

Book Review

Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy, by A. G. Long. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 232.

A. G. Long's slim monograph, part of the *Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy* series, deftly accomplishes the series' goal of being accessible to those without prior knowledge of ancient philosophy while being of genuine interest to scholars. It discusses some of the most famous and important ideas about immortality and death in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy without providing a bland survey. Instead, it attempts to reorient the discussions of both topics while arguing for a variety of novel interpretations. It substantially engages with Homer, Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the early Stoics, Philodemus, Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Remarkably, it manages to introduce readers to each of these authors and to stay sensitive to the goals of their works. To the extent that there is a main thesis to the book, it is that immortality for the ancient Greeks is closely connected to the gods, not merely to existing forever. This leads Long to have his three chapters on immortality before his four chapters on death, despite the fact that to be immortal, in Greek, is literally to be deathless (*athanatos*) or non-mortal (*ambrotos*), and so one might expect to understand immortality alongside death. As described below, I found this chapter arrangement to have significant drawbacks.

Long divides his discussion of immortality into three chapters. The first is on pre-Platonic uses of the term 'immortal', the second on immortality in Plato, and the third on uses of the term 'immortal' in Aristotle, Epicurus, and the early Stoics. For most people, I expect the chapter addressing pre-Platonic uses of the term 'immortal' will be the book's most eye-opening. Many things described as 'immortal' before Plato do not last forever. For example, Long notes that in the *Odyssey* (18.190-6), Athena gives Penelope 'immortal gifts', which make Penelope look more godlike, but are used up, rather than lasting forever. Conversely, according to Homer the souls of the dead exist in Hades without end but are never called 'immortal'. Long concludes that calling something 'immortal' primarily indicates a connection to the gods, although of course when applied to the gods, it indicates that they will not die. Long also discusses how, according to traditional Greek religion, some mortals can join the gods, thereby becoming immortal—a process called 'apotheosis'. This is important for Long's discussion of Empedocles' remarkable claim that he (Empedocles)

once was immortal, but then became mortal and has reincarnated many times, but is now once again immortal (B112, B115).

I have concerns with how Long describes the different uses of the term ‘immortal’. He describes one use as meaning ‘enduring endlessly’, ‘never ceasing to exist’, or ‘everlasting’. As noted above, the Greek words translated ‘immortal’ (*athanatos* and *ambrotos*) literally mean ‘deathless’ or ‘non-mortal’, which strongly suggests that in its basic application, to call something immortal means that it is not susceptible to dying. In order to die, something must first be alive. Homer treats humans and gods as alive and so it makes sense to ask whether they are susceptible to dying—whether they are mortal or immortal. By contrast, I would suggest that the reason why Homer never describes the souls of the dead as immortal is because the Homeric view does not treat the soul itself as alive, and so the question of mortality simply does not arise. It is not mere endless duration, but rather continuing to *live* forever that marks something as immortal, in the basic sense. Hence it is not surprising, for example, that the early atomists, Democritus and Lucretius, do not describe their atoms as immortal, despite thinking of them as everlasting. They are not alive and so not immortal. By extension from the core meaning of not dying, ‘immortal’ can be used for the possessions and characteristics of things that do not die, such as their gifts. Traditionally, only the gods are thought of as not dying, and so being immortal is one of the characteristic features of the gods. In Homeric poetry, of course, there are metrical and poetic reasons to find a synonym for ‘divine’, which is frequently how ‘immortal’ is used.

