



## BOOK NOTE

Stephen Maitzen, *Determinism, Death, and Meaning*, New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 208, \$170USD (hardback).

Determinism is usually presented as the empirical and contingent thesis that every event has a causally necessitating condition. However, Stephen Maitzen holds it as an *a priori* and necessary truth. He takes determinism to logically follow from *rationalism*, the core of which is the principle of sufficient reason, that everything has a logically sufficient explanation. In his formulation, determinism states that every event is logically necessitated by the state of the universe at any prior time.

The book's most challenging claims come from combining determinism with two features of physical laws. The first is *extreme sensitivity to initial conditions*, where an infinitesimal difference would eventually lead to vast changes in the subsequent trajectory of the universe. Second is *time-reversal invariance*, such that even a minute change at any moment entails that the state of the world would have been greatly different in the distant past.

Maitzen holds that our everyday counterfactual reasoning is deeply mistaken, in a way that undermines the rationality of reactive attitudes such as regret or relief. When we think 'I wish I had done *A* rather than *B*', we assume that if we had done *A*, the world would have been very similar to the actual one. But, he argues, even the most minute change in anything we do would ensure that humanity would never have existed, so there is no chance of a world in which you did *A* rather than *B*.

While we know that we will die, we have seemingly sensible worries over *when* and *how* this will occur. The discussion of counterfactuals shows that these concerns are based on the false assumption that the world would go on roughly as it is even if the conditions of one's death were to differ. But, in fact, your very existence depends on you dying at the precise time and way you will in fact die.

While he rejects the notion of 'cosmic meaning', 'the most expansive notion of meaning we could want for life', Maitzen argues that rationalism plus determinism gives us the best possible substitute, since they imply that our actions have an ongoing causal influence on how the future turns out.

As well as its philosophical sophistication and depth, this is one of the best-written books that I have ever read. It deserves a wide audience, and I encourage Routledge to publish a paperback version.

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