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This book is part of a series entitled "The Art of Living" edited by Mark Vernon whose own book, After Atheism: Science, Religion, and the Meaning of Life (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) recommends agnosticism towards, not only theological doctrines, but also any system of beliefs that demand unquestioning conviction. Vernon argues that reverence for the beauty and mystery of nature and of life is made more possible by such an attitude. The series he is editing for Acumen continues a recent trend in the publishing of "popular philosophy". Spurred on by the success of such authors as Alain De Botton and A. C. Grayling, publishers are responding to an apparent need among the reading public for works which are both accessible and thoughtful and which address philosophical questions of existential import rather than abstruse theory. For his part, De Botton demonstrates both the virtues and pitfalls of this genre. Drawing on wide reading, he presents bon mots and pithy summaries from the great philosophers in the hope of stimulating deep reflection in his readers. What this approach does not acknowledge, however, is that philosophy is hard work. It is not enough to present or explain the conclusions of philosophical arguments. Readers must be taken through the rigorous processes of thought that have generated those conclusions so that they can own the insights for themselves and absorb them into their own thinking. Todd May recognises this necessity.

Author of books on continental political philosophy and on such authors as Deleuze, Foucault, and Rancière, May is no philosophical slouch. The present work draws on insights ranging from the Stoics to Martin Heidegger with incursions into famous arguments by Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams on the way. Yet, May never loses his ability to write clearly and engagingly. May rejects any religious approach to death which would deny its finality by positing a form of life after death. From his secular viewpoint, death is the end of life which not only terminates that life but also potentially renders it meaningless. It is good to be alive and for that reason alone death is an evil to us. Moreover, the
fact that our lives can end at any point threatens to render all of our projects useless and unfinished. It is this threat of meaninglessness which we must deal with in the face of the inevitability of our deaths. And yet we would find no comfort in a life which was not curtailed by death. If we were immortal our lives would be meaningless for a different reason. In that scenario we could always put off till tomorrow what we should do today and so there would be no urgency to bringing any project to a conclusion. With an infinite range of possibilities and a limitless span of time our lives would inevitably become boring and tedious. So what we need to do is to live with a mature realisation that death can come at any time. We must live the fragility of our existence and embrace the finitude which our deaths confer on us.

Many books on death discuss a wider range of issues. Some discuss clinical definitions of death – whether "brain death" marks the end of a life even when the heart is still beating or respiration is maintained by artificial means – in order to resolve bioethical issues. Others discuss the morality of killing and whether abortion and euthanasia are cases of murder. This book does neither. It focuses only upon the existential significance of death and on the difference it should make to the way we live our lives. If it spends a lot of time on what may seem in the end to be simple and homely truths it does so because only by considering all the aspects of this issue and by exploring them in depth can the reader be taken on a journey that will truly be one of discovery and inspiration.

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