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Edited by Steven Luper

Excerpt

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STEVEN LUPER

Introduction

This book is devoted to the metaphysics of life and death, the significance of life and death, and the ethics of life and death. As will become apparent, these three topics are interrelated. Work on the nature of death benefits from work on the nature of life, and bears on life's significance, while discussions of the moral significance of killing people and other animals draw on discussions of the nature of the interests of such creatures (at various stages of their development), the significance of their lives, and the extent to which death harms them.

The first of the three parts of the book (concerning the metaphysics of life and death) begins with a chapter on the nature of life by Mark Bedau. As he notes, many theorists attempt to illuminate life by setting out necessary and sufficient conditions for being an organism. Bedau calls this the Cartesian approach, and suggests that we abandon it in favor of the Aristotelian approach, by which we attempt to explain distinctive features of "living worlds," or actual complexes of mutually interacting organisms and micro-organisms. To that end, we can begin with the simplest forms of chemically based life (such as bacteria). On the model Bedau endorses, a minimal chemical system is alive just if it brings together three mutually supportive capacities. First, it controls itself using information stored within it. Second, it maintains, develops, and repairs itself using materials and energy it extracts from its environment. Third, it protects its constituent chemical operations from external threats by "localizing" them, giving them an identity over time. Bedau goes on to suggest that "there is no particular time at which life begins or ends. As new chemical interactions among components create

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more complex networks of capacities, the whole chemical system becomes more and more alive."

The second chapter, by Eric Olson, considers what it is to be one of *us*. We must answer this question if we are to know when our existence begins, when it ends, and what it entails. Many issues hang in the balance. For example, if our persistence conditions include psychological continuity, it is much easier to justify the collection of organs from donors. Olson defends animalism, the view that you and I are organisms – specifically, human beings. The toughest challenge to animalism is the contention that we would go with our brains if these were moved into fresh brainless bodies. A human being can be kept alive, at least for a time, after its liver is removed, and the same goes for its brain. If its liver or brain is moved, the human being stays behind. So if you are a human being, you stay behind when your brain is moved elsewhere. By contrast, if you go with your brain, you are not a human being, and animalism is false. But if you aren't a human being what are you? According to Olson, theorists who claim that we go with our brains have not given us a satisfactory answer to this question, and their view makes it hard to avoid the strange metaphysical contention that being alive is incompatible with the capacity for thought.

Chapter 3, written by Katherine Hawley, is devoted to the question of how different views of time bear on our nature and interests. Eternalism says that past and future things are as real as present things. Does it follow that our lives are fated to unfold in certain ways? According to presentism, neither past nor future things exist. A third view of time, the growing-block view, says that while past and present things exist, future things do not. Neither presentism nor the growing-block view seems to suggest fatalism, but do they imply that we do not exist in the future, and that, consequently, nothing that happens in the future can affect us? Hawley denies that eternalism supports fatalism, and she denies that presentism or the growing-block view implies that what we do now cannot affect the future, since, on all three views, what happens now has a causal effect on what *will* happen in the future. She goes on to explain how different views of time are related to different views about how people and other things persist over time.

Chapter 4, written by Marya Schechtman, discusses whether identity is malleable in some sense – that is, whether it is possible

to control what our persistence conditions are, to some extent. If we can manipulate the conditions under which we survive, many intriguing issues arise. For example, perhaps death does not occur when people usually think; maybe we can survive events that are normally considered fatal. Also, many theorists say that what is in our interests depends on our identities; if that is true, and identity is malleable, our interests may also be. Schechtman distinguishes between literal and figurative ways of understanding a person's identity. Typically, we think that only the latter sort of identity is malleable, but she offers an account of numerical identity within which it, too, is literally malleable, at least to a degree. Her idea is that whether one survives a change depends, at least in part, on whether one *identifies* with that changed individual – whether one recognizes her as oneself. It also depends on whether others believe one has survived. Since, on her approach, whether we survive over time depends, in part, on the attitude we and others take about whether we survive, and that attitude is malleable, so is identity.

