Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

From the stove

Christmas I find a difficult time, for a variety of reasons, and have a tendency to withdraw, which I did I again this last year. Having recently bought a house, I threw myself into three months of renovation work and revelled in the distraction and in the meditative nature of hard physical labour. I have written little of late, but it does not concern me. My thoughts form slowly and come in waves, but do come, with a remorselessness of which I am reminded in the literal waves of the Baltic, where I bathe most days of the year. It is good to get thoroughly cold and to be reminded of the indifference of the universe to one's fate. Sometimes, I push my time in the water into the realms of extreme cold, to approach something like Conrad's shadow line. I know at such moments that another ten or fifteen minutes would see me drifting across it. Were I to expire, the sea would not mind. It would take my remains as it takes billions of other organisms and do with them what it does. I find comfort in this. Peace, even.

I returned to the *Phaedo* recently, as something about it has been bugging me. My sense is that whoever committed those words to readable form was not being frank. Were you and I to have been in the cell with the others, I suspect we would have heard Socrates seek to dispel the notion of the individual soul. Forgive me if I have rehearsed this idea with you before, but I believe that all the logic of what we are given as Socrates' words tends toward that position. I have been digging for other indicators in Heraclitus and the biblical texts. The former I find more encouraging, the latter less. Why might this be so?

I commit thoughts to paper along the lines that the soul is indifferent to us, as the sea is. We are not indifferent to it. Instead, we hang on the notion of the individual soul as

a form of eternal insurance policy. Our bodies may decay, of that we are certain; but our souls will prevail, in what form soever, as evidence to the universe that we once drew breath. This notion has been monetised by religions, and is the flesh in which religions consist; the promise of eternal relevance. That includes all forms of religion, especially the latest variants of signalled atheism: climatism, wokeism, whateverism.

The other evening, I found myself in conversation with a young chef in Sønderborg. Young to you and me. 30-something? No matter. Our conversation began with a sauce that he had been working on to accompany a Beef Wellington, and moved via his white fish bisque, which proved one of the most harmonious things ever to have hit my palate, to a consideration of the 68(?) classic sauces of the French kitchen. These he had mapped for himself, to provide a visual representation of those based on egg and those not based on egg. Like a family tree, it traced the offspring of the base sauces. He explained that, although they tend to vote along party lines, one or two occasionally cross the floor to accommodate particular meats or fish, and methods of cooking them. Grilled fish, because it always has some water on the surface when taken from the heat to the plate, requires a velouté to stabilise certain non-egg sauces, which would otherwise break down on contact with the water. He is a man who thinks deeply about what he is doing at the stove, and why. He bemoaned the fads and shortcuts that have crept into his trade, mostly, in his view, in the scramble for social media recognition. “People do not know how to cook. They do not want to do the work.” From there, it was a short hop to his asking me:

“Can you explain to me something Goethe said?”

“Almost certainly not.”

“Goethe said that if the world were to end tomorrow, he would plant an apple tree. Why would he do that? What did he mean by it?”

“What… end completely? The entire planet going up in smoke?”

“Yes. Why would he plant an apple tree if he knew the world was about to end?”

“Perhaps because it is a gesture of love. Perhaps he wanted his last moment on earth to be a gesture of love. I don’t know.” This brought us to the nature of love and, by that declension, to the nature of the soul.
“Was it not an expression of hope?”
“Hope for what? For a world that would disappear tomorrow, taking everything with it?”
“Yes, but hope for something better afterwards.”
“What?”
“I don’t know. His soul?”
“What soul?”
“His soul. The one we all have.”
“The one we all have, or the one we all share?”
“What do you mean?”
“Well, do we all possess a soul?”
“That is what we are told.”
“I know. But is it true?”
“I guess you’d need to know what the soul is.”
“Do you love individually?”
“How do you mean?”
“Well, love needs an object, right; whether animate, inanimate or abstract?”
“Sure.”
“And you feel that love?”
“Of course.”
“Does that make it your love?”
“It’s mine in that I feel it.”
“Yes, but is it yours to carry around with you in a bag? Is it something you have that others don’t? Something you can trade?”
“No, of course other people love. We all love.”
“So what is that love? Something each of us possesses or something each of us shares?”
“I guess we share it. If I love something, I know that doesn’t mean that all love is all mine.”
“That would imply that love is out there, all the time, waiting for us to bump into it. That the thing we call ‘love’ exists independently of us, and that we only recognise its presence when it manifests itself in our apprehension, through whichever cause.”

“I guess.”
“If is it out there, where did it come from?”
“What?”
“Where did it come from? When did that thing we call ‘love’ start, and when will it end? When did that thing we call ‘soul’ start, and when will it end?”
This is what I don’t find in the *Phaedo*, but which I find heavily hinted at, particularly in the discussion of causation in 99b-d. As I understand it, the *Phaedo* is said to be the book in which Plato’s hand is most visible among the four books of the *Last Days*. If this is the case, he seems to be being evasive; fighting shy of the logical conclusion of what he gives us as Socrates’ words: that there is no individual soul. The thing we call ‘soul’ is defined by our experience of it, but our experience of it is not material to its existence. Similarly with love, friendship, fear, anxiety, courage… We do not possess courage, we express it. We do not possess a soul, we express it. We do not possess love, we express it. Or is this argument expressed in the *Phaedo* already and I missed it? It would not surprise me.
When I asked myself the question, a few months back – “When did that thing we call ‘love’ start, and when will it end?” – I could only answer: “It didn’t, and it won’t.” Which implies what? Whether we use the term ‘soul’ or ‘love’, the act of apprehending them as acting in our lives makes us immortal, in that it puts us in direct contact with eternity. In the act of love, we experience the infinite. We become, if you like, divine, and that divinity is our immortality.
Last summer, I fell into conversation with a man who, five minutes later, began to tell me of his deceased wife, who had left the world a year or so previously, waved off in a matter of months by an aggressive cancer. Since then, he had been trying to find another woman. He had loved his wife deeply and was struggling. However, he had recently met someone who seemed to promise the possibility of a relationship, but… I went to bed that night thinking of what he had said and awoke at 5.30 or so to a thought. I wrote to him, straight away, as he had given me his email address. The gist of my

