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Review of “Death and Philosophy”

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Book Review

Death and Philosophy, edited by Jeff Malpas & Robert C. Solomon. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. 211 + xi pages (including notes, bibliography, and index). ISBN: 0-415-19144-0.

This anthology consists of an introduction by the editors and thirteen original essays from thirteen authors, including one by each editor. The preface states that the collection of essays had its origins at a conference in New Zealand hosted by Peter Kraus, one of the contributors to the collection, but it is not clear from the preface how many of the papers were delivered at this conference (p. xi). Obviously, the central topic for each essay is death, but instead of numerous attempts to define death, these essays generally focus on exploring the significance of death in human life from a philosophical perspective. The specific topics range from the recounting of a near-death experience, to a commentary on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, to interpretive essays on Heidegger's thought on death, to pieces on the significance of death for life and for philosophy. Although nearly all of the authors are professors in philosophy departments, there are essays from a poet and an art historian. This diversity in substance and approach might have been improved if there had been at least one essay that discussed death as something leading to an afterlife, although Betty S. Flowers, the poet, does lament the death of the afterlife in both literature and philosophy (pp. 53-56). However, this lack of diversity on that issue is made up for, in my opinion, by the way in which many of these essays is connected. Many of the essays illuminate other essays in a way that gives the reader insight into related and sometimes conflicting positions.

Table of Contents:

1. Death and philosophy: Introduction; Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon
2. My death, Tem Horwitz
3. Against death, Reinhard Steiner
4. On the purported insignificance of death, Ivan Soll
5. Death and the skeleton, Kathleen Higgins
6. Death, the bald scenario; Betty S. Flowers
7. Death as transformation in classical Daoism, Roger T. Ames
8. Death and enlightenment, Robert Wicks
9. Death and detachment, Graham Parkes
10. Death and metaphysics, Peter Kraus
11. Death and authenticity, Julian Young
12. Death and the unity of a life, Jeff Malpas
13. The antinomy of death, Peter Lopston
14. Death fetishism, morbid solipsism; Robert C. Solomon

The essays in this anthology are not easily categorized, and the editors made no explicit attempt to impose any categorization, although I think that the order of the essays reveals some effort at categorization. The introduction and the first five essays introduce many themes discussed in later essays. These are followed by two essays on Eastern philosophy and death, two interpretive essays on Heidegger, two essays arguing that death gives significance to life, and the concluding essay by Robert C. Solomon. I couldn't find a place for Graham Parkes' "Death and detachment," but I found this to be one of the weaker essays in the anthology due to its coverage of too many figures and issues.

The first essay, "My death", by Tem Horwitz, recounts his near-death experience in compelling language. At the end he writes, "All of my battles are indeed battles for life. My creations are the record on my journey into nonexistence. Any inattentiveness can result in death. Death adds a potency and concentration to life. It is a most reliable counselor (p. 15)." This theme that death adds something valuable to life is picked up in a number of the essays that follow, and Horwitz does a good job of reminding the reader that death is not just a philosophical topic, but also something intimate and inevitable.

However, in the next essay, "Against death," the author, Reinhard Steiner, explores the paradoxical position of Elias Canetti that even if death is inevitable one should fight against it and desire immortality. Canetti writes, "It is pathetic to submit to the knowledge of one's mortality. It is pathetic to pray to the gods who trample you with their strength. It is not pathetic to try to divest them of their immortality, precisely because this attempt is condemned to failure (p. 21)." The desire for immortality is discussed by both Jeff Malpas and Peter Lopston near the end of the anthology, and, in Canetti, we have a proponent of the position that one should strive for such immortality even though one realizes that it is impossible.

In "On the purported insignificance of death," Ivan Soll presents a sharp analytic piece that both contributes to later discussions in this volume but also offers strong criticism of Thomas Nagel's famous essay, "Death." First, Soll undermines Nagel's argument that since we can't experience posthumous betrayal and posthumous betrayal is bad, then not all bad things are things that we experience. Nagel argues that death is one of the bad things that we don't experience. Soll criticizes this argument with a defense of experientialism (pp. 27-28), but he also connects this criticism with another concerning the distinction between dying and being dead. Soll writes, "If anyone could suffer the state of being dead, it would have to be the dead, but it is the living, and only the living, who die. If death is a calamity, and calamity can meaningfully befall only the living, it is more promising to seek this calamity in the event of death than in any posthumous state, in which its putative victims no longer seem to exist." (p. 36) Basically, Soll wants an argument that death is bad for the living, and he thinks that Nagel has given us an argument that death is bad for the dead. For anyone interested in Nagel's position on death, Soll's essay is worth reading, and I have not by any means done justice to the depth of his criticism. Finally, Soll's essay connects nicely with Horwitz' essay about the experience of dying, and with later essays that discuss the possibility of things happening to the dead.

