

This collection of essays is intended to have a wide appeal. Dying and death affect us all – indirectly, yet ultimately, of course, directly. We read of the deaths of millions of persons unknown to us and we can be distressed; yet typically we are more intimately touched by those deaths much closer to home – deaths involving our family, friends and finally ourselves. We believe that the essays here will interest general readers as well as academics, religious believers as well as humanists, and casual ‘flickers-through’ as well as payers of sustained attention.

The essays are diverse. In substance they range from the rights and wrongs of euthanasia to the possibility of an afterlife; from counselling someone with just a few months of remaining life to questioning whether a dead person can be harmed; and from the consequences of an earthly immortality to whether someone’s death is a loss to that person. In form the essays are also diverse – ranging from traditional continuous prose articles to questions and answers and fictional dialogue.

The first four essays look at dying. A gut feeling might be that we should usually prefer not to die or, at least, would prefer to live for much, much longer – and increased years are indeed becoming more and more likely for those in the future with access to the best medical care. However, such extended longevity has social consequences – and these are discussed in John Harris’ *Intimations of Mortality*. Harris asks what will happen when it becomes possible to repair the effects of aging and chronic disease using cloned embryonic cells, growth factors or genetic therapies. He contends that these technologies could make many people virtually immortal (though not invulnerable to accidents and acute diseases). If a significant proportion of the population is quasi-immortal in this way, then either the population will rise until checked by scarce resources, or the birth rate will drop at least to match the reduced death rate. The first case is clearly undesirable. In the second case, suggests Harris, society could miss the vitality currently supplied by the young.

Suppose that the quasi-immortality outlined by Harris presented such social or economic problems. Is there any reason to suppose that they would be self-correcting in a benign way? If not, how could the resultant problems be addressed without violating some of the rights and values that we currently hold? Harris suggests that something – either our right to reproduce as we wish or our right to use all available medical technology to prolong our lives – would have to give way.

In addition to curing previously intractable conditions, advances in medical technology give us information that we might not otherwise have had. How is one to cope, for example, with the knowledge that one has about six months left to live? Philosophical counsellors use a mixture of philosophical techniques and traditional counselling to help with predicaments of this sort. Tim LeBon, in *Six Months to Live*, explains what philosophical counselling might have to offer someone in this situation.

Ever-improving medical technology enables people to survive conditions that would previously have killed them, yet that technology often fails to overcome the survivors’ pain or debility. Consequently, there are more and more people wanting or needing, at the very least, to consider euthanasia. Their circumstances are such that, in practice, death appears preferable to more life. Incurable suffering, aged loneliness and an inability to get around – one’s world shrinks – can lead some perfectly rational individuals to prefer quite simply to be dead rather than alive. Circumstances, though, might well mean that these individuals are unable to take their own lives; and so the plea for euthanasia comes to the fore. When the plea is voluntary, and someone kills that person or deliberately lets him die in that person’s interests, philosophers usually speak of ‘voluntary euthanasia’. Involuntary euthanasia occurs when a death is brought about in that person’s interests yet against his wishes; and non-voluntary euthanasia occurs when the person expresses no wish either way, perhaps because he is in a persistent vegetative state.

It is often argued that voluntary euthanasia should not be permitted because, if it is permitted, we shall slide down a slippery slope and find ourselves acquiescing in non-voluntary euthanasia to varying degrees: there might be pressure on the elderly to accept euthanasia; there might develop a more casual attitude towards killing, even if not in that person’s interests. Peter Cave’s *Voluntary Sex* is a satire on this reasoning. It aims to stimulate debate over quite what sort of slope might specially apply in the case of killing but not in that of having sex. If no special reasons can be given for thinking the slope particularly applies in the euthanasia case, then there is no more reason to prohibit it than to prohibit consensual sex or, indeed, consensual flower-arranging.

Euthanasia continues, though, to be illegal in the UK, yet suicide is no longer. Campaigners for the right to voluntary euthanasia may be tempted to argue that since suicide is legal, it should not be illegal to assist a suicide and so should not be illegal to engage in voluntary euthanasia. How (runs the thought) could it be reasonable to prosecute someone for helping somebody else to perform what would be a legal act if performed solely by that someone else? Suzanne Uniacke’s *A Right to Die?* takes up this important question.