In order for the soul to be thought of as immortal, there needed to be a shift in how the soul is understood, a shift which Long does not discuss. In Homer ‘soul’ refers to the breath of life, and it is typically only mentioned once a person has died. The idea that the soul itself might be alive, and so a candidate for mortality or immortality, does not seem to occur in extant Greek literature until Heraclitus (see, for example, [Betegh 2013](#), appendix 1). Heraclitus extends being alive much more broadly than fits with our ordinary intuitions—he describes the elements as being born and dying in the same fragment where he refers to the soul as being born and dying (B36). Of course, simply learning that the soul is alive and immortal would not be much more than a curiosity—like finding out that one’s liver is immortal—unless one identifies oneself with the soul and thinks that it possesses important cognitive functions. Here again, Heraclitus is the first extant author to provide the soul with the same basic set of cognitive and motor-control abilities found in later authors, such as Plato. It is worth emphasizing that while Heraclitus seems to be at the beginning of a tradition that attributes life to the soul, not all later Greeks and Romans followed him. Aristotle, for example, understands the soul as that by which the organism is alive, but he never says that the soul itself is alive.

In chapter 2, Long rightly emphasizes that understanding Plato’s use of the term ‘immortal’ requires thinking through pre-Platonic uses. Long notes that Plato draws on the traditional notion of immortality in Homer. I would

emphasize that he also draws on the newer idea that the soul itself is alive and so the sort of thing that could be immortal, as well as the idea that we can identify ourselves with our souls, and so if they are immortal, in some important sense we are too. It is evident that humans are mortal; no philosopher denies this. Sometimes, as in Empedocles, the question is whether we can cease being human and instead become a god. But more often the question is whether some part of a human is immortal, and whether we are first and foremost this part.

Long opens chapter 2 with two distinctions that he sometimes seems to treat as equivalent. One is between immortality as everlastingness and immortality as godlikeness. Long sometimes seems to treat these two sorts of immortality as alternatives to one another, although in other places he treats being everlasting as one way of being godlike. Long's other distinction is between essential and achieved immortality. The latter is the type of immortality we can achieve through extraordinary actions. In general, Long seems to treat essential immortality as everlasting and achieved immortality as godlike. This makes the two distinctions line up, although Long is not committed to their always doing so.

Long generally sees immortality as a relatively flexible notion and repeatedly emphasizes that it is not always essential everlastingness. Long himself notes (p. 30) that Plato always attributes achieved immortality to a mortal or a human, never to a soul. I would further suggest that when applied to the soul it consistently means being unable to die. Taken together, these points suggest that there is not much flexibility in the application of the term when applied to us—either to us as humans or as souls. In two places, the *Symposium* (206c–212b) and *Timaeus* (90b–c), Plato discusses the idea that *mortals* (rather than souls) could gain some share of immortality. Of course, to the extent that mortals are mortal, they cannot simply be immortal; at best, they could have a share of immortality. At the end of the *Symposium's* discussion (212a–b), Plato might be imagining, for those who ascend to the form of the beautiful, a type of apotheosis—that is, literally becoming a god (as Sedley 2009 suggests). By contrast, *Timaeus* is very clear that he is only speaking about the extent to which human nature can have a share of immortality. As Long says, this would not involve a human continuing to exist forever. However, it seems to me that the main reason why human nature can only have a *share* of immortality is precisely humans' limited lifespan. Moreover, human nature has a share of immortality when a human's immortal soul produces the same sort of motions as the immortal world-soul. It is when a human engages in the proper activities of these truly immortal beings that human nature acquires some share of immortality.

The *Phaedo* contains Plato's most famous treatment of immortality. Long follows standard scholarly practice in saying that this dialogue provides a series of arguments for the immortality of the soul. However, Socrates only claims to show that the soul is immortal in his final argument. The previous arguments (cyclical, recollection, and affinity) respond to Cebes' challenge, which asks

Socrates to respond to the fear that the soul is destroyed upon death (69e–70b). Cebes does not ask him in his challenge to show that the soul is immortal and Socrates does not claim to show this in his first three arguments. These arguments do not explicitly connect the soul to life, whereas this connection is central to the final argument (105c–107a), which does aim to establish immortality. Similarly, the *Phaedrus*' argument for the immortality of the soul connects the soul to life (245c). One problem with referring to all four of Socrates' arguments in the *Phaedo* as 'immortality arguments' is that this obscures how closely Plato associates immortality specifically with eternal *life*.

