

BOOK REVIEW

Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy. By A.G. LONG. Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 232. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN: 9781107086593.

This is a remarkable book: it is both (i) a contribution of the first rank on the history of the philosophy of death in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, and (ii) a provocative, fascinating study of the concepts of immortality and the “ethics of death” that will prove illuminating for philosophers and classicists working in any time period. A central strength of Long’s study is his ingenious division of the book’s contents: in Part 1, he treats of the concept of immortality in ancient Greek thought (notably, *before* he discusses death at length); in Part 2, he considers ancient Greek and Roman philosophical treatments of death and the intricate ways in which death figures in ancient ethics. With this careful, principled separation of the book’s contents he is able to keep distinct what is often muddled in the contemporary literatures surrounding death and the afterlife: on the one hand, just what it means to die; on the other, just what it means to be “immortal.”

A bit of background will be helpful. Contemporary philosophical debates around death draw heavily on Bernard Williams’s rich 1973 essay, “The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality.” In it, Williams considers the case of Makropulos’s unnatural prolonged existence and her eventual decision to give up the pursuit of unending life. The interesting philosophical conclusion is that, despite popular sentiment to the contrary, “eternal life,” conceived as something resembling our human lives now, would be dreadfully, tediously, crushingly boring—especially as we add centuries upon centuries to our regular lifespans. Death, Williams thinks, gives meaning to our life-projects by ascribing bounds and limits. This idea has proven powerful in the philosophical literature on death, and has featured heavily, too, in contemporary bioethical debates about life-preserving measures, dying and death with dignity considerations.

Long rightly notes the influence of this idea on contemporary scholarship on ancient Greek and Roman thoughts on death, dying and immortality. Many modern scholars, he thinks, follow Williams in assuming that immortality is simply “a state without death” (2). On this minimalistic view of immortality, we can imagine human beings who do not die, but otherwise go on living lives roughly equivalent to those of other mortal, i.e., dying, human beings. This, Long says, is a decidedly Christian-influenced, post-ancient view of what immortality consists in, where we can imagine an immortality available to human beings at least similar to their current embodied existence on earth.

For ancient pagan Greeks and Romans, Long argues, the picture is more complicated. For one, immortality is closely tied to notions of divinity. The *gods* are immortal; if a human being is thought immortal (in either a literary episode or philosophical exposition), that person is then nearly without exception associated with godlike qualities. This casts doubt on the idea that for the ancients the idea of a drab or tedious immortality is even conceptually possible—immortality, for them, emanates from awesome, pervasive power. Immortality presents itself in other unexpected ways for ancient philosophers: for Empedocles and the Stoics, both of whom believe in the doctrine of cosmic conflagration, “immortal” beings do not “die” insofar as they persist *within* the cosmos, but nevertheless are not immune to the periodic destruction of the “world-system.” These are but two ways that Greek notions of “deathlessness” diverge from our notions of simple immortality.

Long’s principal aim in the first part, he says, is to make today’s readers of Greek philosophy “less confident in applying to the ancient world their own intuitions about what immortality should or must mean” (2). In this he is very successful.

In the second part of the book, Long discusses death and, in particular, its ethical implications in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. This reader much appreciated his focus on the ancient skeptical tradition, as skepticism about death served as a recurrent therapeutic consolation to fear of death since at least Socrates (notably in the *Phaedo*) and finds a powerful exponent in Cicero in *Tusculans* 1. In addition to his discussion of the skeptics, Long provides a first-rate analysis of the long Stoic tradition of providing so-called Symmetry arguments (in short: that we should expect death to resemble the unknowing sleep that preceded our being born). Throughout, Long carefully navigates ancient therapeutic philosophical traditions and their emphasis on purifying the soul of a fear of death for the purposes of achieving peace and repose in this life through *eudaimonia* or

ataraxia. He does this while providing new, provocative readings of key texts with a fresh lens of interpretation (such is the power of his clear-headed interpretive division between death and immortality).

In sum, Long's book is a rare achievement. It is both an excellent survey of the historical sources of Greek and Roman philosophy of death, and an engaging, original philosophical document in its own right. I have every confidence that it will serve as a key text among classicists and philosophers interested in the topic.

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