

Paul Fairfield. *Death: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Routledge 2015. 138 pp. \$145.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780415837613); \$44.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780415837620).

Epicurus famously denied that death was worth our attention. Paul Fairfield, however, believes that death can be a great educator, if we approach it with ‘caution, rigor..., boldness and imagination’ (120). In an exploratory style, Fairfield argues that the modern world has not yet figured out how to take death seriously. His stimulating and accessible book is meant to show the way. It is rich with the sort of wisdom you would like to hear in a homily at a ‘civil death ritual’ (51), but those in search of systematic analysis will probably want to find another church.

Decrying our technological society’s refusal of ‘all inwardness’ (5), Fairfield invites us to fashion the meaning of our lives by facing up to our mortality with Kierkegaardian ‘earnestness’ (19) and Heideggerian ‘resoluteness’ (89). In chapter one, he argues that we must ‘come to terms with our finitude’ (29), because death ‘is the basis of our personhood’ (25). Chapter two traces the path from the ancients, who had proper funerary rites and died good deaths, to the awkward, ‘managed death’ of modern secularism (50-1). Chapter three examines the meaning of suicide from Nero to Albert Camus and Randy ‘The Ram’ Robinson. Chapter four presents Heidegger’s philosophy of death as the best modern account of mortality (92). Finally, in Chapters five and six, Fairfield argues that we must approach death in a mystical frame of mind (112, 124, 127), cultivating humility (105-7), becoming ‘at home in a world of unlimited complexity and mystery’ (119), and affirming life hopefully, without abandoning reason (128). Thinking about death encourages us to settle our affairs, to gain perspective, and especially to ‘reconcile ourselves with the human condition and with what we cannot change’ (27, 29, 50, 103-4). To achieve this, we need a ‘new conception of acceptance’ (109), distinct from the too ‘tidy’ psychological theory of acceptance as a stage in a largely passive process of grieving (19). Throughout the book, Fairfield aims to help us to accept death with joy and Socratic tranquility, in an existential act of will (49, 57, 88-9, 109-11).

These are familiar rather than bold ideas, but then Fairfield doubts that there is anything new to say about death (10). What role does he see for philosophy if the truth is already known? Perhaps it is to assemble reminders for busy urbanites who tend to forget their mortality (3, 9, 17, 100-1, 104). Fairfield’s discussion of death rituals (35-43) can fruitfully be taken in this way, even if it concludes rather feebly: ‘If the disparate phenomena...contain an essence then I do not claim to have glimpsed it. All that can be said, phenomenologically speaking, is that rituals of death and the common sensibilities that they express exhibit a search for meaning that is as old as the species and as imperative as any in this particular form of existence’ (43). Further attempts at ‘existential elucidation and philosophical interpretation’ (97) cover major figures (Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Freud), minor figures (Gabriel Marcel, José Ortega y Gasset), a few recent books of philosophy, two films starring Mickey Rourke, and a lot of social science from the 1960s. Fairfield largely ignores recent empirical literature on death, and is ambivalent about the relevance of science for his inquiry (22, 45, 60-1, 78, 82). Not much is said, either, about analytic philosophy, which he regards as myopic intellectualism or literalism (121-5). It is sometimes hard to know if there is nothing new to say about death, or if Fairfield is not looking in the right place.

What, then, are the well-established truths about life and death that need rehearsing? One is that death is final. Another is that it is good to believe that death is final, and a third is that the meaning of life must be invented (1, 63). Believing in an afterlife may bring comfort but it may also remove the urgency to make something of your time in this world. Moreover, it drains your life of

significance since one ‘cannot create meaning without recognizing the inherent meaninglessness of things’ (104). Literal talk about the afterlife is foolish (125) and should be met with a ‘sigh’ (122). Theology, therefore, like statistics (60) and logic (120), falls outside the scope of Fairfield’s philosophical inquiry into death.

