

Fischer, John Martin. *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 184. \$65.00 (cloth).

Our Stories is a collection of insightful and rewarding essays by John Martin Fischer. It consists of nine previously published articles, many of them well-known, along with a new introduction that usefully illuminates some of the interconnected themes of Fischer's work on death, immortality, and free will. Three essays are co-authored (with Anthony Brueckner, Daniel Speak, and Ruth Curl). There is some overlap in the contents, especially in the chapters on death, but the cumulative effect is less of repetition than of interlocking construction. As a whole, the book makes for excellent reading: it is consistently clear and the essays constitute an unparalleled model of how to do philosophy. Fischer is honest, sophisticated, and wonderfully generous with his interlocutors.

Although the title of the volume and the introductory essay suggest a kind of unity, the topics of *Our Stories* revolve around two mostly discrete themes: (1) the significance (for us) of our not being alive, whether pre-natally or post-death, and (2) the significance of self-expression and narrative for free action. In the last few essays these themes intertwine in interesting ways, but the absence of a systematic unity in the rest of the book is negligible, for the volume abundantly rewards readers curious about our best accounts of death and free will.

On Fischer's compelling account, the badness of death, when it is bad, consists entirely in its being a certain sort of deprivation. Importantly, a person can be subject to this harm even when no longer alive. This view of death's badness (when it is bad— let us assume this caveat throughout) is contrasted with a broadly Epicurean view, on which "death is nothing to us." On the Epicurean picture, death cannot harm us precisely because death marks the end or non-existence of the dead agent; the death of the agent precludes the possibility of the agent being harmed by death.

Over many of the chapters of *Our Stories*, Fischer extends and develops the deprivation account, grappling with objections raised by present-day proponents of the Epicurean account, and explaining the way his account accommodates our often (but perhaps not necessarily) asymmetric attitudes towards post- and pre-natal existence. Fischer also profitably takes up some larger issues for the significance of life and death, including the meaning of life (chapter 10) and immortality (chapters 6 and 7). There is much that interesting and valuable in those chapters, but here I wish to focus on one especially notable aspect of Fischer's discussion of the badness of death.

At one point, Fischer suggests that there exists a “dialectical stalemate” between deprivation theorists and Epicureans, where neither side has the resources to move the other off his or her convictions (II6). Although I am simplifying matters a bit, Fischer thinks that one way to break the stalemate is to reflect on considerations about *why* particular examples move us or do not. Among other things, he focuses on the deprivation account’s unique ability to articulate how death could be *the* paradigmatic harm. As Fischer puts it, “if *anything* is (typically or at least often) a bad thing for an individual, it is death; that is, death is arguably a *paradigmatic* harm (or bad thing) . . . whatever other harms there are, our philosophical theorizing should accommodate death’s being a harm (or evil or bad thing)” (15). For Fischer, then, it comes as a significant cost that the Epicurean cannot so easily accommodate this piece of the furniture of common sense, for it suggests that whatever else is true, the stalemated Epicurean is at a disadvantage.

That all seems right. Still, I suspect that the matter may look somewhat different if we consider the larger dialectical situation. Let us begin with *why* common sense regards death to be (ordinarily) a bad thing. Plausibly, the badness of death is not a primitive of common sense, so much as it is something we infer from our attitudes towards death. (Consider: If we did not fear death, it is much less obvious that we would have the conviction that it is a bad thing.) Hypothesizing that death is bad (really, really bad) permits us to explain the intensity of our typical fear of death. Our terror provides (part) of the evidential basis for the badness of death.

This point seems harmless enough, and I see no reason why Fischer cannot accept it. Indeed, an epigram (too long to quote here) at the beginning of chapter 2 suggests that something very much like this thought motivates his own account. The epigram claims that it is not fear of dying but fear of death itself that matters. Now suppose that we also accept Fischer’s view that death is (ordinarily) a deprivation. What the Epicurean will surely observe is that even so, this does not obviously suffice to explain the full force of the terror we have of death. That is, even if we accept that death is oftentimes a bad thing (because it is a deprivation) the fact of deprivation does not seem adequate to explain the full scope of terror that death ordinarily instills in us.

It is a familiar enough thing that when an aged and terminally sick person is near the end of life, that person can fear death with every bit of the terror that may drive a healthier, younger person, for whom death represents a greater deprivation. Perhaps no philosophical theory has the resources to explain the appropriateness of that terror in those cases, for perhaps such terror just is inappropriate.

Here's the worry, though: for any thing, or any collection of things of which we might be deprived, death-class terror does not seem licensed. Something about death itself, apart from the deprivation it brings, seems to lurk once we accounted for all the deprivation. Any theory will have to allow that death terror is oftentimes (frequently?) disproportionate to any deprivation. So, even the deprivation theorist will need to say something to cover the gap between the terror of death and his or her account of its badness.

Fortunately, there is a natural way to close the gap, a strategy to which any theorist can appeal. We can invoke something like an irrational instinct for self-preservation. All animals have it, and it is implausible to hold that we are exceptions.

Here though, is the Epicurean's thin edge of a wedge. The argument against Fischer's appeal to common sense comes in two steps. The first step: What makes it appear that common sense is committed to the badness of death, the Epicurean will say, is the overactive operation of some primal instinct for self-preservation— something the deprivation theorist is already committed to. If so, then the deprivation theory does not obviously get to claim that it leaves our full set of commonsense beliefs about the significance of death intact, for it too is committed to a kind of error theory about the terror. Both deprivation theorists and Epicureans are committed to an error theory about a significant number of cases. They are separated only by the frequency with which they think such terror is in error. The deprivation theorist holds that it is only occasional. The Epicurean holds that the error is pervasive. Both, however, are committed to thinking that common sense is subject to errors about the significance of death because of something like an over-active instinct for self-preservation.