In the next essay, "Death and the skeleton," Kathleen Higgins argues that the narrative structure of human life makes death necessary in that the narrative doesn't have significance without an ending. This is part of the broader theme introduced by Horwitz that death gives meaning to life. For Horwitz, it added potency and concentration. For Higgins, death allows for our narratives, our lives, to have endings. Malpas and Lopston argue that death is necessary for life to have significance. I see this as the most

significant position in the book because it plays a prominent role in the essays just mentioned and because it is an important part of Heidegger's thinking about death, which is examined in depth in two more essays. I shall return to this issue with a critical eye when I discuss the essays by Malpas and Lopston.

In "Death, the bald scenario," Betty S. Flowers challenges what she sees as the sterile "economic myth" of our time. She proposes that we not rule out the afterlife, not because she claims that there is an afterlife, but because she thinks the effects of thinking about an afterlife can have salutary effects on individuals and the broader society. She writes, "An afterlife story, for example, like the one told by near-death survivors, would have profound effects on the way we live now." (p. 56) One excellent quality of this anthology is that the reader can test some of these claims immediately because so many of the essays are connected by discussions of common problems and ideas. Since Horwitz discusses his "post-death" experiences (pp. 10-11), the reader can re-examine the essay by Horwitz to see if it is true that thinking about death in this way can have such powerful effects

These first five essays give the anthology a brief, accessible foundation from which to explore the other essays. The next group contains "Death as transformation in classical Daoism," by Roger T. Ames and "Death and enlightenment," by Robert Wicks. These authors examine Eastern thinking about death from Daoist and Buddhist perspectives. I do not possess the knowledge of Eastern philosophical traditions to make anything more than cursory comments on these essays, but I thought that the essay by Ames was the better of the two. Ames sets out a fairly detailed case for the Daoist understanding of death as transformation rather than destruction, and this case runs counter to the arguments by Soll that there is a sharp distinction between dying and being dead. The essay by Ames raises important questions about this distinction, and Soll's essays, especially the discussion of change and destruction (pp. 37-38), in turn confronts the position that death is a transformation. Again, one of the strengths of this anthology lies in the connections and interplay among the essays, and this is just another example of this.

Unlike the essay by Ames, I did not particularly enjoy the one by Wicks, and I believe that this is due to the fact that Wicks attempted to interpret *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* from a Jungian perspective that I thought did not take the Buddhist elements seriously enough. He writes, "Since *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was composed as early as the eighth century AD, quite independently of the development of Western psychoanalysis, these observations offer some startling confirmation of Freud's core insights into the mainsprings of sexual identity." (p. 79) First, we don't need to be told that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was not influenced by psychoanalysis. This is rather obvious. Second, isn't Freud confirming *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and not the other way around? Third, Freud was clearly influenced by ancient Greek writings about male-female relationships. So, Freud, the ancient Greeks, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* share some ideas. But this doesn't tell us why *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is significant. Surely, there are other ideas in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that are more central to it. Finally, what part of all of this is startling?

Wicks does advance some evidence for this purported connection between *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and psychoanalysis, but I don't buy it. He writes, "This affinity between ordinary dream states and the after-death states of consciousness described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* establishes a bond between the Western practice of psychotherapy and the Tibetan Buddhist concept of rebirth: successful psychotherapy entails a rebirth of personality." (p. 78) Even if this is right about psychotherapy, this statement seems to misunderstand the goal of Buddhism. Instead of a rebirth of personality, the goal is to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth. These philosophies have very different goals, and this is masked by

talk about a bond between them. However, one might counter that Wicks provides evidence that this isn't really the goal of Buddhism. Wicks quotes a passage where the Buddha supposedly told his disciples not to waste time on "barren metaphysical speculations." (pp. 77-78) Does this mean that we shouldn't bother with metaphysical speculation at all, or just with barren metaphysical speculation? In other words, is the Buddha admonishing his disciples to eschew all theoretical thinking about the nature of reality, or is he simply warning them not to waste time on unnecessary theoretical thinking? The comparison between *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Epictetus at the end of the chapter illuminates this issue. Certainly, Epictetus was focused on the ethical (practical) implications of Stoic thought, but this doesn't mean that one should disregard all Stoic thinking about nature when trying to understand *The Handbook* of Epictetus. In my opinion, Wicks has neither presented nor mentioned the kind of serious arguments that one would need before one could read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its underlying philosophical foundation, Buddhism, as a purely practical philosophy.

