

Reviews

Should We Live Forever? The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging. By Gilbert Meilaender. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013. 135 pp. Softcover \$18.00.

“Aging” is not what it used to be. More persons live a healthy and long life. Many will have to face aging as gradual decline. With improved sanitation, greater food safety, and more powerful medicine, we avoid many problems that used to be customary. Techno-optimists envisage further moves, not just avoiding “premature” death, but extending the human lifespan. In December 2012, *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47: 710–34 published a set of articles on transhumanism, with Hava Tirosh Samuelson arguing in “Transhumanism as a Secularist Faith” that transhumanism secularizes traditional religious themes and endows technology with religious significance.

The ethicist Gilbert Meilaender begins much closer to ordinary human life in our time. We certainly should try to treat diseases, when possible cure them, and thus expand the average lifespan. But should we consider “aging” itself a disease, to be approached in the same way? If life is a good thing, why not aspire to have more of it? As biological organisms, finitude and a life-cycle is natural. But using our reason freely to transcend our limitations makes us human. Meilaender offers questions and humane challenges to the ambition of life extension. And cautiously, he speaks of a Christian vision of life eternal, of the restless heart longing for God. He argues that an immortality worth wanting needs a large and rich context of belief and practice, and not just endless life as such. In the context of such a wider perspective, the finitude of our lives is a blessing as it allows for healthy relations between generations and a valuable sense of completion. Indefinite life-extension would change relations between generations. One type of fulfilling experiences, the encounter between generations (parents and children, teachers and students) would change beyond recognition, and so would the feature underlying the existence of generations: sexuality. Indefinite life-extension would also change the experience of a flow of time, of patience and of endings—of stories and much else. And it would undermine the possibility of a fulfilled life cycle, a completeness that accepts the incompleteness of one’s life.

Given that life is finite, this brief book that raises many questions in an evocative way is very valuable. Old age may be a normal, special and significant stage of life. As he quotes the poet John Hall Wheelock, “Old age is the hour for praise,” Meilaender invites us to love the finite human life.

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Religion, Science, and Democracy: A Disputational Friendship, by Lisa L. Stenmark. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 230 pp. Hardcover \$70.00.

“Religion and science” is often taught as if the discussion is about metaphysics and epistemology, ideas about knowledge and related topics in systematic philosophy. However, much of the interaction in American culture is driven by “culture wars,” conflicts between those who appreciate modernity, science, sexual liberation, and much else, and those who dislike these developments. Thus, we need studies that reflect on “religion and science” as an issue in practical, social philosophy. Lisa Stenmark studies the interplay of religion and science as a “disputational friendship.” With this shift, she also moves the topic from academic to public discourse—though the book itself is an academic study of serious depth and documentation.

An original feature is the emphasis on a more antagonistic discourse than the irenic style often sought, for example in the “dialogue” and “integration” modes from the widely used classification by Ian Barbour. Stenmark associates the irenic style with the philosophical work of John Rawls, who assumed that one has to find common ground and thus must avoid claims that are based on a particular authority, including religious tradition or historic community of identification. The excluded claims are considered private rather than public. The exclusion of “private” considerations is also typical of the “conflict” mode in religion and science, for instance the advocates of Intelligent Design (ID), who sell ID as suitable for public schools. Excluding “particular” authorities may seem promising, but it also excludes what is important to the people involved, and thus might make it impossible for the conversation to be inclusive, “democratic”.

Stenmark develops her alternative by reflecting upon the nature of “authority,” which need not be opposed to freedom and creativity. She turns to Hannah Arendt’s work as a way to understand the private and the public spheres, and within the public sphere the shared social world and the world of politics. In the political sphere, we need to talk and act with others, exchange perspectives on the world, and come to shared action to achieve particular goals. After introducing ideas of Arendt, Stenmark applies these to religion and to science, seeking to understand their social and political roles. On the social side, religion and science are institutions that seek to produce a shared world, that include persons and perspectives that may be politically marginal, and that intend to be “world building”. This does not fit well in the political sphere, where truth claims are suspect as despotic. However, if one moves away from the pretension to be an objective observer, the person who seeks to live a religious way of life can participate in social and political culture by becoming a “marginal critic,” in the world but not comfortable about the world. The “disputational friendship” she looks for is not primarily driven by a quest for agreements and consensus, but by genuine discourse that respects points of difference and disagreement. I find this an original contribution and a fresh voice. Personally, I am more inclined to “epistemic inequality” in favor of science, given the strengths of the natural sciences and the plurality of religious voices.

However, Stenmark makes a strong and attractive case for a morally adequate approach to religion and science that recognizes differences while granting greater equality.

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