Socrates and the philosophers' take on death

I read a recent book called *How to Think Like Socrates: Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Life in the Modern World*, by Donald J. Robertson. It was hard to put down, as it contained so much that we now consider modern concepts about wisdom and discourse, along with some great material on the philosopher's take on the subject of death. Very refreshing for a mere 2400 years old.

Fear. We all have some fear about something, or many things. Socrates discusses the idea that fear can be easily controlled if we understand what we're talking about. Duh! But more than that, he tells how to overcome our fears.

Example: In a chapter called *The Wisest Man Alive*, in a section named "The Practice of Cost-Benefit Analysis," we read, "Socrates outlined a rational therapy of the passions or, in modern parlance, a form of cognitive psychotherapy. We could also describe it as a philosophical therapy, which aims to replace irrational fears and desires with rational ones." (P. 135)

Socrates said (in ancient Greek, no doubt), *"Fear … is due to the belief that something bad or painful will happen, a belief that can easily be mistaken due to false appearances. Conversely, desire can be seen as the belief that something good or pleasurable will happen, which can also be mistaken. We are especially prone to being misled by appearances when we focus too much on the present and fail to take account of the consequences of our actions."* Sounds right.

Our emotional issues might stem from cognitive factors, and their solutions could also be cognitive. *"…[I]ndividuals who suffer from phobias and similar forms of anxiety usually avoid facing their fears. … "Avoidance is everyone's favorite coping strategy because, at first, it invariably seems like the easiest option."* (p. 136)

Socrates goes on to tell us how to tackle such issues, and the author tells us how much of what Socrates says lines up with today's psychotherapy. For example, *"Sometimes cognitive therapists teach clients simply to ask themselves, regarding a particular course of action, "What do I have to gain?"* and "*What do I have to lose?"* I think Socrates would have recognized this weighing of pros and cons as an application of the 'art of measurement' that he discussed with Protagoras. … Of course, most people will object that knowledge alone is seldom enough to overcome our most powerful fears and desires. We all know the better course of action but follow the worse. … Socrates acknowledged that people would laugh at *"him, at first, for claiming that knowledge can overcome pain or pleasure. As he put it, people believe their problem is one of being overcome by fear and desire, or pain and pleasure, not one of being overcome by ignorance."* (pp. 136-137)

Now on the "fear of death."

The book is not only a treatise on Socrates' way of thinking and how to incorporate it into our daily lives, but it is also a riveting story of Athens and its many years of troubles with its neighbors, especially Sparta, including details of the Peloponnesian War. And the resulting transformation of Athens from a democracy to an oligarchy to a dictatorship, and its subsequent collapse.

The discussion on death came about through a discussion of consciousness that Socrates had with his young, but ambitious to lead, protégé, Alcibiades.

Socrates starts off by telling Alcibiades this, “After having cast your eye over nature for forty years, will you not now agree with the old saying that life is merely a sojourn on earth? You should pass your time here as a rational man, ready to depart in good spirits at any moment. Otherwise, you condemn yourself to the life of a coward, who ends his days being torn away roughly from existence, weeping like a child.”

Alcibiades replies,*“Fear grips my mind, … and tears me into pieces, when I imagine being removed from the light, and everything good, and left rotting, wherever that may be, unseen and forgotten, being eaten by worms and other foul creatures.”* Socrates repremands him with, *“You are speaking at odds with yourself, …. Are you not making the error, … of confusing consciousness with unconsciousness?” “How so?”* asked Alcibiades. Socrates replied, *“You are grieving over the loss of consciousness that comes at death, while at the same time you lament the idea of your body rotting, and being deprived of what is pleasant. How can anyone be pained by these experiences, though, if after you die your fate is to be in a state of complete insensibility no different from the one you were in before you were born?”* (pp. 247-248)

Socrates said, *“That death exists neither for the living nor for the dead …. [T]hey are not yet dead, and so the experience of death does not exist for them. Regarding those who are dead,” he added, “they do not exist themselves, and so cannot experience anything. You cannot suffer because of death while alive, because it does not exist for you, nor can you suffer after death, because you will be no more.”*

Socrates continued to explain that *“… when we fear our own death, as if being dead was somehow an event in our life, we behave as if we knew the value of something that neither is nor will ever be. Fearing death is like worrying about dragons, centaurs, or other mythological creatures. Although we can talk about these and other such fantastic creatures, we never actually encounter them during our lives. The experience of [one’s] own death is no less elusive. … For what is fearful is so to those who exist but to those who do not exist, how can it be fearful?”*

He added, *“You are forgetting that you will be dead, and so you will not be able to experience the suffering of deprivation.”*

