
In Schumacher’s ambitious book, he attempts to discuss and evaluate phenomenological, existentialist, and analytic approaches to thinking about death. The book is divided into three parts, each of which includes both Schumacher’s own view, as well as a critical survey of the literature. In the first section, he considers various analyses of the concept of death, ultimately endorsing the view that human death is the destruction of the human organism’s capacity to function as a whole. In part two, Schumacher addresses the question of how one comes to know that one is mortal. Here he argues that one must experience another’s death to obtain such knowledge; intuitive knowledge of one’s mortality is not possible. In the final section of the book Schumacher presents both classical and contemporary views on the value of death, defending the view that death is an evil of privation. My review focuses on the first and third sections of the book.

Much of Schumacher’s critical discussion of the analysis of death is devoted to the way in which philosophers have understood “personal death.” According to Schumacher, those who defend this approach to analyzing death are best understood as “anthropological dualists.” He claims that advocates of this type of dualism distinguish biological beings (human beings) from personal beings (persons), and hold that the second is neither identical to, nor constituted by, the first. Their account of death focuses on the death of the person rather than the biological being: personal death occurs when “the person is irreversibly incapacitated and no longer exercises self-consciousness and moral conscience, in other words, upon the destruction of the neocortex” (p. 26). This view, which Schumacher sometimes refers to as the ‘neocortical view’ of death, implies that it would be “ethically permissible to make use of the vital organs of ‘non-personal’ living human bodies, in other words, ultimately to use them merely as means for the benefit of moral persons” (p. 33), and so is rejected. Although Schumacher acknowledges that proponents of the neocortical view sometimes introduce the notion of a “social person” to escape this objection – where a social person is a being who, although not technically a person, will be treated as such because it is to the benefit of other full-fledged persons – he does not find this move convincing. He points out that human beings who are neither persons nor social persons, “would be considered dead on the personal level and thus ready for burial, cremation, or the harvesting of their bodily organs ... Such assertions, however, are profoundly counterintuitive...” (p. 36). After considering and rejecting other approaches to thinking about death (e.g. whole brain death, as well as the view that an adequate definition of death is not possible, and so one must instead ask when one can treat a person as dead) Schumacher ultimately claims that the correct definition of death must make use of a “philosophical anthropology that is based on a concrete reality of being and that recognizes the human person is essentially corporeal” (p. 48). His positive view can be found in the following paragraph:
Personal death occurs with the destruction of the capacity of the human organism to function as a whole, and not just the inability of one or another of its parts to function. In other words, death deprives someone of all ability to preserve his unity and to keep together the constitutive elements that make him a personal human organism. The distinction between a personal human being and a corpse lies in the organization and functioning of the vital parts, taken as a whole (p. 48).

With respect to Schumacher's positive view, my primary concern is that, at least in the passage above, it appears to be the case that there are two distinct statements of his definition. The first rejects the idea that death is merely the destruction of the functioning of certain parts; the second, which is suggested by his distinction between a corpse and a personal human organism, affirms that death is the destruction of the functioning of vital parts, taken as a whole. Schumacher must make clear which position he endorses in order for his view to be adequately understood. Moreover, supposing he did endorse the "vital parts" interpretation, he must state which parts are the vital parts. Thus, Schumacher's definition, as it is currently stated, is unclear and under-developed.

In the third section of the book Schumacher enters the classical debate on the value of death. He characterizes the evil of death as an evil of privation, and in so doing believes that he has resolved "both the problem of experimentalism and that of the need for a subject. The privation solution makes discourse about evil possible without presupposing either experience or a subject" (p. 181). While there are several issues that he addresses in the final chapters of the book, my evaluation will focus exclusively on Schumacher's account of the evil of death.

According to Schumacher,

An evil of privation is not regarded as something in itself, as something concrete that can be experienced as such, but is situated at the level of what is not, or of what no longer is. It is understood as a relational property that appears between two states: between a pleasure or a good and its disappearance, between being and the absence of being, between a possibility and the lack of that possibility, etc. (p. 182-183).

While some of what he says here is vague, I suspect that his view is ultimately best understood as an example of the deprivation view. Roughly speaking, deprivationists hold that death is sometimes bad for the person who dies, and it is bad in those cases where one who dies is deprived of goods she would have had, if death had not intervened. The view is skeletal, however, until the deprivationist gives an account of the goods of which death deprives one. Unfortunately, on Schumacher's view, he says things that suggest at least two different ways of developing his view. Consider the following paragraph:

One can nevertheless assert that death is an evil in an even more fundamental sense: it signifies the absolute end of the existence of a particular individual; it deprives him of his very being. Such discourse applies to every death, even "natural" death. In my opinion the difference between an accidental death and