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**Adam Buben, *Existentialism and the Desirability of Immortality* (New York and London: Routledge 2022), pp. xvii – 177.**

In this book, Adam Buben focuses on a number of influential thinkers who belong to the continental, and specifically existentialist, philosophical tradition. They are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Unamuno, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir. The author's thesis is that their reflection contributes to supporting his view that "a never-ending existence offers more hope for personal meaning and value than ordinary finite-existence does" (p. 3). The opposite view is sustained by those whom the author, following John M. Fischer, calls "immortality curmudgeons," and consists in questioning the idea that immortality is more beneficial to us and therefore preferable to mortality. This view has often been seen as typical of the reflection of the above-mentioned representatives of the existentialist tradition. As Buben says, however, they have usually been neglected with regard to the desirability of immortality (see p. 14). This is why he devotes this book to attentively focusing on their work and offering a novel interpretation of their thought.

This does not imply that Buben is simply developing a sort of history of philosophy project, which has nothing to do with urgent issues that affect human experience in our days. The theme of the desirability of immortality touches our lives especially today, given the various attempts to achieve immortality that are being made by scientists, transhumanists, and numerous other protagonists of technological progress. In this context, it is of fundamental importance to make it clear that even those philosophers who have often been considered associable with immortality curmudgeons seem to confirm the commonsensical view that immortality is desirable and preferable to mortality.

The Introduction – which is significantly titled “The Hope of Meaningful Immortality” – usefully puts the reader in a condition to grasp all of the main aspects of the reflection contained in the book. Buben puts forward the thesis that there is more meaning in an immortal life than in a mortal one. According to him, this thesis is overall more acceptable than the opposite view, which he honestly recognizes is grounded in arguments that cannot be totally rejected. Buben makes reference to some of these arguments proposed by Bernard Williams as well as to the replies that Fischer offered to them (see p. 5). Also, Buben mentions the contemporary technological attempts to achieve immortality especially by way of the so-called mind-uploading, which is the futuristic process of transferring the information that constitutes the mind into a synthetic medium. The author arguably points out that this kind of immortality, however invulnerable to failure it may appear to be at first sight, is not genuine immortality given the fact that it does not make death impossible (see pp. 1f.).

I intend to focus on two aspects of the desirability of immortality, which are only partly treated by Buben. They are the role that religion may play in the debates on the hope of immortality and the relationship between these debates and the concept of life’s meaning. While dwelling upon these aspects, I will be able to identify some of the positive features and the special insights of Buben’s book.

Let me first refer to the role of religion. Buben’s book is devoted to developing a merely philosophical reflection on the desirability of immortality. This is fully understandable because the author focuses on views that have been advocated by philosophers on merely rational grounds. Incidentally, let me note that Buben shows remarkable competence in dealing with those philosophical views as well as considerable ability to propose alternatives to usual interpretations of them. However, it is my conviction that it is hard to effectively focus on the philosophical views in question without constant reference to the religious and more specifically Christian perspectives to which, more or less implicitly, they refer.

Buben mentions precursors of existentialism such as Kierkegaard and Pascal and

says that both of them were “thoroughly engaged with religious matters.” He then claims that “to raise the question of the desirability of immortality, however, is not necessarily to participate in a religious conversation” (p. 25). The author is right since one can plausibly limit oneself to providing philosophical arguments in response to equally philosophical arguments such as the ones put forward by immortality curmudgeons. A convincing example can be found with regard to Bernard Williams’s view that boredom would affect immortality (see pp. 4f. and 25ff.). Buben arguably shows that pro and con arguments can be provided and that in the end there seem to be more arguments against Williams’s thesis than in its support. Let me just remind the reader of some of these arguments. It is known that Williams insightfully puts forward a dilemma. According to him, we either maintain our own identity, and this causes us to become irreparably bored once we are granted immortality, or lose our identity, and the consequence is that, although we keep life interesting, we simply lose ourselves and talking about “us” and “our life” no longer makes sense. Buben shows that effective responses can be provided, which I too find convincing. He notes that, among the desires that Williams calls “categorical” – they are the desires that “make one’s life worth living, as opposed to what one only desires on the condition that one happens to be alive” (p. 138, n2) – some “can be exhausted, while others continue to seek fulfilment, and still others are being born” (p. 27). In the footsteps of Sophie-Grace Chappell, Buben concludes that a sort of unbroken series of overlapping projects follows, which means that both variety and our personal identity are preserved. Also, Buben focuses on other important arguments that, following Williams, immortality curmudgeons have given rise to, and formulates responses that, like the one I have just mentioned, can be found fully convincing.

