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Gilbert Meilaender, *Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging*

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Book review by Daniel P. Maher

Gilbert Meilaender, *Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2013. 135 pp. ISBN-10: 080286869X ; ISBN-13: 978-0802868695 (pbk.)

Two sorts of motions, each natural in its own way, determine our lives. In one sort, our bodies metabolize food, heal wounds, regulate body temperature, maintain salt balance, distribute oxygen, remove toxins, and so on. These remarkable processes occur quite independently of our individual and collective abilities to understand them. Most of us, most of the time, remain blissfully inattentive to the rather automatic biological substructure on which our conscious activities depend. And yet these vital operations, in their complexity, coordination, and durability, compel our wonder whether we take them to be caused by nature's unmindful teleology (as Aristotle did), God's creative generosity (as Augustine did), or indifferent chemical mechanism (as any number of our contemporaries do). In the other sort of motions, our metabolism slows, eyesight weakens, bone density lessens, muscles slacken, skin loses elasticity, and, generally, our vital powers and processes become increasingly vulnerable to environmental interference as they deteriorate, malfunction, and ultimately fail. Entropy always wins, which is an abstract way of saying that a living organism's marvelous integration of vital operations is but a temporary island that inevitably recedes into the non-living cosmic sea. Nature's power to produce life amazes, and yet falls short of its power to destroy life.

Must it be so?

Over the centuries, poets, philosophers, and theologians have tried their hands at cracking the mystery of our mortality, our sadness that life must come to an end, and our corresponding desire to live almost always a bit longer. Gilbert Meilaender has composed an attractive meditation on these otherwise indelicate themes. He has faced them as a serious human being must think about them today, namely, in the disorienting light cast by contemporary techno-scientific writers, who encourage us to believe that we or perhaps our children can place a thumb on the scales and tip the balance against entropy and in favor

of indefinite lengthening of our lives. How do we think about efforts to alter the most necessary fact of life?

When we try to think about our desires and hopes for a transformed life, “we must,” he says, “come to terms with our nature as organisms, as bodies that limit us in countless ways and limit our days.” That is, we must think about that nature now that it appears open to being designed anew or, perhaps, designed for the first time. Is our given nature something good and deserving of preservation? Is our nature a hindrance to the satisfaction of our desires, and is it not something to be discarded in favor of whatever post- or trans-human nature we can generate? Alternatively, is there no combination of earthly goods available in an unending life that can in fact satisfy our desires? And does this indicate that we are created for happiness only with God, or does it mean that really achieved immortality would ultimately leave us miserably bored? “We cannot know what we think of attempts to retard aging or prolong our lives indefinitely unless we know what a human being is and what it would mean for human beings to flourish.”

According to Meilaender, there is no metaphysically neutral way to approach these questions. Consequently, over the course of the book he takes roughly three points of view seriously (albeit not equally seriously). One may be described as a pagan poetic or philosophical view according to which human beings are a naturally limited part of a good natural order. On this view, human life can still be understood as good, even if it remains tinged with sadness because what seem to be aspirations for eternity cannot be fulfilled. The second may be described as a modern or contemporary naturalistic view according to which the human being is an evolutionary effect of the motion of particles of matter according to indifferent statistical laws. On this view, human limitations are reasonable targets for whatever readjustments come within our power and promise to gratify our desires. The third may be described as a Christian view (allow me to call it “mere Augustinianism”) according to which the

goodness and beauty of human life is affirmed even though nothing in this world and no prolongation of this life can satisfy the heart's innate yearning for God himself.

Throughout the book's six chapters Meilaender shifts between these three points of view, all the while ruminating on what it means to age, that is, to live "a life whose moments are not identical but take their specific character from their place in the whole." For us, one day or one year is not simply a measure of elapsed time, as a physicist might conceive it; time is ontologically and not merely psychologically tied to the vital and mortal motions of the body. As we entertain thoughts of radically altering the ordinary arc of human life, it is difficult to know what can be sensibly desired, and Meilaender turns over the various possibilities in a clear, graceful, conversational manner. He is remarkably adept at choosing quotations that permit him to be substantively engaged with a diverse range of authors without also requiring tedious exposition. Meilaender knows how to suggest a line of thought and to avoid distracting or exhausting the reader with unnecessary detail.