Chapter 5 concerns the question: what is it for a human being to die? David DeGrazia discusses the strengths and weaknesses of three standards for determining when death occurs: first, the whole-brain standard, which says that death occurs when the entire brain irreversibly ceases to function; second, the traditional cardiopulmonary standard, according to which death occurs when the heart and lungs irreversibly cease to function; and third, the higher-brain standard, which says that death is the irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness. He criticizes the last, mostly on the grounds that it rests on an implausible account of personal identity, and while he defends an updated version of the cardiopulmonary standard, he eventually concludes that, for practical reasons, the best policy is much like the one that is already in place in the USA, namely the standard that consists in the disjunction of the (updated) cardiopulmonary standard and the whole-brain standard. At the end of his chapter he suggests that some of the things that are now done only posthumously should be done sooner: in some cases, people who are irreversibly unconscious should be allowed to die and vital organs should be removed for transplantation.

Part II of the book concerns the significance of life and death. The first chapter in this part of the book, Chapter 6, clarifies how lives may be assessed. What makes one life better than another?

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According to Noah Lemos, author of this chapter, the judgment that a life is good might mean that it is choiceworthy because it is high in various values, such as moral goodness, or welfare. However, Lemos limits his investigation to what makes a life high in welfare. He discusses the three leading accounts of welfare (noting that one or other might also turn out to be relevant to the moral goodness of a life): preferentism (or the desire satisfaction theory), which says roughly that you are well-off to the extent that you satisfy your desires; hedonism, which says that only your states of pleasure and displeasure determine your level of welfare; and the objective list view, which says that various things are good or bad for you regardless of whether you want them and no matter whether you enjoy them. All three views come in competing versions and face difficulties. In particular, on the objective list view it is difficult to compare the value of one good as against another, and to assess the relative contributions of different goods to welfare.

In Chapter 7 Eyjólfur Emilsson discusses the view that a good life is not made better by lasting longer. While this idea is no longer taken very seriously, it was defended by Stoics, Epicureans, and Plotinus. Emilsson reviews some of the grounds they offered for it, focusing mainly on the Stoic approach, then offers further considerations in its favor. If true, this ancient position would be very important, as it suggests that we are not harmed by our mortality: dying shortens a life, but it has no power to make that life worse than it would have been if it had gone on forever. It also bears on whether it might be good to be immortal. If extending a good life does not make it better, immortality is of no benefit to us. Emilsson suggests that when the ancient theorists deny that happiness is cumulative, they mean that it “does not accumulate like monthly savings that gradually raise the sum in our bank accounts.” They do not deny that our happiness *over a lifetime* will be greater than it otherwise would be if we add on more happy days; they deny that our happiness *at later times* will not be greater than at earlier times if we add on more happy days. According to Plotinus, the former – having more happiness over a lifetime – should not matter to us, however, since neither past nor future happiness is “there for us to enjoy now.”

In Chapter 8 John Martin Fischer asks: in what sense death is harmful to those who die? Famously, Epicurus denied that death harms us if it is understood as the cessation of existence. On one

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interpretation, his denial is based on the following experience requirement: we are harmed by something only if we can have an unpleasant experience as a result of it. According to the experience requirement, being punched or having one's reputation destroyed might be harmful to us, as these can give us bad experiences. But death seems harmless precisely because it removes the possibility of experience. According to Fischer, however, we should reject the experience requirement, as there are serious counterexamples to it. One that he offers is a modification of the betrayal example: suppose that a powerful person named White can and will prevent you from ever experiencing anything bad as a result of being betrayed. In that case, even though you are betrayed, you cannot have any bad experiences as a result. Yet it still seems bad for you to be betrayed. Fischer concludes that death is bad insofar as it deprives a victim of life that would have been good for her.

Chapter 9 concerns when, if ever, we incur mortal harm, or harm for which death is responsible. It seems reasonable to assume that something harms a victim only if there is indeed a *subject* who receives the harm and a *time* when that subject incurs that harm. But if death harms us, either it does so while we are alive or later. If we opt for the second solution we appear to run head-on into the problem of the subject: assuming that we do not exist after we are alive, no one is left to incur harm. If we opt for the first solution – death harms its victims while they are alive – we have a ready solution to the problem of the subject, but it seems impossible for death to have any ill effect on us while we are living since it will not yet have occurred. Jens Johansson, author of Chapter 9, criticizes two possible views concerning when death's victims incur mortal harm: subsequentism, or the view that they incur harm after death occurs, and priorism, the view that they incur harm while they are alive. Johansson then argues in favor of a third view, atemporalism, which says that while death does indeed harm those who die, there is no time at which they incur mortal harm. In this respect, death is not alone, he says: many sorts of events are also atemporally harmful.

