

Todd May

Death.

Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Limited 2009.

119 pages

US\$18.95 (paper ISBN 978-1-84465-164-1)

Where there is an uncompromising balance to be struck between philosophical analysis and popular appeal, this book succeeds in achieving it. *Death* is part of 'The Art of Living' series, which also includes books on illness, wellbeing, deception, work and other topics that touch on the series' defining question 'How should we live?' (ii). The specific question that occupies Todd May in *Death* is 'How should we live within the knowledge that life is fragile?' This fragility is 'the vulnerability of life to death at all moments of its existence' (104). It is a fact about us, and it is, according to May, what gives life both its meaning and its meaninglessness.

May establishes and explores the meaninglessness death imposes on our lives by arguing for a set of four positions. The first is that death is the end of us and our experience. The second clarifies that death is not a teleological end to life and living but 'simply a stoppage' (22). It is the end of the goods that we enjoy in life and the end of the good that is a life of experience. Nevertheless it is an end that that we know is coming. Doesn't that, then, make it an end that we can live towards as an end-point for complete and fulfilled lives? May has two lines of response to this thought that we can approach death with purposeful finality. One has to do with the uncertainty of death; the other concerns the importance of closure to life. Together they establish the dual role of death for which May argues.

May counterbalances the certainty that we will die with the uncertainty of when and how death will befall us. This uncertainty is the third position on the way to May's point about death and life's meaninglessness. It is because of death's uncertainty that death denies us whole and complete lives. We are aware that we will die but cannot prepare for it; whenever death does come there will always be projects and relationships left outstanding. What ensues, argues May, is the fact that death makes our lives meaningless. Thus, the fourth position is a consequence of the first three. It is the meaninglessness that follows from the fact that at any moment our lives could—and at some point will—end without proper closure.

Nevertheless, the finality of death and our awareness of our impending end does bring the kind of closure that lives need in order to be meaningful. May argues for this point by way of his critical analysis of immortality. One of the desirable aspects of immortality is that it eradicates what is bad about death, namely that death abolishes the intrinsic good that is living a life of engagements, projects, and goals. However, as May is quick to argue, immortality does so at the cost of having and maintaining those

experiences, commitments, and relationships that make life meaningful in the first place. May takes his lead here from Martha Nussbaum, who argues that we live our lives with intensity and dedication under the constraint of time; take away that constraint and the passion and commitment dissipates (63). In May's words, an immortal life would be 'shapeless' (68). Death, however, gives our lives shape and structure because death makes things matter (70). In this respect, death is what gives our lives meaning because it forces us to put things in perspective of an end. This is the other side of death—the side that bestows meaning on our lives. Death is still also what saps our lives of meaning with its constant threat that the very interests, projects, and relationships that make our lives meaningful while we are alive will be cut short without closure, never to be made whole.

Having established this dual role of death, May concludes that 'both death and immortality are inimical to us' and considers this to be 'perhaps the most important dilemma facing human beings' (78). Of course, there is no real choice to this dilemma. We humans are mortal and any means of extending our lives will neither defeat our mortality nor afford us the kind of living that May depicts as valuable. There is, however, a real choice to be made in the following: 'What do we make of ourselves if the death that undermines us is a necessary feature of our lives being worthwhile?' (78). With this question and the analysis of death that leads up to it, May forces us to confront the fragility of life, to put ourselves within the perspective of it, and to choose how to live within the knowledge of an uncertain future. Whatever that choice is, May argues that it requires living towards the future in the projects we choose to pursue and living in the present as we go about working on them. He does not argue about what our choices ought to be; he lets his analysis of death provide the perspective for making those choices on our own. In doing so, he delivers the substantial weight of his thesis that death is the most important thing about us.

There are two main objections with which May must contend in the defense of his thesis. First, the concept of an afterlife challenges his claim that death is the end of our experiences. If we survive death in some way, then death is not bad for us in the way May argues. Second, suicide, so it would seem, could ease the threatening uncertainty of death and allow one to have control over the arc and completion of one's life. May acknowledges both of these objections to his analysis of death, and responds to them. In the first case he simply states that he has no religious inclinations of his own and no belief in surviving death, and thus the 'underlying assumption [of the book] is that one does not survive one's death' (19). In the second he refers to the fact that failed suicide attempts are rarely repeated to prove that suicide is rarely based on 'reasonable reflection on the state of one's life' (77). However, elsewhere in the book there are, in fact, better replies to these objections. Within May's assessment of immortality, his thought that an immortal life of purely intellectual pursuit would be no life at all contributes to a convincing case against the meaningfulness of the afterlife as conceived of as an immortal intellectual soul. In addition, his practical point that the way and means in which we engage in our projects means that there is no good time to die, and his epistemological point that the information

for determining the right time to die will never be fully available to us, both undermine the possibility of a timely suicide and, with that, the objection that one might plan to die with closure.

At just over one-hundred pages, neatly divided into three chapters, *Death* is a short but rewarding philosophical examination of death. To be precise, the book is about death in the context of our human lives, i.e. lives characterized by series of engagements and projects (30). In that regard, the focus of *Death* is very specific, yet May manages to incorporate an exceptional variety of topics and material into the book, handling it all with sincerity and respect. This includes such standards from the philosophical literature on death as Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Bernard Williams' argument for the tedium of immortality, Thomas Nagel on the badness of death, and Epicurus and Lucretius on the finality of death. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* also feature prominently in the chapter on living with death. In addition, an artful and honest use of narratives enhances the philosophical theory and argument of the book: a fictional work on immortality by Jorge Luis Borges sets up the chapter on that topic and a number of personal stories illustrate May's points.

All of the ideas in this book develop in a pointed direction yet flow with a comfortable ease. That kind of successful fine-turning makes *Death* scholarly enough for the academic interested in a critical examination of theory and argument concerning death, while at the same time accessible enough for the reader interested in an introduction to philosophical thought on the topic, and to philosophical thought in general. All readers will appreciate this book's ability to get them to think. Amongst the philosophical literature on death, May's *Death* stands out for its ability to encourage and compel its reader to reflect on life and death in a philosophical and personal way. It is a fine achievement to make philosophy personally meaningful, and *Death* succeeds in this regard.

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