The book has six chapters. The first three address the question of whether indefinitely more life is truly desirable. In these chapters we see descriptions of some of the proposals for restructuring human lifespans, and, despite some critical comments that strike at various depths, Meilaender holds that the virtue of love—understood as affirming that another person's existence is simply good—provides the strongest argument in support of the desire that people be preserved without death. He also distinguishes the virtue of hope, which is appropriate for beings on the way to fulfillment in divinely granted beatitude, from optimism, which is the mood of those confident in their power to construct an interminable (or "pointless") extension of this life. In the third chapter he considers the view that immortality, whether god-given or man-made, is not desirable *for us*, and comes to the dilemma that life and happiness might be recognizably human precisely because they are finite.

In the final three chapters, Meilaender examines matters from the point of view of three non-traditional virtues. *Generativity* names the virtue by which we are properly disposed toward producing

and acting for the benefit of the next generation. Children shake parents out of self-absorption and draw them into the virtues by which they generously prepare their children for the world and the world for their children's enjoyment (not their own). *Patience* names an instrumental virtue that is necessary only so long as we do not yet have what we want, but it also names a Kierkegaardian expectancy that is always essential for the person who waits on God. Still another sense of patience amounts to acceptance of what we are; patience in this sense acknowledges that our agency, howsoever great it becomes as we strive to master the conditions of our lives, remains circumscribed by more fundamental limits, conditions not of our making, as a result of which we remain essentially patients. Meilaender sees generativity as imperiled by attempts to disrupt the natural arc of aging and death; he sees patience as permanent no matter what we do, although the third sense of patience, while not an endorsement of passivity, still counsels against attempts to transcend (or transgress) our given limits.

In the final chapter Meilaender interprets a *complete life* as a virtue. "In order to know how best to characterize a complete human life, we have to know what sort of being a human being is." Here he juxtaposes the pagan and the Christian views most plainly and draws together the main argument of the book. On the pagan view, mortal life may be understood as somehow complete in moral or theoretical virtue, but Meilaender is suspicious about the extent to which our desire outstrips what nature makes available. No one desires happiness for a determinate period, like a leased car, and there is more than a hint of sorrow accompanying the recognition that all our loves must die. He examines poetry from John Hall Wheelock, who appears several times in the book. Wheelock's melancholy reflection on the sweetness and finitude of life is juxtaposed with a Christian view according to which human life is ecstatic, i.e., centered on God. If human life can be complete, Meilaender concludes that our choice is between a pagan view, according to which we enjoy our bittersweet day in the sun, and a Christian view, according to which our desire has always oriented us toward a transformed and eternal life with God.

After this conclusion, Meilaender inserts a short afterword consisting of an imaginary dialogue between three characters, barely disguised versions of Aristotle, Augustine, and Francis Bacon. This conversation presupposes that, having read the preceding six chapters, each still believes his own view to be best, though “None of the friends supposes he has all the answers.” Although the preceding chapter suggested that our choice is between pagan acquiescence and Christian hope, a spokesman for the project of life-prolongation resurfaces here in the afterword. This may indicate that Meilaender accepts that his critique and his counsel against that project will not finally make it go away. The trans-humanist project may be afflicted with internal inconsistencies, as Meilaender has argued, but that is unlikely to inhibit its proponents. The desire to avoid death probably cannot be defeated by argument. Meilaender’s temporary dismissal of it might indicate only that it is not a serious option for most of us today, no matter what prophets like Ronald Bailey say. Concluding the book with this three-part dialogue reflects Meilaender’s approach throughout the book: give genuine consideration to deeply opposed interpretations of a fundamental human question.

Clearly, Meilaender could have written a longer book, but we should be grateful that he did not. This is a thoughtful book for anyone for whom *memento mori* is an intellectual challenge and not only a moral injunction, but it is not yet a scholar’s book analytically engaging every argument and every school of thought. A scholar might have liked to hear what Meilaender has to say about Epicureanism and its efforts to shape desire by argument both that life is good *and* that death is not bad, but that kind of addition would mar the book’s accessibility. A Christian might have liked to hear what he has to say about death understood as a punishment for sin, but the absence of that kind of discussion reveals one of the virtues of the book. Meilaender may be a theologian, but this is not a theology or theodicy of death. Meilaender rather gives voice to a Christian point of view (what I called “mere Augustinianism”) as a serious intellectual contribution to the universal human quest for self-understanding. He cites the Bible and a variety of theological sources without becoming entangled in doctrinal specificity that might

alienate readers. Too often in our public discussions, theological voices are dismissed automatically, as if they were private and willful projections rather than thoughtful reflections on human life. It seems to me that Meilaender displays both how and why the tradition of Christian wisdom ought to be part of the dialogue.

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