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Book Review: Geoffrey Scarre, *Death*, Chesham, Acumen, 2007

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Book Review – Glenn Morrison, *The Heythrop Journal* 49:3 (May, 2008) 539-540.

*Death*. By Geoffrey Scarre, Pp. 175, Acumen, 2007.

The question of the meaning of being has led philosophers on towards formulating theories and questions on a variety of subjects such as time, God, personhood, otherness and death. Geoffrey Scarre has chosen the subject of death to explore not only its meaning and truth, but also its relation to life and its effects upon others and the world. Traversing the philosophical tradition of death, Scarre brings into conversation centuries of wisdom and reflection upon the meaning and rationalisation of death. Taking the position of the unlikely occurrence of any form of afterlife, it is not surprising that Scarre re-creates a Heideggerian inspired logic of death as our ‘ownmost possibility’, that is to say, life in the shadow of death demands that we make the best of our finite time available.

Accordingly, seeking an insight into our ‘being-towards-death’, Scarre sets out to uncover the meaning of the nature of death through existential and metaphysical explorations. This leads him on to analyse the effects of short lives and long lives and the fears and evil associated with death. Appealing to the notion of Cambridge change, Scarre relates a whole manner of possibilities of events that affect us after death. The journey ends with a moral and even a sacred testimony of honouring and dealing with the dead.

The strength of the book lies in Scarre’s fundamental acceptance of death in our death denying culture. Even though his book seeks to argue against any semblance of eschatology and hence, of an afterlife, there are major points of interest and

connections that theologians will find compelling. Scarre invites the reader into a whole trajectory of insightful analyses, meditations and reflections on death. Especially for pastoral theologians, the points raised can invite a host of opportunities to better understand the emotions and attitudes surrounding death. Opportunities also arise for systematic theologians to initiate a deeper inquiry of eschatology from Scarre's reflection on death. For example, Scarre relates that for most of us, death arrives too early. We can extend his analysis to think that death reminds of us that our lives are ultimately unfinished, and hence, going beyond Scarre, I would suggest that death initiates humility before the Infinite God who, like on the seventh day of Creation, finishes our lives with divine Goodness and outlasts our temptations with an eternal hospitality. Consequently, our being-towards-death is humbled by a kenotic inversion in which, through eternity, we become like God, a being-towards-others.

In a sense, I am suggesting that Scarre's book, like Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Emmanuel Levinas' *God, Death and Time*, can provide a foundational influence to deepen and enhance theological reflections. Whilst Scarre may in fact be quite loathe for theologians to take his book further in a manner that runs counter to his ultimate argument of rejecting the afterlife, he nevertheless articulates a logical and rational way to speak of life, being and death, which theologians can learn from or at least, engage in dialogue.

In a final remark, Scarre's ending paragraph seems to inchoately touch upon theology, where he illuminates human life - by reference to Dworkin's phrase - as 'a masterpiece of nature', and further remarks, '... that is not a bad thought with which to face eternity'. Whether eternity is leaving our traces in the world for others to relate

beyond our temporal lives, or a love-life with God and the Saints, the nature of death suggests that we embody questions that ultimately cannot be consumed by answers. Like Heidegger attempting to find the meaning of Being through categories such as time, death, anxiety and care, and still find that his questions are pending, Scarre's *Death* offers another attempt, necessary for every generation, to investigate the existence and reality of life and death together.