

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

**JAMES STACEY TAYLOR**

*The College of New Jersey*

**John Martin Fischer**, *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life*, Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press 2020, 216pp.

In *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life* John Martin Fischer addresses a set of interlinked questions that are of perennial interest to both philosophers and laypersons alike. This alone does not set this volume apart from others—many philosophical questions are of widespread interest. But there is often a gulf between the interest generated by the questions themselves and that sustained by their treatment by professional philosophers. In *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life* Fischer bridges this gulf with a book that is both accessible and engaging to non-philosophers and of serious professional interest.

Fischer begins *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life* with the question “What is the meaning of life?” (p.1). Noting that this “seems to be question about the point or purpose of human life in general” (p.2) he observes that unless one believes in a god who created humans for a particular purpose it is not clear how one can identify a general purpose for human life. It is thus better to address the related (but less loaded) question of what makes a person’s life meaningful—what is it to have meaning *in* life? Fischer answers this question by holding that only beings with free will can have meaningful lives and that the more such a being loves something that is worthy of love the more meaningful their life is. (Fischer notes that the latter part of approach to answering the question of what it is to have a meaningful life is drawn from the work of Susan Wolf.) The capacity to have a meaningful life is widely considered to be important and so there is, Fischer observes, a “social consensus” that the death of such a being is “particularly bad” (p.23).

But this social consensus that death can be bad for the one who dies raises the question of what it is for someone to die. It is also subject to challenge from those (such as Epicurus and his followers) who reject it. After canvass-

ing different accounts of what it is to be dead Fischer addresses the three main Epicurean challenges to the claim that death can be a harm to the one who dies. The first is that since being dead does not involve any negative experiences for the one who is dead, it cannot be a harm to her. The second is that since a person is harmed by an event either during or after its occurrence, and since persons do not exist when they are dead, there is no time at which death is bad for the person who is dead. The third (the "Mirror Image Argument" made famous by Lucretius) is that since a person's prenatal nonexistence was not bad for her, her posthumous nonexistence cannot be bad for her either.

Fischer is unpersuaded by these challenges. In response to the first he agrees with those (such as Thomas Nagel) who hold that there could be cases where a person could be subject to an event (such as a stroke) that incapacitates her in such a way that precludes her from having any negative experiences as a result of it. However, since the event in question incapacitates the person subject to it (i.e., it reduces "an intelligent, active, and thriving adult... to the mental condition of a contented infant" [p.57]) she has been harmed by it. One could be thus harmed by events that do "not involve even the possibility of negative experiences" (p.61). In response to the second challenge Fischer notes that it is possible for persons to have properties at times at which they do not exist: There is, for example, nothing puzzling about the claim that Turing is admired now for his codebreaking work (i.e., he has the property of "being admired" now, after his death). In addition to this subsequentist response Fischer is also persuaded by atemporalism, the view that a person's death is a harm for her "but at no particular time" (p.67). He offers support for this position by quoting Nagel's view that there are some things that are bad for a person in virtue of her history independently of her experiences of them. This would be (Nagel holds) the case of a person who spent her life attempting to communicate with asparagus plants; that she wasted her time on this was bad for her even if she found the endeavor satisfying. In an extensive discussion of the Mirror Image Argument Fischer's primary response is to the version of this Argument that aims to establish that just as we have no negative attitudes towards our prenatal nonexistence so we should not have any towards our postmortem nonexistence. Fischer draws on an example developed by Derek Parfit in which a hospital patient is scheduled to have an extremely painful operation without anesthetic after which she will be administered a drug that makes her forget the experience. The patient wakes

from sleep and cannot tell if she has undergone the operation or not. But she knows that a patient who had the operation the day before suffered for ten hours while the patient who is scheduled for that day will suffer for only an hour. Parfit asserts (and Fischer agrees) that the patient would be relieved if he were to learn that his operation lay in the past—even though this would mean that he suffered more pain overall. This example, Fischer notes, helps to explain why we care more about the loss of pleasures that our death will deprive of us than we do about the loss of pleasures that we were deprived of by our prenatal nonexistence.

