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Bernard N. Schumacher

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Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy

This book contributes to current bioethical debates by providing a critical analysis of the philosophy of human death. Bernard N. Schumacher discusses contemporary philosophical perspectives on death, creating a dialogue between phenomenology, existentialism, and analytic philosophy. He also examines the ancient philosophies that have shaped our current ideas about death. His analysis focuses on three fundamental problems: (1) the definition of human death, (2) the knowledge of mortality and of human death as such, and (3) the question of whether death is “nothing” to us or, on the contrary, whether it can be regarded as an absolute or relative evil. Drawing on scholarship published in different languages and from distinct currents of thought, this volume represents a comprehensive and systematic study of the philosophy of death, one that provides a provocative basis for discussions of the bioethics of human mortality.

Bernard N. Schumacher received his Ph.D. in philosophy and his Habilitation from the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, where he currently teaches. He has served as a visiting professor at the University of Chicago; Providence College, Rhode Island; and the University of Lugano. He is the author of *A Philosophy of Hope* (2003) and has edited and co-edited numerous scholarly works, including *L'humain et la personne* (2008, translated into German as *Der Mensch und die Person*) and *A Cosmopolitan Hermit: Modernity and Tradition in the Philosophy of Josef Pieper* (2009).

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BERNARD N. SCHUMACHER

University of Fribourg

Translated by Michael J. Miller



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to Michele Marie

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This award-winning book received the
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Preface

In order to safeguard his happiness, contemporary Western man has contrived to stop thinking at all about death and, more particularly, about his own death, to deny it in a way by maintaining a stony silence with regard to it. Some philosophers end up taking part in this masquerade by considering the subject taboo or by declaring that it is not philosophical. Whereas the act of philosophizing was understood in the philosophical tradition as a preparation for death, as a rumination on life and death, many contemporary philosophers set aside the very question of man's relation to "his own death". Does this habit of averting their eyes originate in a fear of death? Is it due to a shift of attention away from radical questions concerning the meaning and ultimate foundation of human life, in both its personal and its social dimension, so as to focus on particular and local problems? Whatever the reason, it seems that philosophy would have everything to gain if it once again centered its theoretical and practical reflections on such fundamental themes, for they are at the heart of human existence.

When they heard that I was writing a book on death, most of my colleagues smiled ironically; they just couldn't understand how a young philosopher could "waste" several years of his life meditating on death, given that the subject eludes all philosophical investigation and there is no hope whatsoever of arriving at definitive answers. But isn't philosophy, in some sense, a waste of time? Like true leisure and love, philosophy cannot be evaluated in terms of profitability, and I am glad that I devoted time to contemplating a philosophical subject that of course continues to elude me but that nonetheless is evident under the aspects of the incomprehensible and the frontier.

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The years that I spent meditating on death have certainly enabled me to tame it somewhat, to understand it a little better by clarifying certain points and by dispelling several false notions with regard to it. While eluding thorough comprehension, it nevertheless remains one of the most troubling mysteries for philosophical reflection. Writing the present volume did not lay to rest my philosophical and existential musings; I am still seeking a better understanding of death and, more particularly, my death and the death of those whom I love.

I am extremely grateful to my wife, Michele Marie, without whom this book could not have been written. During her patient and painstaking reading of the various drafts of the manuscript, she managed with great perspicacity to identify a number of problems in my arguments, suggesting excellent comments and corrections and offering many pertinent arguments and criticisms. I am very grateful to her for those long and stimulating discussions that shaped the present volume, as well as for her constant support over the course of those many years. I dedicate this book to her as a token of my profound gratitude. I likewise thank my older daughter, Myriam, for her patience, during the final months of composition, with a Dad who was absorbed in his reflections, and also for her regular visits with her mother to the library to look up references. I am likewise very thankful for my three other children, Sophia, Teresa, and Nicolas, who helped me, along with Myriam, to understand better what it means to live.

My thanks also to Evandro Agazzi for his generous support and his availability, as well as for his valuable comments and suggestions; to Martine Nida-Rümelin, Daniel Schulthess, and Jean-Claude Wolf for their helpful remarks; to the late Jorge Arregui for the long and stimulating discussions that we had on several themes treated in this work; to Jacinto Choza, Günther Figal, John Martin Fischer, Thomas Flynn, Paul Griffiths, Otfried Höffe, Thomas De Koninck, Thomas Nagel, Gregory Reichberg, and Ronald Santoni for their discussions and their excellent critiques; to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their very helpful comments and enlightening points; to Michael J. Miller not only for his excellent translation but also for his marvelous synthesis of professional and human qualities including his dedication and true kindness; and finally to the staff of Cambridge University Press – especially Beatrice Rehl, editor; Emily Spangler, assistant editor; and Regina Paleski, production editor – for their helpful comments, fine work, and patience. This monograph was also made possible thanks to the financial assistance of the Humboldt Foundation and of the National Swiss

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Foundation for Scientific Research. Finally, I am very grateful to the students of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) and the University of Chicago who attended my seminars and my lectures on death and on the notion of person for their questions and comments, which stimulated my personal reflection.

The present work constitutes a revised edition of the original French and German editions. The first part of this English edition has been entirely rewritten and the first chapter of the second part (treating the knowledge of death and mortality of the animal, the “primitive” human being, and the child) of the original editions does not appear here.