The focus of Chapter 10 is the symmetry problem, which arises from the following symmetry claim: the period of non-existence that precedes my birth seems saliently identical to the period of non-existence that will follow my death. Appealing to the symmetry claim, Epicureans argued that since prenatal non-existence is

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not bad for us, posthumous non-existence is not bad for us either. In Chapter 10 James Warren discusses the two main ways to respond to the Epicurean argument if we wish to insist that death may harm its victims. Asymmetrists deny the symmetry claim and say that while death is harmful prenatal non-existence is not, while Symmetrists accept the symmetry claim and deny that prenatal non-existence is harmless to us.

In Chapter 11 Simon Keller discusses whether we may be harmed by events that happen after we are dead. He notes that different sorts of thing may contribute directly to our welfare, to how well our lives go. Among these are experiences; good experiences seem to boost our welfare, while bad experiences lower it. If experiences were the only constituents of welfare, then clearly posthumous events could not affect it at all. But it is plausible to say that welfare includes other elements, such as achievements. If that is right, then there is a strong case for the possibility of posthumous harm after all, since things that happen after we are gone may well affect whether we achieve goals we set ourselves, such as the goal of having a lasting reputation. So maybe one component of welfare – involving achievement – can be lowered (or raised) by posthumous events even though another component – involving positive experiences – cannot be. Keller goes on to point out that the two components differ in interesting ways. In particular, it might be that positive experiences contribute more to welfare than do achievements, and in that case it might be best not to allow our efforts to help the dead achieve their goals get in the way of our efforts to help the living enjoy positive (and avoid awful) experiences.

Chapter 12 discusses life's meaning. Here Steven Luper suggests that a person's life has meaning if, and only if, she achieves the aims that she devotes her life to freely and competently. These achievements are themselves the meaning of her life. He discusses how life's meaning is related to its purpose and to a person's identity and welfare. Luper suggests that, like happiness, meaning is an element of welfare; one's life can have meaning even if one is quite unhappy, and one could be happy even though one's life lacks meaning. He criticizes reasoning that suggests that life is absurd and emphasizes that, with respect to meaning, immortals are no better off than mortals: long or short, one's life can have meaning in the fullest sense.

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Part III of the book concerns the ethics of bringing living things into existence and the ethics of killing them. The first chapter in this part of the book, Chapter 13, discusses the ethics of enhancing life, especially when this means replacing human beings with creatures that are thought to be superior to us. Nicholas Agar equates the enhancement of a human capability with its improvement. One scenario he discusses involves the enhancement of some people to such an extent that they are able to dominate others who opt not to enhance themselves. Another is the possibility that people could be so altered that they become more morally sophisticated, morally better. Yet another scenario involves replacing bits of the brain with electronic chips, allowing human beings to take advantage of the speedy pace of technological improvement.

Chapter 14, written by David Archard, discusses several issues that arise in connection with procreation or bringing people into existence. The main issue is whether it is wrong to create people. One line of thought is this: suppose that if we create someone her life will be worth living but just barely so – that is, what is good in her life more than offsets the bad, but not by much. When we focus on how low such a person's prospects are, it might seem objectionable to bring her into the world. But is it? Were we not to bring her into being, she would not exist at all; for her, the only alternative to a marginally good existence is none at all. This suggests that it is rarely wrong to procreate, since most people would prefer even a marginally good existence to none at all. On another way of looking at things, however, procreation seems to be entirely unacceptable. David Benatar asks us to consider a merely possible person named Fred. We do not think that Fred is harmed by not being made actual, even if it means he will miss out on a very good life. However, we do think that Fred is harmed by being made actual if it means that he will endure a very bad life. Hence we should maintain Fred's status quo as merely possible, which is unobjectionable, for fear of subjecting him to a bad existence, which is objectionable, and the same goes for any possible person.