However, if we look at the hope of immortality from a religious viewpoint, we may find a more radical reply to Williams’s and other immortality curmudgeons’ arguments. To turn back to Williams’s view of boredom, it may be said that one becomes bored only before finite goods, which lose their value and their attractiveness as time passes. This cannot regard infinite goods such as the eternal life and happiness that religious people hope they will achieve once they have been granted

communion with God in the afterlife. Williams and those who do not take into consideration the religious view of immortality simply do not focus on the infinitude in question. Perhaps more importantly, they seem to look at immortality in terms of quantity and mere life extension, whereas immortality achieved by way of religion should be considered first in terms of quality, since it also involves perfection and eternal beatitude. Those who only look at immortality in philosophical terms excogitate arguments that may be more or less appropriate only to earthly life, whose value is necessarily finite both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Obviously enough, someone may object that the religious view I am considering is attractive to the extent that one is able to demonstrate the truth of religion and more specifically that of the Christian revelation. This would involve reference to debates that have been conducted for millennia, in which I clearly cannot indulge here.

However, a convincing response to the objection at stake can be given, since it is strictly related to the theme of meaningful life and can be easily formulated. God's existence and immortality, even if they are put as mere hypotheses, can have positive repercussions on earthly life and its meaningfulness. As is shown by a growing literature on the axiology of theism, religion, and especially God's existence, are of interest not only in metaphysical terms – whether or not God exists – but also in axiological terms – whether or not God's existence is beneficial to us. Pascal's Wager, which Buben treats in his book, is clearly aimed at showing that the immortality option may lead us to improve earthly life. Choosing to live in accordance with belief in God may put us in a condition to lead a better life if compared with the choice to reject that belief. As I will show in a moment, this distinction is of crucial importance when it comes to discussions on life's meaning, and this sustains my view that religious experience should not be overlooked when we discuss the desirability of immortality. Furthermore, it should be said that, as far as we know, only religion promises true immortality. This emerges from contemporary debates on digital immortality. They show that, even if we could become immortal by way of technology, death would still be possible. As I have noted above, Buben mentions our lack of technological ability

to overcome death at the very beginning of his book. Robert Geraci, whom Buben cites regarding other subjects, has arguably shown that true immortality is the impossibility of dying, and that, unlike the one promised by religion, the immortality that digitalization could perhaps provide will always be exposed to failure, since every device containing our mind would be susceptible to destruction, which may occur either accidentally or purposely.

Let me now say something about the relationship between Buben's reflection and the notion of life's meaning, to which he constantly refers. In the Introduction, he opportunely focuses on the meaning of "meaning." He acknowledges the existence of many ways to understand what it consists of. Also, the author explains the reasons why he will not adopt "any particularly rigid notion of such meaning" (p. 3). I find that the reasons in question are fully understandable and that once again Buben shows his ability to treat the subject of the book in a methodologically impeccable way. However, I think that reference to a decisive aspect of contemporary reflection on meaning, i.e., the distinction between metaphysics and axiology that I have mentioned above, is of interest here and should not be missing for at least two reasons. First, this distinction allows us to explain why there are philosophers who do not believe – metaphysically – in immortality and at the same time believe – axiologically – that immortality would grant meaning to human life. Second, this distinction shows that we do not need metaphysics to deal with immortality and its desirability from the viewpoint of religion. In this connection, we can still learn from Pascal's Wager. It shows that, from that viewpoint, we can cultivate the belief that God and his promise of immortality are able to make our earthly life meaningful although we do not need to previously devote ourselves to sophisticated controversies in the field of natural theology.

Of course, these considerations by no means belittle the quality of Buben's scholarly product. He offered an impeccable treatment of the reflection conducted by outstanding existentialists on the desirability of immortality. He attempted to find a synergy between the analytic tradition and the continental one, a synergy which can

help us deal with the current interest of science and technology in the achievement of immortality. Finally, he used a rigorous methodology, which the reader can immediately appreciate as soon as she picks up the book. Firstly, with regard to the precise abbreviations provided at the beginning of the book and, secondly, with regard to the extraordinarily detailed index, which grants her the opportunity to easily find reference to all of the notions employed by the author.

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