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Beverley Clack

Sex and Death: A Reappraisal of Human Mortality.

US$59.95 (cloth: ISBN 0-7456-2278-X);

In an age of materialism and consumerism, in which scepticism about ultimate values is combined with a fascination for the paranormal and the mystical, it is important for people to discover a sound basis for the meaningfulness of their lives. This book promises guidance in this quest by suggesting that we, as human beings, should be able to find spiritual meaning in our lives through fully acknowledging ourselves as sexual and mortal beings.

Two key terms that Clack uses are ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’, and the thinkers she chooses to discuss take varying positions on whether they see the meaningfulness of life as arising from the transcendent aspects of human existence — our rationality and powers of reflection and contemplation — or the immanent aspects — our bodily being, sexuality, and mortality. Her argument is that we should place the stress on the latter aspects of our existence rather than the former. So she criticises Plato and Augustine for directing our attention towards the transcendent realm of Forms or of God respectively and for promising us an afterlife. She suggests that both Sartre and de Beauvoir, despite their atheism and worldly focus, continue the Cartesian focus on the separateness of our reflective powers of autonomy in order to define our existence as transcendent to the world. She invokes Freud as a thinker who stresses the immanent aspects of human existence and helps us see ourselves as akin to animals. But, asks Clack in her next chapter, if the transcendent realities and values beloved of our tradition are to be rejected how can we avoid the horrors of sexual depravity and violence that de Sade has portrayed in his writings? Clack then appeals to the Stoic philosopher Seneca in order to present a non-dualistic account of human existence in which the necessities and vicissitudes of life can be accepted without rejecting the immanent features of human existence in which they are grounded. Clack’s final chapter promises a sketch of how life might be lived in a meaningful way without appeal to purely transcendent realities. Sexuality highlights the relational aspects of our existence, while mortality gives value to the time that we have.

A book of this kind succeeds to the extent that it leads readers to engage philosophically with arguments that have the potential to change their fundamental attitudes. However, in her discussion of Augustine, Clack accounts for his negative views on sexuality and his faith in God by citing his unhappy experiences in love rather than by fully explaining his arguments. Sartre’s credibility is impugned because of his insensitive journalistic discussion of a rape case. In this and in other cases she makes use of recent feminist scholarship to challenge the authenticity of her chosen authors as well as the
cogency of their ideas. And yet Clack devotes a whole chapter to de Sade. Why should a reader seeking to ground the meaningfulness of human life in immanent human values be tempted to take his writings seriously? Why does Clack suppose that such writings pose a challenge that needs to be met? Does she seriously believe that anyone with an ounce of normal human decency would think that a rejection of purely transcendent values would lead inevitably to such depravity? Are these pathological texts the only substantial connection between sex and death that she can muster? It is Nietzsche whose challenge she and her readers need to meet. (Another notable omission is Heidegger on being-towards-death.) Clack fails to notice that the problem of a secular spirituality is an ethical as much as a metaphysical one.

This failure is also illustrated by her limited conception of what a tragic view of life can be. She equates this simply with the ability to bear loss, and she appeals to Seneca to teach us how to develop this ability. But a genuinely tragic view of life is deeper than this. It is the acceptance of loss without justice. It is the ability to bear a loss or a hardship without having an answer to the question, ‘Why?’ or ‘Why me?’ Clack misses the essential meaning of the Platonic tradition as it flows through Augustine and religious thinking more generally: namely, that the cosmos is just or that God is providence. In this conception our hardships are accepted in faith as being justified in the order of things. In contrast, the tragic sense of life is one that acknowledges that there is no justice in the cosmos. ‘Shit happens’ and that is all there is to it. Clack can accept Seneca’s view because he still believes in cosmic justice in the form of the rationality of nature. A truly ethical view of life is one that accepts responsibility for creating justice rather than having faith in its transcendent reality. Clack has not seen the full implications of Nietzsche’s resounding dictum that God is dead. We are on our own and we make the meaningfulness of our lives to the extent that we make our goodness.

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