

[Daniel Watts 2013. Please see published version for citation purposes.]

Stokes, P. and Buben, A. J. (eds): *Kierkegaard and Death*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. x + 302. £60. ISBN 978035402235324.

‘Quite frankly, while I'm alive I want to be alive; I don't want to be spending my life contemplating death’. Thus spoke Deborah Meaden, on a recent episode of the BBC's *Dragons' Den*, declaring herself ‘out’ of a deal to invest in an online funeral planning service. Naturally, a volume on Kierkegaard on death can be expected to take a different stance. Indeed, a recurring theme in *Kierkegaard and Death* is the idea that we should somehow be occupying ourselves with our own deaths at every moment of our lives. But Meaden's remark is a refreshingly direct expression of what is presumably a rather common outlook and one question we might naturally ask is what, exactly, is supposed to be wrong with it.

It is regrettable that *Kierkegaard and Death* does not take up such straightforward questions more directly. This collection of fifteen essays will appeal most to those who already have a professional stake in Kierkegaard interpretation, and in the possibilities of comparison with Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida; less to those whose proximal interest is in how we should respond to the prospect of one's own death and to the deaths of others. That said, the collection includes some fine essays and it does establish the framework for a serious assessment of the import of Kierkegaard's work for our understanding of death. Since I cannot do justice to the range and richness of these essays – several of which explore ideas and images of spiritual death – I will restrict the rest of my remarks to their bearing on questions surrounding natural death and human mortality.

Three major themes emerge in this connection. *First, Kierkegaard and Death* furnishes materials for an account of the various ways in which we are wont to repress awareness of our mortality. These materials go beyond familiar points about *divertissement* and the quiet despair of ‘the man of immediacy’. Ian Duckles’ contribution, which develops a comparison with Derrida, centres on the arresting idea that *ethics*, as traditionally conceived in terms of universal duties and public justifications, is one means by which we occlude our own ‘singularity’ as mortals.

Duckles works to make this idea more convincing through discussion of examples such as Agamemnon and Kierkegaard's portrait of Judge William as a fully signed-up 'ethicist' whose express aim is to overcome the temporal conditions of human existence. With reference to Kierkegaard's *Postscript*, Paul Muench extends a similar analysis to the practice of philosophy itself – in its modern, professionalized form anyway – and to the risks implicit in conceiving human mortality in purely abstract, generalized terms. Again, Charles Guignon's contribution, which provides helpful orientation to the Heidegger/Kierkegaard axis in general, highlights the possibility that regarding oneself in narrative terms, and death as the culmination of one's life-story, is another way of failing to face up to the singular character of human mortality. And several contributors take up the theme, in Kierkegaard's discourse 'At a Graveside', of the ways in which our typical responses to death are marked by flight and repression, whether in affective states such as horror or sentimentality or in our tendency to fall back on such clichés as death being a 'sleep' or a mere 'transition'.

Assuming it would be better for us not to indulge such avoidance strategies, the pressing question is what it would be like not to do so; more positively, what it would be to live out a proper, clear-sighted, 'earnest' or 'authentic' orientation to one's own death. *Kierkegaard and Death* explores a number of candidate answers. These include: *self-restraint*, *narrative unity*, *living 'in the moment'*, *concerned ignorance*, 'anticipatory resoluteness', *resignation*, *living by the demands of 'second ethics'*, 'co-presence with death', *faith*. No doubt this variety of answers reflects the polyphony of Kierkegaard's writings. But there are genuine interpretative fault-lines here as well, such as whether or not Kierkegaard is rightly numbered among 'narrativist' theorists of the self. John Davenport's contribution – which jumps into this debate in a way those who have not followed its prior twists and turns will surely find rebarbative – invokes Dickens' Scrooge as one who, late in the day, is able to find new narrative coherence in his life as a result of his imaginative engagement with death. But the question remains whether to read Kierkegaard as a 'narrativist' is not to miss the heart of his concerns with such themes as moral despair, anxiety, contingency, alterity and 'the moment'.

*Second*, several contributors take up the question of our duties towards the dead. In a rather opaque comparison between Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida on

this front, Laura Llevadot appears to advance the view that fulfilling our duties to the dead means holding out for their resurrection (while purportedly showing how Derrida can help us towards a non-dogmatic appropriation of religious dogmas!). Certainly, this is the view attributed to Kierkegaard by Jeremy Allen, who develops a comparison in this regard with Hegel on recognition. Patrick Stokes takes a more mainstream and critically focused approach to these issues, considering whether we have good grounds for thinking we do indeed have duties *to*, and not merely duties *regarding*, the dead. He concludes, compellingly in my view, that Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* can help us to articulate just such grounds.

*Third*, there is the question of the afterlife and of its place in Kierkegaard's thought. The overall impression of *Kierkegaard and Death* is confusing here. Llevadot assures us in no uncertain terms that it is 'absolutely not' the case that, for Kierkegaard, 'Christianity gives hope in the face of death because it promises another life beyond this one' – to believe this would be to 'contradict the Kierkegaardian understanding of Christianity'. Other contributors insinuate, implausibly, that whether there is an afterlife is somehow beside the point. By contrast, Tamara Monet Marks begins her contribution with the words, 'Kierkegaard believed that he would experience a post-mortem existence' (p. 274). Despite being placed last in the collection, the reader would do well in fact to begin with Marks' overview of these issues – if only to properly frame the question of how far Kierkegaard's thoughts about death can be appropriated outside an eschatological framework. (I would have liked to see more honest grappling with this latter question, throughout the volume.)

*Kierkegaard and Death* is an uneven collection and, as a whole, it falls short of a philosophically accessible and rigorous approach. Beyond what it has to offer the Kierkegaard specialist, it is nonetheless rich in leads for anyone who feels compelled to spend at least part of their life contemplating death.