

**James Stacey Taylor, ed.** *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death*. Oxford University Press 2013. 288 pp. \$78.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199751136).

As editor James Stacey Taylor notes in the introduction, ‘in recent years there has been a significant increase in the amount of philosophical attention devoted to both the metaphysics of death and the many and varied ethical issues that are related to it’ (1). Although a bit uneven, this book contains many significant contributions to the field. It is a collection of essays by various authors who have established themselves as important contributors to the growing literature in this area, and who generally take this opportunity to present elaborations or developments of their views.

After a detailed introduction by the editor, providing a substantive outline of many of the issues to be addressed, the book opens with a delightful essay by Martha Nussbaum, which provides both an overview and an update of her earlier work on this topic (in *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994, updated edition 2009)). Nussbaum’s article provides an excellent starting point for the book in many ways. First of all, it offers a subtle treatment of the argument that lies at the root of much of the discussion in this field, Epicurus’ argument to the effect that ‘death is nothing to us.’ Nussbaum offers insightful discussion of how best to understand Epicurus’ claims (and the related claims by Lucretius). She notes that, in her earlier work, she had found Epicurus’ view to be ‘illuminating, though ultimately flawed’ (26). She still maintains that Epicurus’ view is flawed, but now on slightly different grounds than she had relied on before—a change she attributes in part to the insights of John Martin Fischer.

Another way in which Nussbaum’s article serves as an excellent opener for this book is through its consideration of a couple of authors whose previous work in this field is, perhaps inevitably, at least alluded to, and often directly addressed, by many of the articles in this work—in particular, Thomas Nagel (‘Death’), and Bernard Williams, (‘The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality’). Nagel famously presented cases in which things occur that might seem to make one worse off, even though one never becomes aware of them, leaving open the possibility that death may be just such a thing. With regard to this, and to some similar examples presented by Fischer, she insists that it still makes a difference whether the reason one is unaware of the events is that one is, say, unable to communicate with those who know of the event, or because one’s death has created a situation in which there is no subject of experience at all who could be made worse off. This raises the issue of whether one can attribute any predicates to non-existent things, which arises again in connection with some of the more metaphysical pieces in this book.

In this context, Nussbaum also touches on another theme which permeates the book. She reiterates her earlier suggestion ‘that life has a narrative structure that contributes to its value, and that it can therefore often be interrupted by death in such a way as to diminish its value’ (30). Although not often addressed squarely, this concept of the ‘narrative structure’ of a life appears in many of the contributions to this book, and the significance one attaches to it seems connected with the view one might take on a number of issues raised, such as assessing how important one judges death to be for the person who dies.

With regard to Williams, Nussbaum takes issue with his contention that immortality would necessarily be so tedious as to be undesirable, but raises her own set of concerns about whether it would be desirable. Her concerns encompass issues about whether the scenario we are contemplating is living forever while those around us age, or of having a small set of people live forever (perhaps the rich, who make use of the poor in order to be able to do so), or having everyone live forever, (which, she suggests, might be insupportable, and also might do damage to intergenerational interactions, including having and raising children). Nussbaum also intriguingly adds a section in which she

provides a critical discussion of her own earlier views on these subjects (which she presents as a critique of 'a younger Martha' (36-8)).

The next article is James Warren's 'The Harm of Death in Cicero's First Tusculan Disputation.' The number of readers who are focused on getting the interpretation of Cicero exactly right is probably relatively low, but this piece is not after all merely a discussion of Cicero. The author situates Cicero's discussion within the broader context of Greek and Roman thought, including Plato as well as a number of Epicureans. The wide-ranging discussion includes conceptions of the similarities and differences between the non-existence following death and that preceding life, and the question of, if death is a harm, to whom and when.