One should first note that the fact that suicide is legal does not entail that it is always morally unproblematic; so any argument in favour of euthanasia using the permissibility of suicide would need to draw on the moral permissibility of suicide, not its legal permissibility. Uniacke’s response to the idea that voluntary euthanasia should be seen as assisted suicide, though, directly attacks the idea at the level of legal rights. Just because suicide is a legal right, we cannot argue that therefore voluntary euthanasia should be a legal right. For one simple thing, euthanasia demands the cooperation of someone other than the person wanting to die. Further, euthanasia is significantly different from suicide, Uniacke claims, because it aims to relieve the physical condition of the patient; it is therefore subject to the ethical and legal norms proper to medicine. If we forget

this, we shall produce bad argument and bad law. In other words, if there is a case for legalising voluntary euthanasia, it must be because such mercy killing is *euthanasia*, and not merely because it is voluntary, though we need, of course, further investigation into the claimed linkage between euthanasia and medical practice.

'Call no man happy 'til he be dead' is a saying ascribed to the Athenian law giver, Solon. Only when we see the whole story of a person's life can we judge whether it went well. However, there may be significant biographical events after a person's death and so we might wonder whether, in some way, they might affect that person who lived. For example, it is part of the story of Oliver Cromwell that some years after his death his corpse was exhumed and decapitated, and his head displayed on a pole as that of a traitor. This was, no doubt, hurtful to his surviving friends and relatives, and it was damaging to his reputation, but did it harm Cromwell? Logically, it seems the answer is 'No': at that time Cromwell no longer existed, or if he did exist it was as a soul or spirit. In either case it was not Cromwell who was decapitated, but merely his corpse. However, this view would seem to make a mystery of our treatment of corpses. Funerals, it is sometimes said, are for the living, yet the bodies of people who leave no known friends or relatives are still usually treated respectfully; certainly, most people think that they should be treated respectfully. How can we make sense of this? These questions are considered in the next two essays of the collection. Both essayists, for the sake of the argument, assume death to be annihilation, thus avoiding claims that maybe eternal souls or spirits might be upset by what happens on earth.

In the first of these two essays, *How Should We Treat the Dead?*, Piers Benn notes that we can be harmed without knowing it (by secret slander or broken promises, for example). Therefore, the fact that dead people are unaware of damage to their bodies, or gravestones, or reputations does not by itself show that there is no harm done to the person. Moreover, if the dead cannot be harmed, then they cannot be harmed by death, yet we know that death is, usually, a bad thing. If we have already decided that the dead cannot be harmed, then the badness of death cannot lie in the harm it does to the dead person. So if we insist that the dead cannot be harmed, we seem to make a mystery of the badness of death itself. Benn suggests that the badness of death is not any property of the predicament of being dead. Rather, the badness of death lies in the finitude of life; but, granting this, this does not answer the question of whether the dead can be harmed, once dead. Benn believes that they can be harmed; he suggests that this is so because our interests exist timelessly and therefore do not cease to exist when we die. This is an elegant solution, though it seems to suggest that our interests existed before we were born or even conceived which could lead us into the question of harms being done to us thousands of years before we were born. Also, some of our interests do have time limits. For example, after I die I want those who miss me to grieve no more or less than is proper and healthy. I do not want my friends and family to be indifferent to my passing, but nor I do not want them to be permanently paralysed by grief. This interest of mine persists after my death, but not after the death of the last person who knew me.

