it have inspired many. The picture of the dying, Socrates must have afforded to his pupils, in the highest degree, what it now after centuries affords to us – a simple testimony to the greatness of the human mind, to the power of philosophy, and to the victory of a spirit pious and pure, resting on clear conviction.