

Book Review of John Martin Fischer's *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life*

Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life. By John Martin Fischer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 216 pages. Paperback. \$29.99.

John Martin Fischer's thought-provoking, introductory level book focuses on big philosophical questions: the meaning of life, the badness of death, and the value of immortality. He is a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Riverside and was the Project Leader of The Immortality Project funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Fischer takes an empirical approach to traditionally theistic questions, which is the book's strength, while also being its chief weakness. He does well at jockeying for a new position among naturalistic explanations but fails to consider plausible theistic alternatives.

In Chapter One, "Meaning in Life," Fischer agrees that the "zooming-out" perspective, where one evaluates one's life from a third-person perspective, shows that life has no ultimate meaning, as Thomas Nagel and Richard Taylor plausibly argue. Fischer, however, sides with the stepping-back approach of Susan Wolf, where he holds there are objective, mind-dependent standards that deem some lives better than others, concluding there is "meaning in life" but no "meaning of life."

In Chapter Two, "The Meaning of Death," he provides a general definition of death and explains the Epicurean reasons for not fearing death, which are explicated and refuted in the following chapters. In Chapter Three, "Bads Without Negative Experiences," he argues against the view that death is not bad because the dead cannot have negative experiences, where he tells us death deprives us of future goods. In Chapter Four, "It's About Time: Timing and Mirror Images," he responds to Lucretius's Epicurean problem for deprivation theory. The deprivationist tells us posthumous non-existence is bad (i.e., a deprivation) but pre-natal non-existence is neutral, despite it also being a deprivation. Fischer draws on the work of Derek Parfit and Bernard Williams, where he argues that death ends one's life projects, which is bad, but pre-natal non-existence does not, concluding there should be no symmetry, defending deprivationism.

In Chapter Five, "The Meaning of Immortality," he argues in favor of "medical immortality," as opposed to "real immortality" or "religious immortality," where he assumes favorable conditions, continued existence without frail bodies, diminished cognitive capacities, overpopulation, and global warming. He criticizes the "immortality curmudgeons" (e.g., Shelly Kagan and Todd May) and, in part, favors the "immortality optimists" (e.g., Ray Kurzweil and Aubrey de Grey), but concludes with his own nuanced position: what he calls "immortality realism," which holds immortality to be valuable but not desirable, for favorable conditions are unlikely. He goes on in Chapter Six, "Would Immortal Life Be Recognizably Human?," to admit that an endless life would be a narrative without an ending, which seems to be a problem, as Bernard Williams proposes in his formulation of the Makropulos Case, but Fischer concludes that life stages themselves are sufficient to be "recognizably human." In Chapter 7, "Identity, Boredom, and Immortality Realism," he argues against the curmudgeons that hold immortal life

is not desirable because it will significantly change who we are, make us intolerably bored, and eliminate the value of life.

He last evaluates theistic arguments for the afterlife from near-death experiences (NDEs), which is the topic of his previous book. He grants there are out-of-body experiences, tunnel vision with a bright light, and experiences of conversations with deity and friends, but denies their reality. His explanation is the brain is most likely not offline during NDEs, but, even if his proposal is mistaken, the NDE is not a supernatural occurrence, for, he claims, the NDE takes place during the return to consciousness. Further, he tells us the experience has natural causes. Some, for instance, are due to hallucinogenic drugs, cultural interpretations, naturally stimulated illusions, or some other physical cause. The weakness of this account is there is no sustained focus on the large amount of corroborated evidence and testimonies made by doctors and others, well documented by Raymond Moody, Michael Sabom, Janice Miner Holden, and Bruce Greyson. As well, Fischer fails to mention or cite prominent dualists, like Richard Swinburne or J.P. Moreland, or mention notable opposing perspectives on NDEs by philosophers, like Gary Habermas's well-known account.

In Chapter 10, "The Final Chapter," Fischer reviews his main claims, draws the conclusion we should not fear death, and provides guidance on how to die well. On whole, this is an interesting, easy to read book, written for a general audience.