Peter Cave, in *Dead People*, starts the argument from a different place; he puts forwards a very simple argument, at least on the surface, namely that we should treat people well; therefore (*a fortiori*) we should treat dead people well. He considers and rejects thirteen objections to this argument. His crucial claim is that we are not separable from our projects and interests in the way that we would have to be if the dead were beyond harm. To kick my shin is to kick me; to damage my reputation is to damage me; to thwart my projects is to thwart me. Consequently, damage to my reputation or projects after my death is still damage inflicted against me. This, presumably, was the view of the vengeful monarchists – it was Cromwell they wanted to punish for treason, rather than his body or reputation. Nevertheless, we might wonder whether the body-parts, reputation and interests still add up to a person after death. Perhaps these elements form an intimate unity only in the living. Cromwell's head was exhibited on a spike, but we would not say that Cromwell was exhibited on a spike. If the royalists could exhibit Cromwell's head without exhibiting Cromwell, then perhaps they could harm Cromwell's reputation without harming Cromwell. However, were that thought sufficient to undermine Cave's position, we might equally well argue that, as we can shake our living Prime Minister's hand, conceal his toes and admire the strength of his argument, without, respectively, shaking, concealing and admiring him, then perhaps, because of such facts, we can also harm his reputation without harming him; yet that would be a paradoxical conclusion concerning someone living. Before any firm answers can be reached about such matters, we clearly need to know better quite what it is to be a person.

Death is universal, but the meaning of death is not. Attitudes to death change over the centuries. For example, previous generations would have been shocked at the suggestion that there is no afterlife, because without one there could be no guarantee of justice. In this life people rarely seem to get what they deserve. If the wicked are not punished and the virtuous rewarded after death, then, it might seem, we must reconcile ourselves to a morally indifferent universe. None of the three essays to which we now turn, on the possibility of an afterlife, considers the question of justice. It would appear that the moral indifference of the universe is no longer inconceivable or even shocking to most people. A prior question is, of course, that of what sense can be made of an afterlife; it is to this question in particular that the final group of essays turns.

The first of this group, *The Possibility of Life after Death*, is by a Christian, Richard Swinburne. Swinburne argues that a living human consists of a mortal body and an immortal soul. The immortal soul is the essential part of the person; it is the part that in some way carries one's personal identity. Since this soul continues to exist after it is separated from the body at death, it is proper to say that we continue to exist after our deaths. Swinburne argues this with a thought-experiment. Imagine that a mad surgeon were to divide your brain in half and implant each half in a different body. Which of these two individuals would then be

you? One of them must be you, according to Swinburne, but there is no physical fact that decides the matter. So there must be something immaterial that settles it, and this is the soul. The soul would go with one of the bodies, and that body-plus-soul combination would be you. Swinburne's main claim is simply that there must be an immaterial soul, otherwise the identity question would be undecidable. He thus assumes that there must be a fact of the matter here.

Hugh Mellor in his *Reply* rejects Swinburne's argument. There is, he says, no reason to think that one of the bodies bearing half of your brain would have to be you and the other not. Suppose that the planet Venus were to split in half, resulting in two planets. It would make no sense to insist that one half must be the real Venus, numerically identical with the planet before the split, while the other is not. The question 'Which of these is the real Venus?' would simply have no answer. Similarly, there is no answer to Swinburne's demand to know which of the two bodies carrying half of your brain would be the real you. So there is no need to posit a soul to decide the matter. Therefore Swinburne's thought-experiment does not establish what he really needs for an afterlife, which is the possibility of a disembodied existence. In fact, Swinburne's attention to the brain in his argument encourages the thought that a disembodied existence is impossible. We should recall, though, that Swinburne was addressing a humanist gathering, and may have been seeking premises acceptable to his audience.

[You can read the whole exchange between Richard Swinburne and Hugh Mellor [here](#) .]