Rounding out the section on 'Classical Approaches to Death and Their Critics' is Kai Draper's 'Epicurus on the Value of Death.' Although Draper accepts the common view that Epicurus believed death could not be intrinsically bad for the person who has died, Draper provides an unusual interpretation of Epicurus in claiming that he nevertheless believed death could be *comparatively* bad for a person. He states, 'Epicurus did not deny that death can deprive its subject of pleasure, nor did he deny that death can be comparatively bad' (72). By interpreting Epicurus in this way, Draper believes he can protect him against a common line of criticism. This line, sometimes referred to as the 'deprivationist' view (espoused, e.g., by Nagel), grants to Epicurus the belief that there are no unpleasant experiences after death, but argues that Epicurus is wrong to hold that it follows that death is not bad for the person who dies. The 'deprivationist' holds that death could still be bad insofar as it deprives the person of good or pleasant experiences s/he would otherwise have had. Draper, however, argues that this possibility is in fact compatible with Epicurus' view, so there is no genuine criticism of Epicurus to be concerned with here.

I am not convinced Draper has the correct interpretation of Epicurus here, and in any case, it seems an even bigger challenge to read Lucretius in this way, which may be relevant since many people have taken the similarities between Epicurus and Lucretius to be much more important than their differences. What is more, however, the view commonly attributed to Epicurus seems a much more interesting view than the one Draper interprets him as holding. The deprivationists want to insist that there is after all a good reason to have a negative attitude toward one's own death. It is largely because Epicurus appears to deny this that his views have continued to provoke so much interest. Of course, many people do ultimately reject (what they take to be) his view in favour of the deprivationist view, so if what is important is giving him a better chance to be on the winning side, this reinterpretation may offer him the best chance. However, if the goal is to provide the strongest possible case against the deprivationist view so that we can really assess it on its merits, there may be good reason to accept the more common interpretation of Epicurus.

The second section of the book has been given the nondescript title of 'Death and the Value of Death.' The first article in this section is the latest in Harry S. Silverstein's series of articles involving 'The Evil of Death.' this one called 'The Evil of Death One More Time: Parallels between Time and Space.' In this piece, he adds substantially to his argument against Epicurus' claim 'that death cannot intelligibly be regarded as an evil for the person who dies because the alleged evil lacks a subject' (83). Epicurus' view is based on the idea that the subject does not exist any longer after death, but Silverstein here expands upon his influential argument that this claim can be eluded if we replace our usual understanding of 'exists' with a 'four dimensional' understanding. He notes that, in ordinary (or 'three-dimensional') usage, saying that something exists does not imply that the thing is present in the same place as the speaker ('here'), or indeed anything about *where* the thing exists. In a nutshell, his suggestion is that we should similarly allow the term to be used without implying that the thing is present at the same time as the speaker says it ('now'), or indeed anything about

when the thing exists. Using a contrast he had drawn earlier, Silverstein argues that his proposed four-dimensional view has many of the same advantages over our usual ‘three-dimensional’ view as the three dimensional view has over what he here calls a ‘0-dimensional view,’ in which the claim that something ‘exists’ would be true only if the thing were both here and now. This article is lively and interesting to read, and it also goes a long way toward dispelling some misconceptions that might have arisen concerning the earlier formulations of his view, and strengthening the reasons one has to endorse it.

Next is Steven Luper’s ‘Adaptation.’ This paper engages primarily with the view (advanced most influentially by Feinberg and Pitcher) to the effect that death is harmful for people because it involves the thwarting of their desires. Luper notes that one way, at least in principle, to avoid being harmed by thwarted desires is to change one’s desires (‘adapt’ them) so that the ones you come to cannot be so easily thwarted. ‘Perhaps we can even see to it that dying will be harmless to us: by becoming disinterested about living on, and the things it makes possible’ (100). Luper’s discussion involves some subtle and wide-ranging analysis of various accounts of well-being, and in particular the role of desires in connection with them. In the end, he argues that there is no way to ‘adapt’ one’s desires to avoid the harm of death without being self-defeating.