letter was: “You have to stop behaving as if your wife were dead. She is not dead and cannot die. She is not here with you, in person, but she is radiantly alive in the love you have for her – not ‘had’ for her – which shone out of the eyes of the man I spoke with yesterday. If you can accept that your wife is not dead, and cannot die, then perhaps you can let the other woman love you as she can, as herself, and not try to make her the person whose company and physical affection has been taken from you.” Unlike hate, love is passed on eternally, making those who love and allow themselves to be loved, eternal. No one passes on hate. Love is heaven; eternal life. Hatred is hell; eternal death.

This set me thinking about what it means to die. My father effectively died aged 21, although it took him another 52 years to stop breathing. I recall my mentor as an undergraduate suggesting a potential PhD topic to me as my UEA years came to an end: “Good death in Renaissance England”. I was flattered that he thought me capable of tackling a PhD, and that title would have been a cracker, but I was not in the right place to do that at the time. I was hell bent on taking my revenge on Oxford. Reflecting on that theme now, I realise that most of the PhD would need to have been invested in exploring the notion of death, in and out of historical context. I’m glad I didn’t follow that course of study then. I would have spent my whole time wondering what Oxford might have been like, and I was not ready to spot the loophole in the title. I would have ended up with a hundred thousand words of something, but would have done little to advance understanding, least of all my own. I can say that with the certainty of the subsequent three decades, defined as they were by uncertainty.

Socrates’ logic, influenced as he appears to have been by Heraclitus. The universe lives in a permanent tension of relativity. Nothing can exist but in relation to its opposite. There can be no hot if there is no cold, no sun without a moon, no love without hate, no sleep without wake, no death without life, no life without death. No wonder that Aquinas should so embrace a notion of the afterlife, or of the idea that Christ’s life was given that we might live. No wonder, either, that he should define God as the perfect synthesis of essence

and existence, and posit that as the model towards which humanity should strive. It is pure Socrates. All Aquinas did was to add a structure and an authority, which Socrates did not. But Socrates was not in the business of monetising his ideas.

The recent c-word hysteria is something I wish that I had died without having to witness, as my darling niece did, bless her, aged 20. At least she was spared that. As the hysteria whirlwinded around me, I stood dumb and heartbroken. It hurt to find myself cut off from all I had called my friends, all but my true friends, for my refusal to hang the blue paper from my ears and sing along with the Horst Wessel Lied. But mostly I was hurt by the spectacle of so many scrambling, clawing, tearing at structures and at each other to hang on to life. Why the immense fear of death? Why has ceasing to breathe become the worst thing anyone in the West can do today? That Final Insult To The Power Of The State.

Heraclitus' relativity. The fear of death can only be the fear of life. How many of us exist under an endless promise of doing something else? Being someone else? Then comes the propaganda that promises us certain death as a consequence of one unguarded handshake, and our chance to live will have been lost forever.

Some while ago, I travelled by train the three hours to Copenhagen and the three hours back again to collect some books I had ordered from a small independent bookshop, of which there are remnants still, but not in Sønderborg. They would have posted them to me, but it was a beautiful day and I love train travel, especially when, because I do it so rarely, I could decide to treat myself to the sanctity of a first-class ticket and the peace and quiet to read and doze in comfort as I was carried through the expanse of land and water separating me from the capital.

I had not been in the city for many years. It is a lovely place, with plenty of air and space and water. The latest capital (it used to be Ribe) of a country that, by any measure – 'metric' being the current argot – provides the best conditions for existence that humanity has so far contrived. The best infrastructure, the best healthcare, the best housing,

the highest general standard of living. I am aware that everyone here lives a notch higher in terms of comfort and convenience than do people in Germany. The Scandinavian countries as a group, and especially the ultra-rich Norway and Denmark, vie with each other for the title of best country to live in, awarded annually by some body or other. These same countries have the highest suicide rates in Europe, and it is not attributable to the weather. The world's lowest suicide rates, according to something called The World Population Review, are to be found in certain of the Caribbean islands (not Jamaica), and countries like Syria, Venezuela and Honduras, none of them noted for their high standards of living or advanced infrastructures.

I looked in vain for smiling faces during my hours in Copenhagen. I looked in vain for faces. Most were bent over phones. Many of those that were not, carried expressions glazed by whatever was playing on the headphones that framed them. People smiled as they sat together in cafés, but those who walked alone did not, and it was a beautiful day. My experience of life in Denmark is of a low hum of dissatisfaction, even anxiety. The almost old, fear losing the 'almost' bit. Many (most?) of the old live in isolation, planted before the altar of the TV, waiting for the world to end, or walking their dogs, waiting for relatives to call.

> Was it for this that the clay grew tall?
> – O what made the fatuous sunbeams toil
> To break earth's sleep at all?

Spring comes slowly here in Denmark. In Heidelberg, March is winter, and May summer. The magnolia blossoms unfold and fall within a week. Here, they stretch themselves through a beautiful month. I saw the first bumble bee in my garden yesterday. Today, there are others. I find it a blessing to watch the seasons repeat their patterns in slow motion.

Nick Berry

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Phone: +45 81 98 73 17

Email: words@nickberry.net