

John Cottingham

On the Meaning of Life.

New York: Routledge 2003. Pp. x +124.

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Peter Heinegg, ed.

Mortalism: Readings on the Meaning of Life.

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 2003. Pp. 214.

US\$23.00. ISBN 1-59102-042-5.

The question of the meaning of life was little discussed by analytic philosophers during most of the twentieth century; indeed, many dismissed it as devoid of content. These books reflect a welcome resurgence of interest in the question that has emerged in the last several years. Addressing this question has the potential to reshape and improve our understanding of such things as the nature of the good life, the relative importance of moral, epistemic, aesthetic, and other values, and the nature of wisdom (amongst other things). It is also an issue that the public expects philosophers to address, and we would do well to reclaim it from self-help gurus and other charlatans.

Cottingham's volume is part of Routledge's recent 'Thinking in Action' series, a series that (according to the editors) 'takes philosophy to its public. Each book in the series is written by a major international philosopher or thinker, engages with an important contemporary topic, and is clearly and accessibly written.' Cottingham's book largely succeeds on all of these counts.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first is primarily devoted to addressing whether the question is itself meaningful (Cottingham believes so), and whether a range of secular answers to the question - that often involve treating a meaningful life as simply one in which a person is involved in projects that she herself values - are adequate (he believes not). Cottingham suggests that a meaningful life will necessarily involve flourishing as a human being, a social creature with a range of abilities, needs, potentials, and so forth. Meaning is created as we engage in social practices that contribute to such flourishing, both for ourselves, and for others.

The second chapter focuses on finding a space for theistic belief in a contemporary, post-Darwinian worldview. Cottingham argues plausibly that the theist need not reject evolution, the Big Bang, and so on; nothing prevents God from making use of such mechanisms in His creation. I suspect Cottingham's arguments here will seem somewhat obvious to philosophers, but will be valuable to many lay readers who might be too quick to assume that theism and a full embrace of the sciences are necessarily incompatible.

Finally, the third chapter (the longest of the three) provides further exposition and development of Cottingham's position. Cottingham argues that theism provides us with a hope of success and a resiliency in our projects

that is absent in secular approaches to a meaningful life. Further, by engaging in the practices of a spiritual tradition our character is shaped in beneficial ways, and our life as a whole becomes more meaningful as we take part in a way of life that is focused on love, and the good. And, following Pascal, he argues that by engaging in such spiritual practices we will (typically) come to a rich faith. (Cottingham takes the question of the existence of a God to be beyond our rational capacities, but argues that this allows us room for the commitment and faith he proposes.)

Cottingham's writing is engaging and accessible, and he manages to cover a good bit of ground in a short volume. There are occasions where arguments could use further development and where the assessment of various views seems to end too soon; but this is to be expected in a short introductory volume intended for a general audience. And indeed, if one were using the book in an introductory course, there would be plenty of scope for using it as a springboard for more in-depth discussions in class.

Relatedly, Cottingham draws upon passages from an impressive array of philosophers, poets, and other writers. In some cases the background to the views presented is rather incomplete, and would need to be supplemented. For example, Cottingham mentions the views of Spinoza and Leibniz, but I worry that his explanations would not be adequate for many undergraduates or non-philosophers. Again, this would be an area where an instructor could supplement the volume with further in-class lecturing or discussion of these views.

On the Meaning of Life would serve well as a textbook for units of lower-level philosophy courses on this issue; general readers would also profit from it. It is concise and clear, and would provide an excellent starting point for discussions with students. As a short introductory text there is less for professional philosophers; still, there are several aspects that should be of interest to such. In particular, Cottingham's positive proposal will appeal to many, and provides an interesting case of a broadly theistic or spiritual account of the meaning of life that downplays the importance of an eternal life and rewards, and instead focuses on the importance of engaging in valuable practices in our daily lives.

Heinegg's anthology consists of brief selections (often a page or less) from over fifty authors, selections that in Heinegg's view argue for or express 'mortalism', the position that there is no human afterlife. The selections are organized chronologically, and draw upon a wide range of authors, including Marcus Aurelius, Shakespeare, Dickinson, Freud, Tolstoy, and Joyce.

Unfortunately, this anthology will be of limited interest to most philosophers. Many of the selections do not obviously argue for or express 'mortalism'; Heinegg seems to include many pieces that simply express fear at the thought of death, and often takes an author's mere failure to mention an afterlife as adequate reason to include a passage as an instance of mortalism. Beyond this, there is very, very little argument included in the selections. Rather, there are several poetic expressions of a fear of death, or a stubborn resistance against it; while these passages are often quite moving, one will

be hard pressed to find extended, philosophically articulate discussions in this volume.

The scope of the anthology is also rather narrow: all of the selections support or express mortalism; no other positions are included. It thus would not function well as a general anthology for classes dealing with the meaning of life. I should perhaps add that the subtitle, 'Readings on the Meaning of Life', is rather misleading; there is little or no explicit discussion of such. Again, the volume contains many poetic or fictional passages that express or reflect the belief that there is no afterlife; even in those cases where Heinegg includes passages from philosophers, he typically fails to include their arguments, and instead merely provides summary statements of their views. Only in rare instances is there any discussion of the implications of mortalism for the meaning of life, or of the different accounts of the meaning of life open to and endorsed by mortalists. Heinegg's anthology might be of interest to those looking for brief passages from poets and other writers on death; but beyond this there is little discussion of the meaning of life, little argument, and little explicit philosophical substance to this collection.

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Jürgen Habermas

The Future of Human Nature.

Cambridge, MA: Polity Press 2003.

Pp. viii+127.

US\$17.95. ISBN 0-7456-2986-5.

Habermas' concern in this essay is to respond to 'debates touched off by genetic technology' (vii). Facing ferocious debates regarding biotechnology, the philosophical question of norms and morals seems to become irrelevant because it loses its own way amid the overspecialisation. Habermas is criticising not only 'deontological theories after Kant' (4) that cannot respond to the question of the necessity of being moral, but also the 'political theories' which are becoming incapable of resolving citizen's conflicts 'about the principles of their living together', as well as 'theories of justice that have been uncoupled from ethics'. Habermas' aim is vast, and his concern is to restore a philosophical possibility that will make possible 'a substantive position' (11). The need for such a position is essential, because what is really at stake is 'the ethical self-understanding of language-using agents'. But, Habermas notices also that 'today the original philosophical question con-