Reviews

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

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 1, "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 2, "The Meaning of Death," he provides a general definition of death and explains the Epicurean reasons for not fearing death, which are exposited and refuted in the following chapters. In Chapter 3, "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 4, "It's About Time: Timing and Mirror Images," he responds to Lucretius's Epicurean problem for deprivation theory. The deprivationist tells us posthumous nonexistence is bad (i.e., a deprivation) but pre-natal nonexistence 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 nonexistence does not, concluding there should be no symmetry, defending deprivationism.

In Chapter 5, "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 6, "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

© 2021 by the Joint Publication Board of Zygon ISSN 0591-2385

Immortality Realism," he argues against the curmudgeons that hold immortal life is not desirable because it will significantly change people, make them intolerably bored, and eliminate the value of life.

He finally 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 people 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.

Patrick Brissey
Department of Philosophy, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina
patrickbrissey@hotmail.com

Verteidigung des Heiligen: Anthropologie der digitalen Transformation. By Johannes Hoff. Freiburg: Herder, 2021. 608 pages. $73.00. (Hardcover)

Johannes Hoff's book *Verteidigung des Heiligen* is and does many things. It is a reflection on theology in the light of contemporary digital technologies and climate change. It is a polemic against transhumanism and an engagement with traditions in philosophy of technology, for example, Stiegler. And it is a nondualistic philosophical anthropology based on Augustine and—perhaps surprisingly—Plato: for Hoff, contemporary phenomenology and neurosciences can be reconciled with the "holistic" thinking of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Eckhart, and Cusanus (178).

Let me start with the first. The theological thesis of the book, according to the author (543), is that the digital transformation destroyed our receptivity for the holy. He contrasts this with early Christianity, which was not anthropocentric but put holiness in the center. He recommends ancient spiritual technologies of the self, for example, the self-transformation techniques recommended by church fathers such as Augustine. For Hoff, this *not* putting the human in the center is paradoxically the only way to preserve the human.

This preservation is necessary since, as Hoff see it, transhumanism destroys the human via its divination (*Vergöttlichung*) of the human. He sees transhumanism as an "ideological superstructure of the economical agenda of mega-corporations"

(22) which threatens our civilization. Hoff is not against new technology. His anthropological "triangle" of technics, nature, and culture (70–87) is designed to adopt a middle path between transhumanist utopianism and bioconservatism. The problem, for him, is the combination with the liberalism of classic modernity and with power: this renders digital technologies toxic. Hoff is influenced by Foucault (87–98).

Moreover, according to Hoff, transhumanism distracts from the real challenges of our time, for example, ethics of information technologies. Throughout the book, he argues against "dataist" ways of understanding the human. But he also shows that these are not new; some of the present tensions are already present in the Western tradition. For example, Hoff contrasts Augustine's with Google's conceptions of time: Augustine developed a view of time that enabled an openness and transformation of the self, whereas Google roughly and mercilessly pins us down by means of its digital world memory: "Tat Twam Asi!" (This is what you are!) (250). Another example is his criticism of some concepts of rationality and their related conception of science, which undermine the *intellectus* of the premodern tradition and giver free reign to *ratio* and a science that is no longer rooted in our lived experience.

Finally, Hoff emphasizes this lived experience in his own philosophical anthropology. Perhaps most significantly when it comes to its potential impact on contemporary philosophy, *Verteidigung des Heiligen* is a defense of nondualism supported by readings of not only Merleau-Ponty and Thomas Fuchs, but also the Augustinian and Proclean-Platonic tradition. Against the Avicennian reading of Augustine, and of course against the transhumanism that sees the body as an instrument, Hoff defends embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*) and, more generally, a non-Cartesian anthropology that recognizes vulnerability (276–277).

Hoff's book is a welcome contribution to a much-needed critical reception of transhumanism in the humanities. I agree with Hoff that transhumanism often focuses on the wrong issues; consider, for example, the discourse on the risks of superintelligence and other work inspired by science-fiction, which has a blind spot for more urgent ethical and political concerns raised by digital technologies. Hoff's attention to power issues helps with developing this direction. His anthropology is also an interesting philosophical work on its own, which achieves a stimulating dialogue between the pre-modern tradition and contemporary philosophical questions. Hoff knows his classics and his readings are both interesting and provocative.

However, I wonder if Hoff is not too pessimistic when it comes to the spiritual potential of new technologies of the self. If we free these from their transhumanist ideology, could we use them in the service of the theological-anthropological ideals Hoff defends? Could artificial intelligence (AI), for example, be used in a way that contributes to, rather than undermines and destroys, paths toward liberation/salvation and healing (making holy again)? Could we think of creative ways in which digital technologies might be integrated into the spiritual practices of everyday life? Furthermore, as Hoff acknowledges, transhumanism has an apocalyptic aspect. This suggests that, as much work in *Zygon*: *Journal of Religion and Science* shows, there are complex relations between, on the one hand, religion and spirituality, and on the other hand our scientific, technological, and economic

culture. Could it be that Hoff's view here is itself too dualistic when it comes to human-technology relations, and that there could also be more productive relations between science and spirituality? I do not know all the answers to these questions, but if the Christian and humanist traditions still have a future at all in the twenty-first century, we need to address them. Hoff's book offers an interesting and stimulating starting point for such a reflection that offers some answers for discussion, and a scholarly work that is both extremely erudite when it comes to reading the tradition and highly sensitive to the main challenges of our time. It is an impressive achievement that deserves a wide readership, not only in theology, but also in philosophy of technology, philosophical anthropology, and beyond.

Mark Coeckelbergh
Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
mark.coeckelbergh@univie.ac.at