But if, as Fischer believes, death is bad for us as it (typically) both deprives us of good experiences in the future and thwarts our preferences to pursue projects that make our lives meaningful does this mean that it would be desirable never to die—to be immortal? After distinguishing between “medical immortality” (conferred by being invulnerable to dying of natural causes) and “true immortality” (which is complete invulnerability to death) Fischer addresses the question of whether an immortal life would be recognizably human. After arguing that it would be (and that “the immortality curmudgeons” who deny this “are mired in a stale conservatism”! [p.116]) he considers whether an immortal life would be “yours” (i.e., it would be the life of the individual choosing it in the same in which she cares about herself as that individual) and whether it would be attractive. After arguing that there no reason to believe that “you” (in the relevant sense) could not imagine having an immortal life Fischer addresses the question of whether such a life would be an attractive one. Here he is cautious, endorsing neither immortality pessimism nor optimism. Instead, after considering the possible ways in which immortality might be unattractive (boredom, the loss of important projects and preferences, the improbability that environmental conditions necessary for an attractive immortality will continue in the future) he describes himself as “an immortality realist” (p.140). He believes that aspiring to immortality is not incoherent but recognizes both that achieving this will be difficult and that it is not clear that humans will succeed in saving the planet.

After addressing the classic philosophical questions of the meaning of life, the nature and value of death, and the desirability of immortality Fischer turns to a subject that philosophers rarely touch on—near-death experiences. Noting that these “are often interpreted as a portal to immortality in a heavenly realm” (p.26) Fischer argues against the claim that they can only be

explained by appeal to the supernatural. But that they can be explained naturalistically does not “render them without meaning or diminish their transformative power” (p.179). Rather than eliminating awe he argues that naturalism situates it—and the stories of love and companionship that near-death experiences tell “resonate with us, comfort us, and transform us” (p.180).

In the final chapter Fischer briefly argues that we need to re-evaluate how we treat old people. Instead of “warehousing” them and attempting to prolong life we should instead both enable them to flourish and to consider whether the lives that we are prolonging are worthwhile for those who live them.

Throughout *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life* Fischer seeks a middle ground in each of the debates that he engages with, eschewing the extremes of (e.g.) the view that death should terrify us or that it is nothing to us (as Epicurus held) and embracing realism about both immortality and near-death experiences. He does not seek the middle ground to be conciliatory. Instead, he arrives at it through careful argumentation after assessing the relative merits of the more extreme views at play. Sometimes, however, his arguments in this volume move too quickly. (Although, as explained below, this caveat “in this volume” is important for his occasional swiftness of argument could be given a positive gloss.) For example, in discussing the case in which an active intelligent adult is reduced to the level of a contented infant through a stroke Fischer explicitly notes that he assumes “that the individual after the stroke is the same person (in the relevant sense) as the individual before” (p.57). This assumption is necessary to support the claim that the person in question has, in the guise of the someone reduced to the status of a contented infant, been harmed by the stroke that resulted in his condition even though this did not lead him to experience anything negative. Fischer acknowledges that this assumption is contentious. And the Epicurean defender of the view that all harms must affect the experiences of those subject to has a ready response: That the mental states of the individual whose experiences are those of a contented infant are so far removed from those of the intelligent adult that these are two different individuals. Since this is so, the Epicurean could continue, the stroke caused the death of the active intelligent adult and replaced her with someone physically similar but mentally distinct. To hold that this example establishes that a person could be harmed by something that she does not experience as negative is thus to beg the question against the Epicurean view.

Fischer does not claim that the Stroke Case definitively establishes that death could be a harm to the one who dies but the weaker conclusion that “death might well be a bad thing for the individual who dies” (p. 59). This careful fairness is a hallmark of Fischer’s work and complements the “middle way” approach that he adopts in *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life*. It also ensures that this volume is an exemplar of how to do philosophy: Follow the arguments where they lead, take care to be as charitable as possible to those whose positions you criticize, and recognize that the conclusions should only be advanced as confidently as the arguments allow. But what of Fischer’s occasional swiftness of argument? This should be construed as a feature of this volume rather than a bug. Some who recognize the ellipses in some of Fischer’s arguments will thus be spurred further to engage in the debate. To facilitate this at the end of each chapter Fischer provides annotated suggestions for further reading. This volume should thus be considered to be a provocative introduction to a series of interlinked conversations about these issues—conversations to which Fischer has been one of the (if not *the*) most important contributors.

*Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life* is a wonderful and accessible complement to Fischer’s earlier work on these topics, especially the seminal essays collected in *Our Stories* (Oxford 2009). It should not only be read by all who are interested in its subject matter but by anyone who would benefit from engaging with some of the most fundamental questions concerning “what it’s all about” (p.1). As such, this is thus one of those rare books that should be read by almost everyone.

## **WILLIAM ABRAHAM**

*Southern Methodist University*

**Jeremy Koperski, *Divine Action, Determinism, and the Laws of Nature*. London and New York: Routledge.160pp.**

The debate about the relation between religion and science has become somewhat passé. Theologians have moved on to deal with challenges from postmodernity and social justice; popular religious culture is awash with concerns about politics. Yet there is still much to ponder. Jeffrey Koperski has