

Determinism, Death, and Meaning by Stephen Maitzen (review)

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MAITZEN, Stephen. *Determinism, Death, and Meaning*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 189 pp. Cloth, \$160.00—In this short but sweeping book, Stephen Maitzen touches on issues in logic, physics, determinism, death, meaning, and more. The claims that Maitzen argues for are bold, the arguments are precise, and the implications are massive. Naturally, given the relatively short length of the book, there are several areas where Maitzen leaves his reader wishing for more, but there is no denying that the book is challenging and elegant. While I (still) disagree with much of what Maitzen offers, I nevertheless found it a fruitful exercise to think through the nuanced and clever lines of reasoning developed in this work.

The book consists of six chapters, the first of which is devoted to articulating and defending the doctrine of “metaphysical rationalism.” This doctrine, as Maitzen conceives of it, consists of three claims: (i) that everything has a logically sufficient explanation; (ii) that no proposition is both true and false; and (iii) that every proposition is either true or false. The bulk of chapter one is devoted to arguing in favor of and defending claims (ii) and (iii). He engages with most all of the well-worn lines of argumentation—the liar paradox, trivialism, vagueness, intuitionistic logic, and so on.

In the second chapter, Maitzen proceeds to show that, if rationalism is correct, determinism must be true. He starts by claiming that (roughly) “determinism implies that every event, in all its details, is necessitated by the state of the universe obtaining at *some* time prior to its occurrence and by the states of the universe obtaining at *all* times prior to its occurrence” (emphasis in the original). Distinctively, Maitzen takes the doctrine of determinism to be an a priori and necessary truth. In the rest of the chapter, he endorses three arguments for determinism, the third being the most novel and challenging, at least in my view. He dubs it the

argument from “no magic” which, (overly) simplified, runs as follows: For every event, there is a token way in which, and hence token mechanism by which, the event occurred—to say otherwise is to allow for magic. But if determinism is false, then for at least one event, there is no token mechanism by which the event occurred—it is common to discuss “gappy” mechanisms under indeterminism, but “gappy” token mechanisms aren’t really mechanisms at all. So, determinism is true.

In the third chapter, Maitzen defends determinism against a slew of objections in order of increasing significance: that if determinism is true, every event recurs eternally; that introspection or the rationality of deliberation shows that determinism is false (or at least ought not be believed); that determinism implies a problematic kind of fatalism; that determinism is incompatible with free will and moral responsibility; and that our best theories in physics undermine determinism.

The fourth chapter draws out implications of determinism (and rationalism), chiefly that the universe is infinitely old, that there is no metaphysically fundamental level, and that every event gives rise to an infinite explanatory regress. Maitzen also engages with some highly influential objections to rationalism, such as the claim that rationalism implies that every event is logically necessary, a result Maitzen is keen to avoid.

While I especially enjoyed the first four chapters, I suspect most readers will find chapters 5 and 6 to be the most interesting since it is here that Maitzen engages with the issues of death, regret, grief, gratitude, and meaning. A central premise of these chapters is that ordinary counterfactuals such as “If Stephen hadn’t flipped on the light switch, the room would (still) be dark” or “If Stephen had turned on the radio, music would be playing right now” are either false or trivially true. This is supposed to be a result of the conjunction of determinism and the (actual) laws of physics. Most basically, the laws of our world are time-symmetric—they can be run “in reverse”—and the events of our world are extremely sensitive—think of the “butterfly effect.” Maitzen argues that these claims imply that the smallest changes, such as Stephen not flipping on the light switch, (almost certainly) require dramatic changes in the past and future, changes that (almost certainly) would preclude Stephen’s existing at all. Hence, the counterfactuals above are false or, at best, trivially true.

In light of this view of counterfactuals, many of our commonsense views about death, regret, grief, gratitude, and meaning are upended. First, Maitzen argues that it is irrational to regret or grieve nearly any event, including anyone’s death, since if the event hadn’t occurred, it’s overwhelmingly unlikely that any of us would have existed, including the deceased. So, unless one is willing to say that it would be better for no one to have existed than for the deceased to have died, say, it is not rational to regret or grieve that person’s death, no matter how gruesome or “untimely.” (Maitzen does make room for the pragmatic rationality of such attitudes insofar as such attitudes have beneficial functions, but this is

supposed to be an importantly distinct sense of rationality.) Second, Maitzen argues that, although the concept of “cosmic” or “ultimate” meaning in life is incoherent, determinism gives our lives the closest substitute for “cosmic” or “ultimate” meaning possible, and for much the same reason: If determinism is true, then, given the laws of physics, our actions have an everlasting and prominent influence on the future.—
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