In Chapter 15 Michael Tooley asks why and when we may kill embryos and fetuses. The answer depends on the nature of persons and the nature of life; if we were never embryos or fetuses it seems more plausible to say that killing them carries far less significance than killing persons. The answer also depends on what an

individual's interests are and on what sort of harm death may do to its victims. Tooley criticizes Don Marquis' widely discussed view concerning the ethics of abortion. According to Tooley, Marquis objects to abortion on the grounds that (typically) it violates the principle that it is wrong to deprive a human being of valuable states which it otherwise would have had – states that normal human beings, such as you and I, enjoy. Tooley says that this principle is flawed, and hence Marquis' case against abortion fails. According to Tooley, you and I are neo-Lockean persons, which are roughly continuing subjects of mental states, that form memories, and that have various other sorts of psychological features, and whatever it is that makes killing *us* wrong would also make it wrong to kill other neo-Lockean persons. Yet something need not be an organism to be a neo-Lockean person; these might include angels and sophisticated machines that are not even alive. In place of Marquis' account, Tooley offers a rights-based account, according to which all and only neo-Lockean persons have a right to continued existence. As for fetuses, they are organisms, but not persons, and organisms do not have the right to continued existence.

Chapter 16, written by Thomas E. Hill, Jr., concerns whether we may kill ourselves and if so, why and when. His topic obviously is closely related to the permissibility of assisted suicide and euthanasia, but Hill does not address these directly. Arguing from a broadly Kantian perspective, Hill assumes that we owe it to ourselves to live and die with dignity, and suggests that suicide is objectionable when a failure to respect ourselves leads us to give up the potential to live on as rational autonomous agents. Proper self-respect rules out suicide in some circumstances, but not in others. For example, it rules out suicide when self-contempt prompts us to abandon life even though we could have remained rational autonomous agents, but not when extreme and irremediable pain would have made it impossible to continue to function rationally.

In Chapter 17 the aim is to clarify when we may kill others in self-defense. Kadri Vihvelin discusses Judith Thomson's influential view on the matter, according to which defensive force may be used against those who have lost the right not to be killed. Some of Thomson's critics reject her account since it implies that innocent people may have lost the right not to be killed. For example, if a villain gives you a drug that makes you crazy, and, thus crazed,

you are about to kill me, you have lost your right not to be killed, and it is permissible for me to use lethal force to stop you. Vihvelin shows that some of these criticisms of Thomson fail, then offers her own criticism. According to Vihvelin, the moral appropriateness of defensive force does not depend on the forfeiture of the right not to be killed.

Chapter 18 concerns the nature of the obligation not to let people die. More specifically, it concerns the reasons we have to aid those in distress. In this chapter Matthew Hanser explores the view that the duty to aid is imperfect, meaning roughly that “[i]t requires one to perform aiding actions from time to time, often enough, but it does not specify exactly when one must give aid, or whom one must aid, or how much aid one must give.” To clarify the duty, Hanser distinguishes between reasons that have requiring force and reasons that have justificatory force. The duty to aid involves the latter; that some person is in need justifies us, and makes it permissible (but not obligatory) for us, to assist that person even though it means neglecting other responsibilities (such as a promise we made to meet a friend for dinner). However, if we encounter enough persons in need, the justificatory force of our reasons to assist increases, so “although these reasons are not individually requiring, we do have a duty to act in accordance with reasons of this *kind* from time to time.”

In Chapter 19, the final chapter, Krister Bykvist discusses the leading reasons why it might be objectionable to end the existence of animals, then considers whether on the same sorts of grounds it would be objectionable to bring about the extinction of a species. It seems wrong to end the existence of animals for three main reasons: we owe it to individual animals not to kill them; killing them frustrates their preferences; and killing them is against their interests. Species extinction need not involve killing any animals; it might instead result from causing them to be infertile. Still, perhaps it is wrong to annihilate a species because we owe it to that species that we not bring about its extinction, or because doing so would frustrate its preferences or because it would be against its interests. However, it seems difficult to make a strong case against species extinction on such grounds. According to Bykvist, it may be more promising to explain the wrongness of species extinction on the grounds that preserving species has some sort of noninstrumental value.

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