In some places, Long treats everlastingness as one way of being divine or godlike, but in others he seems to treat everlastingness as unconnected to being divine or godlike. I think it is worth clearly stating that immortality for Plato is always connected to being divine and godlike. Again, this is easier to understand if we think of the soul's immortality as involving *living* forever—a remarkable, godlike feature. Plato understands this eternal life as closely connected to the use of reason. He often emphasizes that the rational part of us is more divine than the rest (for example, *Rep.* 518d–519a) and he describes this part as having a kinship to the gods in precisely the dialogues where he describes it as immortal—in the sense of living forever (for example, *Phd.* 80a, 94e, *Phdr.* 230a, 246d–e, *Tim.* 90a). In the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, the gods' souls are described as having a very similar nature to our immortal souls. In different dialogues and in different ways Plato repeatedly returns to the idea that there is a part of us that is godlike—a truly immortal part—while also maintaining that we can and should strive to become more like the gods. The appropriate activity for our immortal part is the divine activity of contemplation; engaging in this allows us to become even more like the gods.

In chapter 3, Long turns to immortality in Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. His discussion of Aristotle is deflationary, arguing that Aristotle uses 'immortal' as a synonym for 'divine' in *Nicomachean Ethics* X. While I think Long makes a strong case for his reading, the discussion seems out of place in a series whose 'emphasis is on... debates of real philosophical interest... designed for use in a teaching context', as stated on the back cover. There is often a scholarly subtext in the book, discovered in the footnotes, and here Long is arguing against Sedley (1999) and Reeve (2014), who take Aristotle's use of the term to be more significant. It seems to me that this part of the book would have been better placed in a scholarly journal.

In discussing immortality in Epicurean authors, Long says that they think that the soul is not immortal, but he does not elaborate on why they think this. The monographs in the *Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy* series are slim volumes, so not all topics can be discussed. But in the previous chapter, on Plato, Long only explains in detail one immortality argument in Plato—the *Phaedrus*'. The net result is that there is very little discussion of why these authors think that the soul is or is not immortal—which seems unfortunate, given the topic of the book. In chapter 3, Long discusses why Epicurus calls some goods that

we can acquire ‘immortal’. Given Long’s first chapter, I was surprised that he did not discuss the possibility that ‘immortal’ here simply means ‘divine’—perhaps like Athena’s immortal gifts, Epicurean ‘immortal goods’ are goods that we receive from thinking about the gods, although the goods are not themselves immortal. In any event, it was not clear why, in a book with limited space, this issue received attention. It is worth noting that there is no discussion, or indeed mention, of the central importance of immortality for Platonists such as Plotinus or Augustine. At least a few pointers for interested readers would have been helpful.

Turning to the Stoics, Long offers an ingenious suggestion for understanding how the Stoic cosmos can be immortal and yet destroyed in the cosmic conflagration. He makes a compelling case that Chrysippus argued that death is the separation of the soul from the body, but the body of the cosmos is not *separated* from its soul in the conflagration—since it and the soul are coextensive with everything there is—and so while the body is destroyed in the conflagration, the cosmos cannot undergo death and so is immortal. Long suggests that this could explain the sense in which the other Stoic gods—such as the sun and the moon—as well as the Stoic heroes could be immortal, despite being destroyed in the conflagration. But why would these gods’ and heroes’ bodies not be separated from their souls in the conflagration? Long says that their bodies and souls would be ‘absorbed’, but it is not clear why this is the right way to understand what happens to them in the conflagration.

In the second half of the book, Long turns to death. The fourth chapter is about doubts about death, the fifth about Epicurean evaluations of death, the sixth on Stoic uses of the symmetry argument, and the seventh on suicide. Because Long mostly focuses on later authors in these chapters, there is a rough historical progression to the book. Nonetheless, chapter 4 discusses Plato’s attitude towards death in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*. This, I think, would make Long’s book somewhat difficult to use for teaching, since most teachers would not want to return at this stage to the *Apology*. Given that the basic meaning of ‘immortal’ is ‘unable to die’, I think it would have been better to discuss immortality and death alongside one another throughout the book. This would have allowed a discussion of death and immortality in Homer, noting that in Homer death is the separation of the body from the soul, but that the Homeric notion of the soul (and of the body) is different from that of later authors.