Ben Bradley and Kris McDaniel’s ‘Death and Desires’ focuses on Bernard Williams’ discussion in ‘The Makropulos Case’ of ‘categorical desires.’ This is a very technical piece that attends to a number of possible distinctions concerning the nature of desires (for example, between desires and preferences, or between the thwarting of a desire and the cancelling of a desire). They argue that Williams has left open many possible interpretations of ‘categorical desires,’ but that ultimately none of them will be as useful as Williams seemed to think for ‘understanding the evil of death or the wrongness of killing’ (133).

The following article, by Palle Yourgau, is the most squarely metaphysical (as opposed to ethical) piece in the book. It begins by referring to a statement by Kripke that ‘a sentence containing a proper name expresses a proposition if and only if the name has reference’ (134). According to common usage, a person no longer exists after death, and thus, in Kripke’s view, a sentence referring to a deceased person by name should fail to express a proposition. As Yourgau notes, this would mean even a statement such as ‘Moses is dead’ becomes meaningless—yet it seems to be perfectly intelligible. This leads to a fairly technical exploration of a number of concepts related to the nature of existence, including differences between the non-existence of a person after death and that before birth, possible worlds, modal logic, and so on. Although this content makes the article a bit less accessible to casual readers, it nevertheless manages to remain not only insightful, but entertaining as well. For example, in discussing Timothy Williamson’s claim to the effect that ‘all objects, appearances notwithstanding, necessarily exist,’ Yourgau goes on to say ‘the supposedly still existent Moses is for all that far less active these days, less strident, shall we say, than he was, to put it delicately, in his prime (i.e., when he was alive)’ (139).

The last entry in Section 2 is one by Stephen E. Rosenbaum called ‘Concepts of Value and Ideas about Death.’ In this, Rosenbaum argues that differences about ‘whether and how death is bad for those who die’ (149) often depend upon whether one is making use of a ‘concrete’ conception of value, whereby ‘nothing can have value, can be good or bad, for someone, unless it can affect him or her in some way of which he or she could be conscious’ (151), or an ‘abstract’ conception whereby this entering of consciousness is not required. This distinction is a familiar one (see e.g., J. Griffin’s discussion of accounts of well-being that differ over whether or not to build in an ‘experience requirement’), and is already widely understood as lying at the root of many disagreements about whether we can say death is bad for someone (see e.g., Nagel’s well-known discussion in ‘Death’).

Furthermore, in a section on ‘The Wrongness of Killing,’ Rosenbaum addresses the criticism of Epicurus’ view that, since it holds death is not harmful to the one who dies, it leaves no grounds for a claim that killing is generally wrong. Rosenbaum correctly notes that this does not follow—for example, in utilitarian terms, killing might be harmful for others, and therefore wrong, even if it does not harm the one killed. Rosenbaum fails to note, however, how much more limited the prohibition on killing would be in this case—that killing would be permitted whenever killing that particular person would not have a preponderance of bad consequences for others (e.g., if the individual is overwhelmingly annoying). Rosenbaum does usefully spell out a number of different things that might be meant by the claim that ‘death is bad’ (or ‘unfortunate’ or ‘tragic’, etc.): for example, the claim may mean that it is bad for the survivors, or that the process of dying was bad, or that the life narrative of the person who dies becomes tragic as a result of the death, etc. However, the main argument does not really do much to bring fresh insight to the overall literature on this subject.

Part 3, entitled ‘Posthumous Harm,’ has only two articles in it. The first of these is by Geoffrey Scarre, entitled ‘The Vulnerability of the Dead.’ In this, Scarre defends the general approach to questions about whether and how posthumous harm is possible that was put forward (independently) by Pitcher and Feinberg. This approach suggests that the thwarting of desires can harm a person, even if the person does not know the desires have been thwarted, and that, although it is impossible to claim that a deceased person suffers harm if a desire is thwarted posthumously, because the person no longer exists after dying, the ante-mortem person can be harmed by having a desire which in fact will later be thwarted. Scarre presents a very clear outline of this view, and gives it some defense and elaboration. The article is very accessible, and could be enjoyed even by beginning philosophy students, and it forcefully presents a view that still needs to be considered carefully among treatments of the issue of posthumous harm, though it does not really present much that is entirely new about this view.