This brings us to the second step of the argument. Here, the Epicurean argues that the aforementioned dialectic stalemate takes on a different significance in light of the fact that all parties are committed to there being a gap between the badness of death suggested by our terror of death and what (if any) deprivation it brings about. First, notice that everyone's acceptance of some degree of a roughly instinct-driven error theory undercuts the strength of our conviction that we can read off the badness of death from our dread of it. Second, agreement about the need for this kind of error theory provides the Epicurean with the tools for offering a more parsimonious explanation of the appearance of death's badness. On the Epicurean account, it is the same instinct for survival (which the deprivation theorist already appeals to) which closes the gap between death's terror and death's apparent badness.

Put differently, even if we hold fixed (1) the stalemate over whether death harms us, and (2) the fact that both Epicureans and deprivation theorists require an error theory to account for the terror that funds our convictions about the badness of death, the Epicurean can still argue that the comparative parsimony of the Epicurean view is a virtue that (claims the Epicurean) outweighs any cost of holding that the terror error occurs more pervasively on the Epicurean account.

This is not to suggest that there will be no disagreement about whether the Epicurean's parsimony is worth the costs of a more expansive error theory. The point, though, is that it seems there is plenty that the Epicurean might say to stave off Fischer's claim that common sense can serve as an independent anchor to push the stalemate in favor of the deprivation theorist.

I have no doubt that Fischer is capable of generating a compelling response to the reply I have sketched here. Still, it seems to me that more can be said about the dialectical situation between deprivation theorists and Epicureans, and I look forward to learning more from Fischer's work on these matters.

In what space remains, however, I wish to turn to a very different matter: Fischer's intriguing claim that "the value of acting so as to be morally responsible is a species of the value of self-expression" (10). Or, as he puts it later in the volume: "the value of acting freely is the value (whatever that is) of writing a sentence in the narrative of one's life" (156). This is an account on which, by acting as free or responsible agents, we make it the case that our lives have narrative value.

Fischer is careful to note that the account has a two-tiered structure, one that distinguishes the nature of the thing from the value it has for us. At the first level, we have the nature of the activity, i.e., an artistic/aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic activity, which gives rise to properties of narrative and self-expression. At the second level, we have an appeal to the idea that the first level thing (the aesthetic activity that gives rise to narrative values, say) can itself be *valued* in non-aesthetic ways. Although value talk crops up at both levels, it is crucial to recognize that the fundamentally aesthetic activity of self-expression (or narrative creation) can, Fischer thinks, be valued non-aesthetically. Thus, it is not necessarily an objection to his account to insist that we value moral responsibility in moral terms, and that as a consequence, his account has gone wrong by suggesting that responsible agency is, at root, a kind of aesthetic activity. In Fischer's framework that would just be to say we morally value an activity with an aesthetic value or structure. Put this way, such a claim is not obviously problematic.

Despite Fischer's careful exposition of this idea, I find its nature somewhat elusive for three reasons. First, I find it hard to shake the thought that all of this

talk of self-expression and narrative is metaphorical. However, Fischer does not seem to think it is just a metaphor, so perhaps this just means I am brutishly skeptical about narrative accounts of selves and moral life. Second, it is difficult to make out whether the account is intended to be a largely descriptive one, or whether it has pretensions to prescription. The language Fischer uses oftentimes suggests that the project is primarily descriptive, and not inherently normative. For example, he contrasts it with other, apparently descriptive accounts, such as those that explain our concern for moral responsibility in terms of a concern for making a difference (to, say, the causal fabric of the world, given the actual past and the natural laws governing causal relations). So, I think, the aim is to offer an account that does not deviate from the general contours of common sense. However, if it is descriptive in this way, it raises puzzles about whether the account does any work in illuminating what looks like a deeply normative notion: moral responsibility. Put differently, if it is more than merely descriptive, how does talk of what we in fact value tell us anything about whether we are rightly valuing self-expression and the like?

Third, and relatedly, Fischer leaves it open what sorts of value we attach to the essentially aesthetic activity of self-expression that is at the core of what we purportedly value in acting freely and responsibly. We are never told what the value of self-expression turns out to be, or indeed, whether it is a value found in our *valuings* or in some feature that exists apart from our *valuings*. Here, though, is where the business of whether the account is descriptive or prescriptive matters. If it is purely descriptive, it seems enough to tell us about our *valuings*. If it is intended to be normative, then we need to know a good deal more. For those with non-subjectivist inclinations, it will seem problematic to explain the apparent normative force of responsibility in terms of what we happen to value, right here and now. That is, responsibility's normative force would appear to be a not-obviously-binding property (e.g., how and whether we contingently value self-expression). That would be striking, at the very least, for something so central to our moral practices. So, it would be helpful to hear more about how Fischer sees these pieces hanging together.

Having said that, I should emphasize that these are less objections to what has been said than they are invitations for Fischer to tell us more stories about ourselves. This is good news. One of the surest indicators that the storyteller has done his job is that he leaves the reader with the desire for the story to continue. That's *my* story about *Our Stories*. I'm sticking to it.

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