Chapter 4 is about responding to the uncertainty of death in Plato’s *Apology* and *Phaedo* and Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. This is another chapter that nicely highlights a frequently neglected topic. Socrates is often thought of as dogmatic in the *Phaedo*. Long argues instead that Socrates is supportive of his companions’ carefully thinking through their doubts even while he remains optimistic about the human capacity for knowledge and certainty. But Long does not explain how such optimism is compatible with Socrates’ repeatedly, in the *Phaedo*’s defence speech (63b–69e), saying that there are significant

limitations on our epistemic abilities while embodied. For example, Socrates says that the philosopher believes that ‘nowhere but in Hades will he have a worthwhile encounter with it [wisdom]’ (68a–b, Sedley and Long trans.). Socrates thinks he has good hope for the afterlife, but he never claims to know that the soul is immortal. He has reasons for his good hope, but he apparently thinks that so long as we are human, we will lack knowledge and certainty on a wide variety of important topics. Nonetheless, he thinks we can and should develop good arguments that will put us in a better epistemic position. In light of this, I find it difficult to accept Long’s reading of Socrates’ comment at the end of the final immortality argument. First, Socrates’ comment:

And if you analyse the hypotheses well enough, you will follow the argument, I imagine, to the full extent possible for a human being. And if this itself becomes clear, then you will not seek anything further. (107b)

According to Long, Socrates is saying that the companions, if they pursue these matters properly, will come to realize that being a human being does not limit their ability to know that the soul is immortal. This seems to me especially unlikely given the epistemic limitations Socrates highlighted earlier. Again, Socrates never says that he or they will come to know that the soul is immortal. Nonetheless, he thinks that if they analyse the hypotheses, they will come to be in the best possible epistemic state, given their current human form. I suggest, then, that the *Phaedo* canvasses a response to uncertainty that Long does not discuss: being fairly confident that one has the right view and correct arguments about death, but at the same time acknowledging that so long as we are humans we will never be able to acquire genuine knowledge or certainty of these matters.

In chapter 5, after discussing why death plays a central role in Epicurean philosophy, Long turns to Epicurus’ claim that death is nothing to us. Although I found Long’s discussion here somewhat difficult to follow, he ultimately presents a strong case that in the second Epicurean Key Doctrine, Epicurus thinks that death is nothing to us because there is no subject of awareness after death. According to Epicurus, it is empty to fear something which will never be experienced, and so death is nothing to us because no remaining part of us will be aware of death once it comes.

Throughout the book, Long says that for the Epicureans the soul is destroyed upon death. Long (in my opinion, rightly) does not assign this thesis any role in Epicurus’ arguments that death is nothing to us. Epicureans do not think that we are our souls; instead, each of us is a combination of soul and body. Epicureans think that awareness requires soul and body to be combined; upon death, they are separated and so neither soul nor body could be aware, even if they continued to exist. Hence, the thesis that the soul is destroyed upon death is irrelevant to the claim that death is nothing to us: even if it continues to exist, it could not be aware of death, and so death would be nothing to the soul. Epicurus, as an atomist, certainly thinks that the soul, as a composite, will

not last forever. For atomists like Epicurus, it is always a delicate question how to think of the identity conditions for such composites. However, the evidence seems to me to suggest that Epicurus does not think the soul is destroyed precisely upon death:

Moreover, when the whole aggregate [the soul/body] disintegrates the soul is dispersed and *no longer has the same powers*, or its motions. Hence it does not possess sensation either. For it is impossible to think of it perceiving while not in this organism, and moving with these motions *when what contains and surrounds it* are not of the same kind as those in which it now has these motions. (*Letter to Herodotus* 65–66, Long and Sedley translation, emphases added)

