

Steven Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge 2009)

In recent years there has been, among analytic philosophers, a revival of interest in questions and puzzles about life and death. Luper's book is a "critical introduction" to these philosophical puzzles. His style is straightforward, unpretentious, sometimes humorous. The reader comes away with a good sense of the state of the current academic debates and their importance. Luper offers persuasive arguments for his own views (hence the "critical" introduction) while giving opposing views a fair shake.

To summarize very briefly, the three main questions addressed by the book are: (1) What is death? (2) What makes death bad for the one who dies? (3) What makes it wrong to kill someone? To answer (1), Luper begins with an investigation into the nature of life. To be alive is to be able to sustain oneself via "processes governed by durable replicators" such as DNA (14). To die is for that capacity to be destroyed. Concerning (2), Luper argues that death is bad when it makes the victim's whole life worse than it would have been had the death not occurred – so, for instance, if early death deprives a person of twenty years of enjoyment, and a whole life with that twenty years of enjoyment would be better than without, then early death is bad for that person (60). Luper defends this view against some much-discussed objections deriving from Epicurus and Lucretius, such as the symmetry problem: if the long period of nonexistence *before* one's life is of no concern, why should nonexistence after one dies be so troubling? Luper also argues that there can be posthumous harms – that is, that events taking place after one has died can retroactively make one worse off.

Non-philosophers might be most interested in the question about the wrongness of killing, and its implications for topics such as euthanasia and abortion. Luper sensibly claims that "the wrongness of killing surely has something to do with its harmfulness" (8). So it is surprising that when Luper comes to his preferred view about the wrongness of killing, the evil of death plays a role only when it comes to killing animals and incompetent people. In such cases killing is wrong when it makes the victim worse off. But if we have a competent adult human, what makes killing the person wrong is that the person "has not made an informed choice to be killed" (159). To be competent is to be able to "grasp and rationally assess the matter at hand" (159). It follows that euthanasia is very often permissible; the implications for abortion are less clear, as they depend on identifying an embryo or fetus with the adult it becomes.

Should we accept Luper's account of the wrongness of killing? Imagine you meet a very pessimistic young man named Soren. After much philosophical reflection, and lacking no relevant factual information about what his life will be like in the future, Soren comes to the belief that life is not worth living. He is in perfect health and could easily live another sixty years. Soren asks you to kill him. According to Luper's view, it is permissible for you to do so. Even if you are a very persuasive person, and with minimal effort could convince Soren that his philosophical reflections have been faulty, or that he dwells too much on the negative aspects of life, you would be permitted to kill him.

One might think this takes autonomy too far. Surely some degree of paternalism is called for here. Inflicting this great harm on Soren, merely because he desires it and is informed and competent, seems morally impermissible. Luper suggests that in such a case, you would have reason to believe that Soren is incompetent (161). Indeed, there are many cases in which someone making the judgment Soren makes would be incompetent. But we cannot assume that even a highly detrimental choice is made out of incompetence or ignorance. A competent reasoner might have skewed value judgments, lack perspective, or have any number of other cognitive imperfections that cause her to make poor, but autonomous, decisions. Egregious reasoning need not indicate incompetence.