

conversations with Charles

Death and immortality

I was recently struck by a review of two books by authors who do not hold religious views on the philosophy of death.^{1–3} To my mind the reviewer was extreme in his views about both the subject itself and those who might read the books, misunderstanding the position of those who might not fully agree with him. I raised the subject with Charles, who was brought up in the Catholic tradition.

'I read about two recent books on death in which, contrary to the assumption of the reviewer, I am sure you would be interested despite, as he sees it, coming from the Catholic tradition.'

'I am always interested in what the other side has to say, Coe!'

'I must say that as an agnostic I was appalled by some of the introduction. Not only did the reviewer suggest that the books were not for those who believed in an afterlife, but they were "written for those of us privileged enough to have been educated out of a belief in an afterlife"'

'He may feel that he has had a privileged education but, like all fundamentalists, he has certainly been indoctrinated into intolerance and arrogance, and out of the virtue of humility. This to my mind is the greatest of all personal virtues, whether secular or religious is immaterial, being essential for the contentment of both self and society!'

'What is your approach to death? Is there an afterlife, Charles?'

'Before I answer that I would like to explain something about the Catholic tradition, which I think is not generally understood. It does distinguish between belief and certainty.'

'But it claims the knowledge of God.'

'Yes, but in faith, which can never be proved in material terms.'

'Surely that is playing with words, Charles?'

'That's not entirely unfair, Coe, but I think not quite. Catholic philosophy would accept that in the same way as there can only be tolerance in the presence of the alien in its widest sense, so faith can only flourish where there is doubt and uncertainty.'

'And your answers to my questions?'

'To both of them I would reply that is what I believe, but that is faith and not knowledge. I cannot know the answer, but I

can use the legal tests of proof to analyse my conclusions on a different level. So far as a god, as written with a small g, is concerned, I find St Thomas's argument of the first cause irrefutable, accepting it as proof beyond reasonable doubt. Even an agnostic like you might concede it on the balance of probabilities?'

'I am not so sure, I really do sit safely on the middle of the fence!' *I said avoiding the issue, and adding,* 'And what about the afterlife?'

'The existence of a god certainly does not necessarily lead to an afterlife. There are all sorts of problems at a physical level such as the reality of the uniqueness of man both here and elsewhere in the universe. Metaphysically these are not such practical difficulties but my belief is certainly one of faith sustained by hope, rather than cold rationality as it is with the existence of a god. I can well understand how someone who is an atheist, let alone an agnostic, might conclude on balance of probabilities that there is no afterlife.'

'That is certainly my view,' *adding with a smile,* 'but I can still hope that I have been good enough to join you in heaven if I am proved wrong!'

'Hope, itself a virtue, is indeed the operative word,' said Charles. 'The Catholic tradition looks to a happy death in a state of grace with sin repented, and in the hope of eternal life in the presence of God.'

'But most of us are not believers.'

'Whether that is true or not, only in a small minority is atheism based on long and considered thought. Even where it is, acceptance of immediately impending death as appropriate fulfillment of now redundant life requires objectivity almost beyond the reach of man and the humility of a saint,' smiling, as he added, 'which of course an atheist would never claim to be. Unless an atheist truly achieves this I do not see how they can die in contentment.'

'I am sure that you would say that that is up to them to do so or suffer the consequences!'

'Only to the most vociferous, Coe!' Charles replied, 'But that is not the point. I am all for easing the pain of death for the dying, and their relatives, by encouraging them to celebrate past successes and treasured moments together and without regrets. What I fear is pressure for a trend to a secular atmosphere that removes all hope.'

'But hasn't religious belief exacerbated fear in dying by imposing the prospect of eternal damnation, Charles?'

'That is undoubtedly sometimes true, but I am sure more often than not hope of heaven predominates over fear of hell.'

'I accept that that might also be true. But if we are talking about the NHS, has not secular opinion the same rights as religious opinion in formulating practice?'

'You know as well as I do that if the sadly now controversial but nevertheless sincerely held traditional views are ducked, a bland policy dominated by the more negative secular view will emerge. It is in the nature of the beast!'

'There is much truth in what you say, although I would not agree with your implication that the likely secular dominance is entirely by default. Everyone's views should be given fair weight.'

'Of course I agree that the NHS should continually review and update the advice to their teams on the spiritual care of the dying in its widest sense. Nevertheless, whatever their personal views, those who care for the dying should never destroy hope of eternal life. This should be explicit in any policy. Whether this hope proves to be irrational or justified in the long run, we will only know one way or the other after death. Right or wrong, it is cruel to challenge the concept of

eternal reward in the last moments of life at a time when it may critically be supportive to the individual and their family. A totally unsympathetic culture might be just as damaging in this respect as the remarks of a thoughtless individual.'

Agnostic that I am I have much sympathy with what Charles said. I can see why he is worried when influential figures in the profession treat those who do have religious faith with such disdain. Perhaps it would be a little too far to say that the disciplining of a nurse for offering to pray for someone proves his point. Sometime later, Charles met Dr Smith, the author of the review, and they agreed that we should think more about death and hoped that readers would be stimulated to give their views. Dr Smith suggested another book that might help them in their deliberations.⁴

References

- 1 Smith R. Death becomes us. *BMJ* 2010;340:79.
- 2 May T. *Death: the art of living*. London: Acumen, 2009.
- 3 Critchley S. *The book of dead philosophers*. Colchester: Granta, 2008.
- 4 Saramago J. *Death at intervals*. London: Vintage, 2008.

Diploma in Geriatric Medicine

The Diploma in Geriatric Medicine (DGM) is designed to give recognition of competence in the provision of care for the elderly and is particularly suitable for general practitioner vocational trainees and clinical assistants. It is also suitable for aspiring candidates for any career post in Geriatric Medicine, or in allied fields such as the Psychiatry of Old Age, who wish to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject.

The DGM now consists of a multiple-choice paper written examination and a standardised clinical examination. You are advised to obtain details of this from the address below before applying to take the exam.

The next Written Examination will be held on **Monday 12 July 2010**. The application form, together with the necessary documentation and fee, must reach the College by **Friday 18 June 2010**.

The Clinical Examination will be held on **Tuesday 9 and Wednesday 10 November 2010**. The closing date for applications to the Clinical Section will be **Friday 24 September 2010**.

The Examination fee for the Part 1 Written Examination is £200, for the Part 2 Clinical Examination the fee is £295. Candidates must have held a post approved for professional training in a department specialising in the care of the elderly or have had experience over a period of two years since full registration or equivalent in which the care of the elderly formed a significant part.

Further details and an application form may be obtained from:

The Diploma in Geriatric Medicine, Examinations Office,
Royal College of Physicians of London,
11 St Andrews Place, Regent's Park, London NW1 4LE

Luke.Harper@mrcpuk.org

Tel: 020 7935 1174 ext 1445

Registered Charity No 210508



**Royal College
of Physicians**

Setting higher medical standards