If there were no soul after death, it would be strange to say that it no longer has the *same* powers; instead, it would simply have no powers. Similarly, it makes little sense to speak of what contains and surrounds the soul after death, if it does not exist. Hence, it seems to me that Epicurus thinks that the soul exists after death for at least a short period. For some period of time it coheres to a sufficient extent to count as continuing to exist. My suggestion is that it does not matter much to Epicurus when, after death, the soul is destroyed, because for purposes of dispelling our fear of death, the important thing is that *we* will not be aware of death when it comes. Lucretius presents a lengthy set of arguments that the soul is destroyed in the second half of book III of *De Rerum Natura* (3.417–829), but Epicurus does not seem to present the soul's destruction as a central tenet of his ethics or physics. And it is not clear that Lucretius thinks that the soul is destroyed exactly upon death; instead, he emphasizes how quickly it disperses after death (DRN 3.208–30) and he entertains the possibility that it lasts for a while after death, arguing that even so death is nothing to us (DRN 3.843–6). Perhaps I am misreading Epicurus and Epicureans, but in any event, the book would have benefited from more attention to what death is, what happens to the soul and body after death, and personal identity.

Long's discussion of Philodemus, at the end of chapter 5, is an especially rewarding part of the book. He shows that this Epicurean tried to address why one should not fear death even if one's death will cause distress and hardship for one's loved ones. While I was not convinced that Philodemus has an entirely satisfying theory, Long's account of Philodemus on natural pangs is recommended to anyone with an interest in Epicurean moral psychology.

Chapter 6 turns to several topics about the Stoics on death, with a focus on Roman Stoic uses of symmetry arguments. This type of argument is closely associated with Epicureans, but Long convincingly argues that such arguments were not considered specifically Epicurean in antiquity. Symmetry arguments use the similarity between pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence to argue that we should not fear death any more than we are concerned with our non-existence before birth. On the face of it, the past and the future are very different from one another: we have some control over the future but

not the past, and desires are fundamentally future-oriented, so we can desire to continue to exist, but not to have existed earlier. Epicurus' account of empty fears helps to make the future more symmetric with the past: he argues that if we do not exist to experience something, then a fear about this thing is irrational and so should be removed. However, it is not clear that Seneca had something like Epicurus' account of empty fears. This makes his use of symmetry arguments less persuasive than Epicurus'. Rather than explain how Roman Stoics had resources to make these symmetry arguments more persuasive, Long argues that they are meant as initial arguments, without much theoretical baggage, that are supposed to help begin convincing someone not to fear death. This leaves them as rather unsatisfactory arguments in their own right. Symmetry arguments might not be Epicurean property, but Long's discussion led me to conclude that there are good reasons that attention has focused on Epicurean uses of them.

In the final chapter, Long turns to suicide. While this is included in the section on death, it feels like a third section of the book. The chronology restarts, returning again to Plato, then moving on to Aristotle, Cicero, and Stoics on suicide. The theme of the chapter is that these ancient author's different discussions are motivated by very different aims and interests. In Plato's *Phaedo*, it is about what is religiously permitted; in Plato's *Laws*, it is about what a city should legally sanction. For Aristotle, it is about showing how suicide can fit into his account of general justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Different Stoic authors emphasize different aspects of their account of suicide, depending on their goals in the specific texts. Long's chapter is reacting to the way that the secondary literature frequently sets ancient text's views about suicide alongside one another without attending to their different contexts and aims.

Long's sensitive treatment of the distinct contexts and aims of different ancient texts would serve as a valuable model for students. At the same time, the book has helped me think through several important ideas in ancient philosophy. It is impressive that it can do this while being accessible to a broad audience. A book of this sort need not be the last word on its subject; it needs to spark further ideas and interests, and in this it entirely succeeds.*

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Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany
david.ebrey@gmail.com
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DAVID EBREY