The other entry in this section is Barbara Baum Levenbook’s ‘Welfare and Harm After Death.’ Building from an original example in which a person is sexually degraded while in a coma (and noting how little difference it makes whether it is a reversible coma or not), Levenbook presents an interesting argument in support of the idea that posthumous harm may be possible (or at least, that an argument sometimes given for thinking that it is impossible fails). In this careful article, Levenbook also offers what she considers to be an improvement on the ‘agentist’ view that draws a direct link between our welfare and the success or failure of our agency (205), avoiding a problem noted by Ben Bradley that arises when one takes it as a project that one’s life go badly.

The fourth and last section of the book is entitled ‘Death and Bioethics,’ and includes three articles. (A note in the acknowledgements section indicates that there was to be a fourth, on euthanasia, to be written by R. G. Frey, but he was unfortunately not able to complete that before his death).

The first article here is a very short piece by John Harris, the title of which (‘Doing Posthumous Harm’) does not really describe its topic. Harris notes that ‘using tissue, organs, cells, DNA, and other biomaterials from the dead’ (214) can be beneficial in a number of important ways (e.g. organ transplantation, but also education, and perhaps even what he refers to as ‘entertainment’). The main contention of his article is that it would be wrong to withhold these benefits from people, and that the interests or rights of the dead, if there are any (which he doubts), in any case could not be enough to outweigh these benefits.

The next article is ‘Suicide: A Qualified Defense’ by David Benatar. Benatar argues that suicide may sometimes not only be permissible, but may be more rational than continuing to live, and that this may be true under less severe conditions than is commonly accepted. The arguments

presented here, and the responses to arguments against suicide, are convincing enough. However, the modest assertions made seem so plausible on the face of them that there may not really be a need for substantial argument to establish them.

The last article in the book is by Walter Glannon, and is called 'Brain Injury and Survival.' In a way, it might be said that this article is not really about death at all. Glannon focuses on the notion of death of a person, as opposed to death of a human organism (a distinction reminiscent of one familiar from abortion debates). Death of a person is held to emphasize psychological factors, and 'narrative identity' over physiological ones, and a person who has undergone substantial psychological change is said not to 'exist as that same individual' (246), despite the continued existence of the organism. Glannon illustrates this conception through an examination of several cases in which individuals have suffered severe disruptions of their psychological selves, such as cases of severe amnesia. He argues that the significant psychological changes these individuals have undergone are enough to claim that they are no longer the same person, and thus, in at least one sense, the person they were has died. Through exploring the various 'disorders of consciousness' (254 ff.), such as persistent or permanent vegetative states and Minimally Conscious States (MCS), Glannon provides a very interesting and unusual perspective on a number of issues concerning death and associated issues (e.g. posthumous harm). He concludes that 'Persons cease to exist when they permanently lose integrated cortical functions, even if they retain sub-cortical and brainstem functions. They may survive as human organisms, but not as individuals who could benefit from or be harmed by actions or events affecting their bodies in such a state. Some may survive as persons, but not as the same persons because of discontinuity between mental states before and after a brain injury' (266).

The various articles in this collection provide insights into a number of worthwhile philosophical issues surrounding death. Some are readily accessible to even beginning philosophy students, while others contain a degree of technical sophistication that requires substantial philosophical background; some focus on aspects of the issues that are already fairly familiar, while others explore relatively new ground, or develop old positions in new ways; some focus on issues that are essentially ethical in nature, while others address underlying metaphysical issues. Overall, there is much here to reward 'philosophical thanatologists,' whether they are new to the field or already well steeped in the literature.

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