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The Case Against Death

Citation for published version:

Cholbi, M 2022, 'The Case Against Death', *The Philosophical Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqac048>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1093/pq/pqac048](https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqac048)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

The Philosophical Quarterly

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BOOK REVIEW

The Case Against Death. BY INGEMAR PATRICK LINDEN. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022. Pp. xi + 258. Price £40.00.)

The Case Against Death aims to show that what Linden calls the ‘Wise View’ regarding death and ageing should be rejected. Because the adherents of the Wise View hold a wide array of positions, it is difficult to identify the precise claims Linden opposes. But at its core, the Wise View preaches the ‘acceptance of death’ and its attendant consequences (p. 6): Not only ought we not fear death, we should accept ageing as natural and inevitable, oppose efforts to extend human life, and view death as valuable insofar as it stems the tide of human overpopulation. Linden, in contrast, cheerleads for a kind of optimism about the possibilities for human lives. Death and ageing are often very bad, but we should be glad for medical or technological developments that delay them, and (fortunately, Linden argues) overpopulation does not pose ecological or economic threats to human well-being.

Obviously, rebutting the Wise View is an ambitious task, so *The Case Against Death* is correspondingly wide ranging. Chapter 1 describes the Wise View and clarifies what Linden’s ‘case against death’ means to defend. Chapter 2 argues that ageing is bad rather than a natural and welcome stage of human lives. Linden answers the Epicurean argument that death is harmless in Chapter 3, as well as defending ‘deprivationism’ about the value of death. Chapter 4 responds to arguments that the value of human life is systematically overrated, and Chapter 5 addresses the claim that death is good because it is natural. Arguments that extended or immortal human lives would be boring are the target of Chapter 6, whilst the claim that death provides our lives a deadline or shape requisite for those lives to have meaning is the target of Chapter 7. Chapter 8 aims to show that extended human life would not be a threat to human virtue or nobility. Chapter 9 considers whether death is essential to beauty. Chapters 10 and 11 address sociopolitical dimensions of these questions, such as whether death is an antidote to the ecological strains of overpopulation or whether longer lifespans and graying populations must have adverse economic consequences.

Linden is a passionate writer. Admittedly, this passion sometimes gets the better of him: His argument that ‘holism’ (that human lives, and hence human deaths, are small and inconsequential events within larger biological or metaphysical systems) leads to eugenics verges on *reductio ad Hitlerum*. He is at his best when dispelling unsophisticated but resilient arguments for death’s not being bad (that death is good because it is natural). Linden is also persuasive when underscoring how ageing chips away at well-being. The later chapters find Linden delving into socioeconomic arcana (for instance, the effects that an ageing population has had on Japan’s economy), but he gives good reasons for thinking that prospective ecological or economic woes are not down solely to overpopulation or ageing.

That said, his treatments of axiological issues surrounding death are too brisk. In discussing the timing problem, the problem of identifying when if at all a person’s death could be bad for them, Linden concludes that death’s badness occurs at an indeterminate time, a conclusion he admits is unsatisfactory. But he lands on indeterminism only after very cursory dismissals of those accounts that locate death’s badness either before or after a person dies (pp. 46–7). Similarly, Linden’s confident assertion (p. 108) that we should not be worried about whether we would identify with our future selves in very long lives does not take due stock of the importance of our having personal concern for those future selves.

This scope and vigour notwithstanding, *The Case Against Death* is likely to frustrate readers familiar with the background philosophical dialectic regarding death’s value.

Linden represents his position as a ‘countercultural thought’, as David confronting the culturally hegemonic Goliath of the Wise View. This strikes me as hyperbole. Like many defenders of extending human lives, Linden defends radically extended (rather than genuinely immortal) human lives and so sets aside the possibility that we survive death because there is an afterlife. Yet belief in the afterlife remains the dominant belief among humankind, and while such belief may often rest on wishful thinking, its adherents are likely to see the avoidance of the evil of death as a welcome implication of their belief. Add to this, the evidence provided by terror management theory that anxiety surrounding death is a powerful driver of human psychology, and we have reason to doubt that the Wise View is the popular orthodoxy Linden makes it out to be.

But perhaps the Wise View prevails among philosophers if not among the folk? Linden alleges that ‘*all* the most important philosophers and teachers of mankind have taught that we should not fear death’ (p. 6, emphasis added). We could perhaps dispute which ‘philosophers and teachers’ are the most important, but counterexamples are easy to come by (Aristotle, Hobbes). Linden’s engagement with recent philosophy of death and dying is light. He often associates the Wise View with those he calls ‘our leading bioethicists’, (p. 9),

the bioconservatives Leon Kass and Daniel Callahan (now both deceased). Admittedly, they both sympathise with many elements of the Wise View, but their positions on death and longevity hardly represent the mainstream in contemporary bioethics, and those we might think of representing that mainstream (Jeff McMahan, F.M. Kamm, and Julian Savulescu come to mind) do not espouse the Wise View. Furthermore, the mainstream philosophical position on death's value, deprivationism, opposes the Wise View, at least in part. Deprivationists hold that death is a comparative bad when and insofar as it deprives us of a better life overall. Linden accepts deprivationism but does not flag for readers how the view complicates his dispute with adherents of the Wise View. Deprivationism entails that some deaths are in fact good, and the view suggests a pragmatic stance on whether we should fear death. While death per se may not be worthy of fear because it is not a condition of us at all, it might well be rational for us to fear death as it approaches in our old age because death could mean the imminent loss of our hopes or aspirations.

The Wise View is thus neither the cultural nor the philosophical *status quo* Linden presents it as being. Linden would also have done readers a service by underscoring that the different theses he associates with the Wise View are logically separable. Death could well be something we should accept even if ageing itself is often bad for us, and death could well be an evil even if we would often benefit from longer lifespans. Samuel Scheffler believes that we have good reason to accept our individual deaths (immortality would be worse) but equally good reason to want the human species to continue in order to realise our individual legacies. David Benatar, on the other hand, views death as a very grave personal evil but would be glad for the human species to go extinct. Not surprisingly then, it is difficult to find any thinkers who espouse all the different theses that constitute the Wise View. Hence, in an understandable effort to give *The Case Against Death* an argumentative 'hook', Linden subtly misrepresents the dialectic concerning death's significance and overlooks the heterogeneity among the views he criticises.

These reservations notwithstanding, *The Case Against Death* offers a useful provocation to readers not previously versed in the philosophical controversies it addresses.

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