Both the question of an afterlife and the treatment of the dead lead quickly from universal human concerns and fears into some technical metaphysics. To know whether dead people might be harmed, we must raise the question again of what it is to be a person. The issue between Swinburne and Mellor on the possibility of an afterlife turns on whether there must always be an unambiguous answer to questions about personal identity, even under the strange circumstances envisaged in thought-experiments. Anthony Flew, in relation to these matters, in his *A Disembodied Life?*, reminds us of some of the changes to British philosophy over the last fifty years, and in particular of the influence of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, published in 1949 – though the changes in general, and Ryle's approach in particular, probably owe something to the then unpublished work of Wittgenstein during the 1930s and 40s. In his book, Ryle mocks and rejects the dualist picture of the mind as being a 'ghost in the machine'; but perhaps his greater achievement, was that, in this and earlier works, he contributed to the change in the prevailing style of philosophical argument. Ryle insisted that philosophical problems arise because we unconsciously make bad inferences from ordinary uses of words to abstract conclusions. These conclusions then puzzle us, but the way to avoid bafflement is to attend more carefully to the original, ordinary use of the words in question. If we are sufficiently sensitive, we will detect the illegitimate move from everyday premises to abstract and maybe paradoxical philosophical conclusions. For a time this approach dominated English philosophy, though the conviction that all philosophical questions arise from muddles about language is now less widespread than it once was. There is an important question of quite what the relationship is or should be between, on the one hand, ordinary language use and beliefs of common sense and, on the other hand, philosophical investigations and theories.

Nigel Warburton's deathbed dialogue takes up an argument made by the mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Pascal used a mathematical technique now called 'decision theory' to argue that it is more prudent to believe in God than not; this is because the cost of error to an atheist is an eternity of torment, whereas the cost of error to a theist is negligible. Pascal lived through the later stages of the scientific revolution, and his argument shows some of the characteristics of the modern scientific mind: it is cast in mathematical terms and appeals to prudence to persuade non-believers rather than to properly religious notions such as grace. Nevertheless, it urges belief in a rather old-fashioned and jealous deity, and Pascal's own faith was entirely traditional. Pascal's argument thus reminds us that our thoughts about death are inherited from many different centuries with quite different philosophical and religious tempers, which may not combine easily. Warburton's dialogue runs through some of the argument's flaws: the argument, for example, assumes that there is only one possible god, and that this god is not offended by people who believe in him out of prudence.

The final part of this collection is a paper written a few years too early for the Humanist Philosophers' Group conference – in fact, over two hundred years too early. It is a letter by the economist Adam Smith, which describes the last days, in 1776, of his friend the atheist philosopher David Hume. Hume's steady good cheer during his final illness was widely remarked on at the time. James Boswell in particular was amazed that Hume could calmly face death without the consolation of religion. It does not seem to have occurred to Boswell that the prospect of Hell-fire might be somewhat less consoling than that of oblivion. Like many intellectuals of the mid-eighteenth century, Hume was deeply read in, and influenced by, the classical civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome. We learn from Smith that Hume entertained himself during his illness by reading Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, in which the dead offer excuses to Charon, the boatman of the Styx. Charon, of course, rejects every excuse and insists that the dead enter his boat to cross to the underworld. It seems that Hume treated death with the same mixture of philosophical seriousness and literary delight that he brought to everything else. There is in this something of the stoic virtue of treating death with the same indifference as every other turn of fate, except that Hume cultivated an amused indifference rather than the grim fortitude usually associated with stoicism.

Evidently Hume wished to die well, that is to say in conformity with the manner of his life. Moreover, his friends seem to have been determined to test ify that he did die well. This theme, of the publicly recorded good death, lies at the historical root of Western philosophy in the person of Socrates. As Plato tells it in the *Phaedo*, Socrates chose execution by hemlock rather than escape; he did this out of philosophical conviction

and deference to the laws of Athens. Death is also a preoccupation of eighteenth century classicism. This is seen, for example, in the paintings of Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), which depict the deaths of Socrates, Marat, Lepeletier and Bara, and also include *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. In all these paintings death is dignified and morally serious.

If the moment of death is given this importance, then the temptation to falsify it looms. An earlier atheist, La Mettrie, was said to have died of gluttony and to have called on Jesus with his dying breath; yet the most reliable testimony gives no credit to these claims. The story seems to have been put about to defame La Mettrie and discredit his radical materialism. Since Hume was a famous atheist, it is quite likely that his friends were anxious that nothing of the sort should happen to his reputation after his death. Whatever the motives of the friends of Hume, we have in their testimony a model of equanimity in the face to death to match that of Socrates – and, unlike Socrates, Hume did not depend for his peace of mind on the promise of an afterlife.