

THE CITY OF GOD: BOOK XIII

SAINT AUGUSTINE

Chapter 11.—Whether One Can Both Be Living and Dead at the Same Time.

It is foolish, then, to say that a man is ‘in death’ before he arrives at death—for, if he is, then toward what goal is he approaching while he is finishing the course of his life? In fact, to declare that a man is alive and dead at the same time is as monstrous as to claim—what is impossible—that he is awake and asleep at the same time. This being so, the question arises: When is a man a dying man? Before death comes, he is not dying but is living; when death has come, he is not dying but dead. The one state, then, is before death, and the other after.

Just when, then, is man ‘in death,’ that is to say, when is he dying? Now, there are three distinct periods of time— 1) before, 2) in, and 3) after death—corresponding to three states of a man 1) living, 2) dying 3) dead; but it is difficult to determine just when a man is dying, that is to say, ‘in death.’ For, he cannot be living, since that is a state ‘before death’; nor can he be dead, for that is a state ‘after death.’ As long as the soul is in the body, especially if sensation is present, undoubtedly a man, composed of both soul and body, is still alive and, therefore, ‘before death,’ and not ‘in death.’ But, once the soul has departed and taken away all bodily sensation, then the time ‘after death’ has begun and the man is pronounced dead.

Between ‘alive’ and ‘dead’ there is no room left for a third state in which a man is ‘dying’ or ‘in death’; for, if alive, the time is ‘before death’; if he has ceased to live, the time is ‘after death.’ It is clear, then, that he is never ‘dying’ or ‘in death.’

It is like trying to find the ‘present’ in the course of time and failing because it is merely the unmeasurable transition from ‘future’ to ‘past.’ Does it not seem that, for the same reason, there is no such thing as the death of the body? If there is, just when can a thing exist which cannot be in anyone and no one can be in it? If a man is still alive, his death does not yet exist, since being alive is ‘before death,’ not ‘in death’; and if being alive has ceased then his state is ‘after,’ not ‘in death,’ and again death has no existence. Now, if there is no death either before or after something, then what do the expressions ‘before death’ and ‘after death’ mean? It is silly to use such terms if there is no death. Would to God that in Eden we had lived so well that, in truth, there were no such thing as death. However, as things now are, death is so bitterly real that we have neither words to bewail it nor ways to escape it.

Let us, then, follow established usage (as, of course, we ought) and say ‘before death,’ before death occurs, as Scripture does: ‘Praise not any man before death.’¹ And when death has occurred, let us say: After the death of this man or that one, this or that happened. And let us use a kind of continuous present tense, as we well may when, for example, we say: ‘While he was dying, he made his will,’ or ‘While he was dying, he left such and such to so and so,’ although, of course, the man could do nothing of the kind except while he was living, and, if anything, he did it ‘before death’ rather than ‘in death.’ However, let us follow the usage of Holy Scripture which does not hesitate to say even of those who are dead that they are ‘in death,’ not ‘after death.’ Take, for example, the verse: ‘For there is no one in death that is mindful of thee.’²

Until the day of resurrection we can rightly say that men are ‘in death’ as we say that a person is asleep until he awakes. However, although we say that those who are asleep are sleeping, we cannot likewise say that those who are dead

are dying. When it is a question of the death of the body—the subject I am now discussing—those who have already been separated from their bodies cannot be said to be still dying. Now, this is, as I have already said, something that cannot be put into words—just how the dying can be said to be alive, or the dead, even after death, be said to be in death.

For, how can a man be after dying if he is still dying, especially since we do not use ‘dying’ as we use ‘sleeping’ for those who are asleep, and ‘fainting’ for those in a faint, and ‘sorrowing’ for those in sorrow, or ‘living’ for those who are alive. The dead, however, before they rise again are said to be ‘in death,’ yet cannot be said to be dying.

Thus, quite fitly and consistently, I think, it has happened, not by any human plan but perhaps by a divine purpose, that grammarians are not able to conjugate the verb *moritur* in Latin according governing other verbs. The perfect tense of the verb *oritur* is *ortus est* and the tenses of all similar verbs are derived from the perfect participle. Yet, if we ask what is the *perfect of moritur*, the answer is *mortuus est* with a double *u*; *mortuus* being pronounced in the same way as *fatuus*, *arduus*, *conspicius*, and such like words which are not perfect participles but, like nouns, are declined without reference to tense. But *mortuus*, a noun, is used as a perfect participle, as though something indeclinable were meant to be declined.³ Thus, there is something congruous in the fact that the word expressing death can no more be declined than the reality of death.

What can be done, however, by the grace of our Redeemer, is to decline, at least, the second death, which is much more grievous—in fact, the worst of all evils—since it is not the result of a mere separation of soul and body but of a reunion for the purpose of eternal punishment. In eternal life, as distinguished from temporal life, men will never be before or after but always in death, that is to say, never alive, never dead, but eternally dying. And never is a man worse off in death than when death itself is deathless. (pages 312-314)

1. Eccli. 11:30.

2. Ps. 6.6.

3 . . . quasi ut declinetur, quod declinari non potest. . .