His convictions on these matters derive from Heidegger, who tells us that death is ‘the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein’ (78). This is suggestive, but false if ‘Dasein’ means ‘the living and acting human being’ (77), since the prospect of my death, however unsettling, at least implies that my existence cannot be absolutely impossible. Fairfield takes Heidegger to mean that: ‘dying...is experienced...as an anticipation that lends meaning and structure to our existence. Coming to terms with this is a precondition of one’s own death and, more important, one’s life becoming genuinely one’s own’ (78). Fairfield develops these ideas in some clear pages on Heidegger, but we may wonder if there is really so deep a connection between thinking about death and living a life of one’s own. Reflecting on death can certainly broaden our focus, casting the present moment against the backdrop of an entire life. In this way I may not just *be myself* but also *grasp my life as my own*, and thereby develop the ‘attitude of steady yet unwillful commitment’ (85) that is crucial for authenticity. But of course there are people who, without dwelling much on death, display such an attitude. Think, for instance, of political organizers advancing their cause, or parents working nights to pay for their child’s education. They have lived well and meaningfully without living contemplatively. Are their lives not their own? Should they be aiming, in that case, at authenticity? Would meditating on death be the best way to achieve that?

Fairfield thinks so because he is persuaded that authenticity is bound up with the narrative unity of a life (23-6, 82, 104, 106, 128): ‘An authentic life is lived with an explicitly temporal orientation... Its way of comporting itself in the present resembles nothing so much as an episode in a narrative’ (91). His model is Socrates, whose life ends in ‘a fitting conclusion and a culmination’ (111). Now while it is certain that some actions are incomprehensible outside their temporal context, only rarely does intelligibility require the ‘narrative of one’s life as a totality’ (25). Of course, there are philosophers, like Alasdair MacIntyre, who would agree that ‘a clear perspective on one’s life as a temporal whole enhances the...capacity and inclination to fashion decisions in light of available possibilities and to discern what the situation calls upon one to do’ (85). But an existentialist like Fairfield should be a little more suspicious here. If it is a ‘falsifying evasion’ (78) to dream of eternal paradise, why is it not so to imagine the loose ends of your life woven into a personal myth? Couldn’t the story you are telling yourself be wrong? What if narrative unity is compatible with authenticity, but *aiming* at narrative unity is not? If you told your friends that you keep them around because they are fitting characters in your life story, they would have a name for you, and ‘authentic’ would not be it.

The trouble here comes from Fairfield’s tendency to overemphasize individuality and exaggerate death’s importance, as when he asserts that ‘dying well is the goal’ (74) or that ‘one’s life matters precisely because it will end’ (85). He is impressed with death’s power to enrich our experience and ‘add a bit of depth to the personality’ (102), but his Heideggerian preoccupation with the ‘non-relational’ and ‘individualizing’ (79) should alert us to the risks of turning inward. Fairfield only rarely mentions our relationships to others (16, 53, 62, 128). Even then, he tends to view the loss of a loved one as an occasion for looking into ourselves (114) or ‘enhancing our individuality and taste for life’ (25). Anticipating a charge of solipsism, he argues that the Heideggerian individual is adequately entangled in a shared ‘lifeworld’ or historical context of meaning (89-90). Doubts re

main, especially given Fairfield's comments on the scene from *Barfly* in which Mickey Rourke gives a 'little taste of death' to two lovers who are kissing while stopped at a red light: 'The amorous couple...is exhibiting the habitual self-regard and unreflection of youth—and not only youth. One imagines that their existence lacks originality and any larger significance than the pleasures of the moment. What is more, they lack a sense of mystery' (96-7).

Something has gone wrong if the purpose of philosophizing about death is to liberate us from erotic love. *Eros* itself, after all, has a mysterious, originating, and revelatory power, and may even help us to understand Fairfield's own desire to give a 'taste of death' to his audience of vapid, city-dwelling lovers. He is sure that they should listen to him, but what does he need *from them*? There is some justice in Fairfield's plea for thoughtful 'solitude' in a world bubbling over with sex and Epicurean 'gregariousness' (4), but there would be no point in pleading at all if we weren't in this together.

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