The next group comprises "Death and metaphysics," by Peter Kraus and "Death and authenticity," by Julian Young. These essays are attempts to interpret Heidegger on death, and they are clear and thoughtful. Kraus attempts the perhaps impossible task of making sense of Heidegger on being and nothingness, and any obscurity in this essay is due to Heidegger, not Kraus. Kraus argues that Heidegger's philosophy of being can only be understood if one first understands Heidegger on death. Kraus writes toward the end of his essay, "Thus the possibility of metaphysics is, one might say, founded in that grasp of death in which Dasein's essential nothingness, and the nothingness of beings, comes to light." (p. 110)

Although she only uses seven pages, Young says a lot about Heidegger in "Death and authenticity." A foundational interpretive problem with *Being and Time* is the purported relationship between death and authenticity. Young argues for three possible ways to understand this relationship. She writes, "I have, in this essay, distinguished three ways in which death may be seen as related to authenticity in *Being and Time*: it may figure in the *explanation* of how one becomes authentic, in a *description* of what it is to be authentic, or in a *justification* of why one ought to be authentic." (119) I like the fact that Young is making a strong case for these distinctions in the text, although she admits that Heidegger himself was not entirely clear about this. I think that such clarifying distinctions could be very helpful to readers who aren't Heidegger specialists, but who have a deep interest in Heidegger's thought on death. *Being and Time* is a notoriously difficult text, and Young's approach should give interested readers a purchase on the text. This interpretive enterprise is definitely worthwhile.

The next distinct group consists of "Death and the unity of life" by Jeff Malpas and "The antinomy of death" by Peter Lopston. They are both arguing, as does Higgins, for the general position that death, or its possibility, is necessary for a life to have meaning. Malpas clearly attempts to extend Bernard Williams' position on the boredom of immortality when he writes as follows:

It is precisely because we cannot play through an endless series of choices, an infinite series of possibilities, that the choices we do make become so important to us; those choices establish the character and identity of our lives; they allow certain things to show up as valuable; they establish a certain ordering of and orientation within the world. It is perhaps for this reason that the idea of immortality can seem to entail a loss of meaningfulness, even a form of boredom. (p. 131)

Malpas makes these statements after arguing that humans, as we are constituted, cannot live eternal lives filled with projects and experiences because we would simply lose our personal identity over time. So,

even if our bodies could survive eternally, our persons would not. In addition, Malpas rules out immortality in a permanent, unchanging world as something that one would not desire. I largely agree with him on both of these positions, and this does demonstrate the irrationality of wishing for immortality despite the raging by Canetti. The immortality in the permanent world is not what we desire, and the immortality in a changing world is impossible for us.

However, I don't think that these positions, if true, entail that death, or its possibility, is necessary for living a meaningful life. As Peter Lopston points out in "The antinomy of death," this argument relies on the empirical position that immortality in a changing world is impossible for us (p. 150). But we can conceive of living eternally in a changing world, albeit a world different than ours, and we can also certainly conceive of differential levels of meaning and value for different eternal lives in such a world. If this is true, then it is not the case that death, or its possibility is necessary for meaningfulness in life.

To be sure, death might very well play a role in the meaningfulness of our lives as we live them in our world, but this role is neither necessary nor sufficient. It is not necessary because if it were possible for us to live eternal lives in a changing world, it would still be possible for those lives to be meaningful. And the insufficiency is obvious. Clearly, death is not the only factor in determining the value of, or in, a life, and Malpas clearly does not believe so either. He states, "A life cannot be understood as the life that it is other than in relation to the particular persons, objects, events and places that make up that life." (p. 133) He also discusses the importance of one's projects in life. It seems to me that the value in life is largely determined by the relations and projects that one has. Death might give a certain urgency to our relations and projects as Horwitz claims, but the simple fact of death does not make them valuable. They are valuable or not because of the people that we are related to and the projects that we have. People can waste their lives in this world pursuing worthless projects and relationships, but the same would be true even if their lives were eternal. In the latter case, there would simply be much more time to waste.

Higgins, as stated above, also argues that death gives significance to our lives. However, I think that her argument is guilty of an equivocation involving this idea of significance. She bases her argument on the idea that our lives can be understood as narratives. In a narrative, the knowledge of the ending allows us to see the significance of the events in the narrative. Analogously, our death gives significance to the events and things in our lives. However, there are different kinds of significance. In a narrative, events are significant because of the way in which everything fits together to lead to the ending. So, if the narrative ends in a car crash that kills the protagonist, then the fact that the protagonist didn't stop at a red light because he was an impatient person is significant. But such an event and its causes don't seem to be the kinds of things that make a life meaningful. Death doesn't give that kind of significance to life. It's our projects and relationships that do that even if they are cut short by events that are significant in some other way.

Robert C. Solomon's essay, "Death fetishism, morbid solipsism," presents a counterweight to this view that death gives significance or meaning to life. Solomon, in a sophisticated essay that I can't give justice to in this space, thinks that this focus on death might be a bit overblown. He writes, "Death is one fact among many (birth, the appetites, excretion, and according to common folk wisdom, taxes). Refusing to deny death does not mean viewing everything else in its shadow." (p. 164) Solomon is trying to create some middle ground between the position that death is nothing and the position that death is everything. In other words, death can be something significant in life, but it is not necessarily the source of all significance in life. Once again, this anthology shows its true strength, which lies in the inclusion of

essays that truly engage one another in a way that encourages the reader to return to earlier essays for further study. I think that both the general reader of philosophy and more advanced readers, especially those who think that Nagel, Williams, and/or Heidegger had something important to say about death, would find many of these essays worth reading.

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