



Philosophical Review

Review: [untitled]

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Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Jul., 1993), pp. 416-418

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of [Philosophical Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2185910>

Accessed: 24/02/2011 13:31

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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 102, No. 3 (July 1993)

CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE REAPER: A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF THE NATURE AND VALUE OF DEATH. By FRED FELDMAN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 249.

In the first part of the book, Feldman explores certain conceptual and metaphysical questions about death. Primarily, he seeks to give an account of death. A standard account is that death is the cessation of life; thus, Feldman attends to the question of what life is. He lays out several plausible definitions of life (including various “functional” and “vitalist” approaches) and argues that each of these fails. Feldman thus believes that life—a crucial ingredient in the standard sorts of explanations of the nature of death—is itself somewhat mysterious.

But suppose we understand roughly what life is. Feldman proceeds to argue that various attempts at employing the notion of life to define death are unsuccessful. For example, he points out that death cannot be construed simply as the cessation of life, because there seem to be various ways of getting out of life without dying (for example, suspended animation, fission, and metamorphosis). After considering refinements of the standard analysis, Feldman concludes that death is an enigma; although it “looms large in our emotional lives . . . , we really don’t know precisely what death is” (71).

As he further explores various conceptual issues pertaining to death, Feldman analyzes the notion of the process of dying and the relationship between death and nonexistence. Finally, he presents a “conceptual scheme” for death and the related concepts. The idea here is that even if these notions cannot be analyzed fully and adequately, they can be placed within a structure of claims which give determinate content to them.

I find Feldman’s discussion of the cluster of conceptual issues relevant to death extremely useful. It is very lucid, sensible, and insightful throughout. The criticisms of alternative approaches are particularly penetrating, and the positive suggestions are thoughtful.

In the second part, Feldman turns to value questions. The central issue here is whether death can be a bad thing for the individual who dies. Epicurus and Lucretius argued that death cannot be an evil or misfortune for the one who dies. Feldman undertakes to explain and criticize their arguments. In doing so, he defends a version of the “deprivation approach”—death is a bad thing for the one who dies because it deprives her of the goods of life.

Further, Feldman defends his version of the deprivation approach against considerations that arise from various puzzles. One of the most interesting of these puzzles is the apparent implication of the deprivation

thesis that we should have symmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth, insofar as it might be alleged that late birth deprives us of the goods of life in a way relevantly similar to the way in which early death deprives us of the goods of life.

Finally, Feldman sketches a general normative theory and draws out certain consequences for normative questions about death. His ethical theory is a version of consequentialism that assesses the value of states of affairs in terms of the fit between the amounts of primary intrinsic goods individuals receive (such as quantity and quality of life) and the amounts they *deserve*. Having laid out this theory (and criticized certain rivals), Feldman argues that it has plausible consequences for such issues as abortion, suicide, and the morality of killing.

Again, I find Feldman's normative analysis helpful and insightful. I wish, however, to raise a few worries. First, although there is some consideration of certain rival theories, Feldman's consequentialism (or, as he prefers to characterize it, "utilitarianism") is developed in a rather sketchy and abstract fashion. Further, it makes heavy use of the notion of desert; whereas in passing Feldman concedes that this notion may be "slippery" (208), there is no serious and sustained inquiry into the problems of relying on the notion in the manner of Feldman's consequentialism. Perhaps, we have some fairly clear intuitions about desert which can be employed as required by Feldman's approach to generate answers to certain moral problems, but there are other cases in which our judgments of desert are unclear or controversial. (Of course, this would not be a problem if our moral judgments in these cases were similarly unclear or controversial, but it is not obvious that this is the case.) Worse yet, there may be cases in which the issue of what primary goods individuals deserve is *precisely what is at issue*.

Second, I am not convinced by Feldman's answer to the puzzle about early death and late birth. His answer is two-fold. He points out that normally there is an asymmetry of lifespan that accompanies one's intuition that early death is worse than late birth. When we are asked to consider what would happen if some individual were to die later, we hold her birth date constant; thus, if she were to die later, she would live longer. In contrast, if asked to consider what would have happened if she had been born earlier, we do not hold her death date constant. Instead, we hold her lifespan constant (and thus adjust the death date) (155). This would explain our asymmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth. But if lifespans are held constant, Feldman suggests that an asymmetry in attitudes is irrational.

I am not convinced that in the latter case (where lifespans are held constant), no asymmetry in attitudes is rational. I can only very briefly sketch my worry here. I would wish to begin by distinguishing "temporally

located" and "atemporal" perspectives. I concede that from the atemporal perspective, asymmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth are irrational. But I believe they are *not* irrational, from the temporally located perspective. I would suggest (although I cannot develop the point in depth here) that there is a "Parfitian" asymmetry between my current attitudes toward my own past and future pleasures; in certain contexts, I care more about my future pleasures than my past pleasures, and I prefer my pleasures to be in the future rather than the past (other things equal). Given (what I cannot prove) that this asymmetry is rational (or at least not irrational), then it emerges that it is rational (from the temporally located perspective) to have asymmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth: early death deprives me of goods about which I care deeply, whereas late birth deprives me of goods to which I am relatively indifferent (again, from the temporally located perspective).

I wonder why the atemporal viewpoint should be thought to have hegemony here? Of course, I do not claim that it is obvious that the temporally located viewpoint should be decisive; it seems that we have some reason to give considerable weight to the deliverances of the temporally located viewpoint, insofar as this is the viewpoint of our lives as we lead them. But all I would claim here is that it is not evident that the atemporal viewpoint should control our view. Consider, as an analogy, the situation in ethics. Thomas Nagel argues that there are relatively more subjective and objective points of view on the world. He alleges that the subjective viewpoint issues in certain deontological moral reasons, and the objective viewpoint issues in certain consequentialist reasons. Further, he argues that neither viewpoint is more basic, and thus there is a sort of fragmentation of value; the relevant insight is that the objective viewpoint does not necessarily have hegemony in ethics. It seems to me that the situation is similar with regard to the atemporal viewpoint. Thus it seems to me that Feldman's treatment of this puzzle is too quick—he has not fully defended the deprivation approach against the allegation that it has puzzling consequences.

Despite the reservations briefly articulated above, I have considerable admiration for this fine book. Feldman talks sense about difficult, murky, and perplexing matters.

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