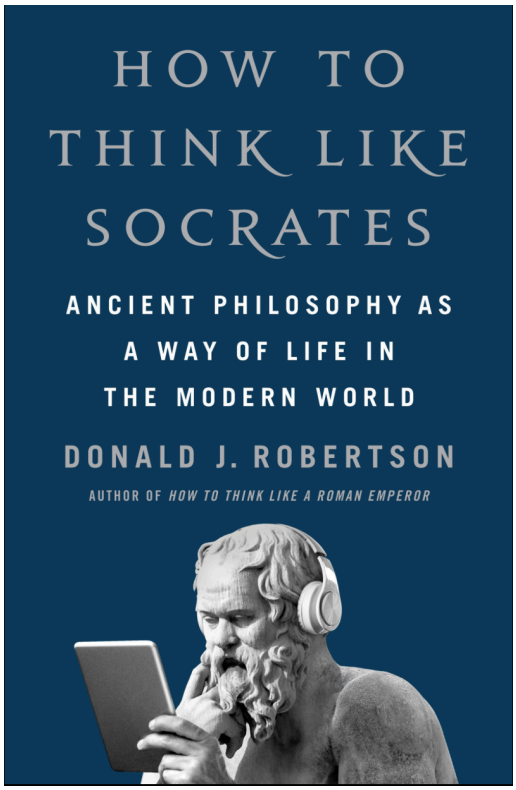
Socrates then said, *“… there are those who believe that at the end of life, rather than oblivion, we may look forward to immortality. They say the body is like a tomb or prison, from which the soul is released at death, in order to enjoy a pure and blissful existence in heaven.”*

“For a true philosopher, who loves wisdom more than anything, requires nothing besides the ability to reason in order to be happy…. As long as he is asking someone questions, perhaps even himself, and examining their character and values, he is engaged in the highest activity that life has to offer. Whatever happens to him after death, if he is conscious at all, and able to think about his situation, he will be able to reason and continue to do philosophy, in death just as in life.”

And, *“… [E]ither death is nothing, an endless sleep, in which case it is not evil but indifferent, or our soul continues to exist, and we have the opportunity to do philosophy, in which case death is something good, or at least no worse than living…. Death is therefore either something indifferent or something good,” he said, “and in either case it is something the wise man fears least of all.”*

A section of the chapter on *The Fall of Athens*, "The Practice of Overcoming Death Anxiety," our author tells us, *"For many people, overcoming the fear of death can change everything. The Stoic philosopher Seneca went so far as to say that as long as we are afraid of death, we shall never do anything worthy of life. At least, reducing this one fear may diminish countless others. Socrates realized that, as with all fears, the first step in mastering our dread of death is to understand that it is largely cognitive. We fear death because, despite our uncertainty about its nature, we believe that it may be something catastrophic. Animals withdraw from pain, and they have evolved many instincts that protect them from danger. They do not, however, fear death, at least not in the sense that humans do. How could they? They have no concept of death. We barely have a concept of death ourselves, and yet we assume that it is something to be feared."*

Socrates believed the fear of death is *"a dangerous conceit. We believe that we know something that we do not, in fact, know—that death is awful. We base our fear not on knowledge, however, but opinion. This realization is a form of cognitive distancing. We can learn to "distance" or separate our judgment that death is awful from death itself, the event to which it refers, by noticing that it is just an opinion and not a fact. Learning to tolerate uncertainty about the nature of death permits us to suspend our judgment, which will normally reduce the intensity of our distress, especially if this way of thinking becomes habitual or second nature to us."* (pp. 256-259)



"The majority of people consider death to be a great evil. Those they call brave only face death from fear of other evils. They risk their lives in battle, for instance, but only because they are scared of being captured and enslaved. Fear and cowardice can make us appear brave when we are not."

"It is therefore false courage … to endure one fear in order to avoid another, and it is false discipline to renounce one desire in order to indulge another. Wisdom is the only valid currency for which we should exchange our actions, by exercising courage and moderation in its name. When one desire is exchanged for another, without reference to wisdom, we have only the illusion or appearance of virtue rather than real virtue. This is the mark of a truly slavish character … in the sense that it causes us to become enthralled by our own desires. Wisdom requires purifying the soul of such attachments. Those who love wisdom, therefore, do not travel the same road as others, who do not know where they are going. Philosophers follow where philosophy leads them, and are not led astray by fear and desire."

There is the story, about singing swans. *"They sing most beautifully when they realize that they are about to die. Most men, because of their own fear of death, tell lies about the swans, and claim that their song is a lament. I believe, on the contrary, that as these birds are sacred to the god Apollo, they are prophetic. Having a knowledge of the future that awaits them after death,*

they sing with great joy of the blessings of the afterlife and their eagerness to depart from this world in order to join the god whom they serve." (Pp. 301-302)

As we all know, Socrates was ordered to kill himself, the result of not giving in to the state's demands that he refrain from telling the truth of his wisdom. So sad. It should never have happened in a country such as Greece, or here, for that matter. The truth can be a fragile thing.

The book is a good, fun read, with much to think about, as one would expect from Socrates, thanks to Plato.

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