



The Greek View of Immortality Frederick Mayer

In Greek civilization the accepted view of the afterlife was rather hazy and indistinct. The souls of the deceased were pictured in Hades, where they lived a vague and shadowy existence. As a typical example, we can cite Odysseus' visit to the underworld, where he finds his mother:

And I mused upon her words and desired to embrace the shade of my dead mother. Three times I started forward to embrace her as my heart bade me, and thrice she escaped from my arms like a shadow or a dream, and the grief grew ever sharper in my heart. And I cried aloud, speaking to her winged words:

'O my mother, why do you not stay for me who longs to embrace you, that even in the place of Death we may put loving arms about each other and find cold comfort in weeping? Is this indeed but a phantom that Queen Persephone has sent me, that I may grieve and lament yet the more?'

And straightway my lady mother answered:

'O me, my child, ill-fated beyond all other men, Persephone, daughter of Zeus, does not deceive you, but this is the way with mortals when they die: the sinews no more hold together the flesh and bones, but they are overmastered by the force of the strong burning fire, as soon as the life has left the white bones, and the shade hovers like a dream and flits away.' (*Odyssey* xi.204)

He also meets Achilles, who says: "Seek not to console me for death, glorious Odysseus. I would rather be on earth as the hired servant of another, in the house of a landless man with little to live upon, than be king over all the dead." (*Odyssey* xi.11.204)

But there was another view of immortality which became increasingly popular. It was taught by the Mystery religions, of which there were two main types in Greece: the Eleusinian and the Orphic Mysteries. The Eleusinian Mysteries, which arose in the 7th century B.C., promised immortality to all their members and were characterized by elaborate initiation ceremonies, secret oaths, and a general attitude of mysticism. They centered around the story of Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, who was taken away by the god of the underworld to be his wife. Naturally the mother could not reconcile herself to the loss of her daughter. Everywhere she looked for her, and finally she discovered Persephone's fate. Demeter was so greatly outraged that she revenged herself by punishing mankind. She saw to it that famine descended upon the earth. In the meantime, Zeus began to fear that human beings would not worship him if they lost all their worldly goods. Thus the episode ended in a compromise, with Persephone spending half the time with the god of the underworld and half the time with her mother. When she is with the latter, spring and light flourish on the earth; when she is in the underworld, darkness and winter prevail.

We may wonder how this story was connected with the concept of immortality. The answer is that Demeter, it was thought, had revealed the mysteries of life to the Eleusinians. Because of her message man is not to be afraid of death but to look forward to a new and blessed life.

Another question emerges. Did these Mysteries demand high moral ideals? Did they

require a change of heart? The answer again is quite definite: The moral attitude was secondary; what mattered most was active participation in this religion and the acceptance of its theological requirements. In short, it was verbal allegiance rather than moral reformation which was demanded by the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Quite different from the Eleusinian Mysteries was Orphism, which was connected with Dionysus, the god of wine and passion. At first its ritual was extremely savage and probably involved human sacrifice. There was intoxicating music made effective by kettle-drums and cymbals. The theology of this cult explained that man is a dual creature, possessed of both good and evil; he is a descendant of the Titans who devoured Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Persephone. This act of the Titans was instigated by Hera, who thereby exhibited her jealousy of Persephone. Yet the heart of Dionysus was saved. Zeus ate it and produced another offspring, being aided this time by a human mother, Semele. Being rather curious, Semele wanted to see her divine lover, but she was punished for her impudence and destroyed by Zeus. Her child, however, was kept alive, and Zeus made him the ruler of the world.

The story explains how Dionysus became central in the cult. The ritual dedicated to him was anything but restrained, for Orphism attempted to approach divine perfection; man and God were to become one. This belief caused a sense of alienation on the part of the worshiper, whose soul was regarded at first as being in a state of sin. Thus a series of transmigrations was necessary, at the end of which final bliss and union with the divine power could be achieved.

To accomplish this goal, Orphism prescribed many ascetic practices and favored vegetarianism. In this religion we find the body viewed as a source of evil—a contrast with the prevalent Greek view, which regarded man's body as the source of goodness and perfection.

In these mystery religions, another side of the Greek character emerges. In promising definite immortality and in preaching an emotional awareness of life, the Mysteries had more appeal for the multitude than had the religion of Homer, which pictured the gods in humanistic terms. Strangely enough, these Mysteries, especially Orphism, had important followers in philosophical circles. Traces of the movement can be found in such outstanding thinkers as Socrates and Plato. As ancient civilization declined and as it lost its vigor and confidence, these cults gained more and more followers and ultimately played a prominent role in technical thinking.

Throughout the history of philosophy, we find a conflict between the emotionalism of the masses and the rational detachment of the thinkers. At first it seems scarcely possible that the two attitudes could meet or that they could be combined. Yet, the more we read and the more we appreciate the history of philosophy, the better we understand the close connection between the two attitudes. In certain periods of decline—such as the Hellenistic Age, the 3rd and the 4th century a.d., and perhaps the 20th century—the religion of the masses becomes all-powerful and establishes definite dogmas, categorical ideals, and absolute rules of conduct. Thus faith becomes supreme, and irrationality is accepted; the philosopher frequently becomes a medicine man and a rationalizer for the established institutions.

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