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Marcus Willaschek, Dr. phil.

Professor of Philosophy

Goethe University Frankfurt/Main

Born in 1962 in Arnsberg, Germany

Studied Philosophy, Biology, Psychology, and Law at the University of Münster

PROJECT

Time, Subjectivity, and Death

Subjectivity and time have both been central topics of philosophical reflexion since antiquity. Moreover, both are currently the focus of intensive scientific and philosophical research. However, there is little work on the interrelations between them. This project explores the hypothesis that time and subjectivity might be interdependent phenomena. More specifically, it pursues the idea that while subjective experience is necessarily related to the temporal present (or “now-indexical”), the distinction between past, present, and future (sometimes called the “passage of time”) is essentially subjective (or “I-indexical”) in that it depends on a first-person perspective. To say that the passage of time is subjective, however, is to deny neither that we all share the same present nor that the passage of time is a real phenomenon. Rather, the aim is to argue from the reality of subjective experience to the “inter-subjective” reality of the passage of time. Thus, the project aims to show that the phenomena expressed by “I”- and “now”-thoughts are interdependent parts of a whole – the conscious life of a person – that has the structural property of “I-now-indexicality.”

If this hypothesis could be substantiated, it would have far-reaching consequences for the philosophies of mind and of time. Moreover, this hypothesis stands in the context of a larger project about the value of life and the badness of death, which emphasizes the I-now-indexical character of human life and of the values that structure it. Thus, the project is meant to contribute to our understanding of what it is to lead a human life and how to cope with its finitude.

Recommended Reading

Willaschek, Marcus. *Der mentale Zugang zur Welt: Realismus, Skeptizismus und Intentionalität*. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 2003.

—. *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics: The Dialectic of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

—. “Death and Existential Value: In Defence of Epicurus.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 106, no. 2 (2023): 475–492.

Death, Value, and the Structure of Life

In my presentation, I will attempt to give an overview of a larger project only parts of which I will be able to pursue while at Wiko. The project starts from the ancient question whether death is bad for the person who dies (considered from a purely self-interested perspective). The first part of the project engages Epicurus' (in)famous argument for the claim that "death is nothing to us". According to this argument, my death, understood as my future nonexistence, cannot be bad for me, since it cannot cause me any pain: As long as I exist, death cannot cause me pain because it has not yet arrived; and after it has arrived, I can no longer be affected by it since I no longer exist. (One might object that we can anticipate death and suffer from that, but Epicurus has a brilliant response to that objection.) Thomas Nagel, in an influential paper from 1970, has objected to the Epicurean argument that death can still be bad for the person who dies in depriving that person of goods she would otherwise have had. This "deprivation account" now dominates the philosophical discussion about death.

In order to criticize this account, and to partially defend Epicurus, I turn to the second part of the project, which starts from the question what makes a life the life of a particular person. I want to suggest that to live the life of a person (as opposed to being alive in a merely biological sense) is to lead that life, and to experience the world, from an I-, here-, and now-centered perspective. This perspective also affects many of the values that structure our lives. They are essentially first-personal and present tense (setting aside space for present purposes). Values that I can self-ascribe as being good or bad for me now I call "existential values". The deprivation account of the badness of death overlooks the fact that the disvalue of death is not of that kind. It can be attributed only from a third-person and retrospective perspective. Assuming that existential values matter more to us than values that can be attributed only from a third-person perspective, we arrive at a variant of Epicurus' conclusion: While death may be bad for the person who dies by depriving her of the goods of life, this loss should not bother us in the same way in which a loss of goods within our lives would bother us. In this sense, death is less bad than it might have seemed.

In the third part of the project, I turn to the question whether there is reason to lament the fact that the older one gets, the less time remains to be lived. I relate this question to a current debate about "temporal neutrality" and "future bias" that concerns the question whether it is rationally permissible to prefer good things to lie in the future and bad things in the past. I want to argue that this is rationally permissible, given some common-sense assumptions about the structure of time. These assumptions turn out also to underlie the way in which we experience personal life as being centered at the present moment, but also as directed towards the future. In this way, I hope to show that it can be rational to lament that less and less time remains to be lived, but also to argue that the reason for this is not the badness of death as such, but the fact that the life of a person is both finite and essentially future-directed.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOWS' LIBRARY

Willaschek, Marcus (Oldenbourg,2023)

Vernunft und Realismus : zur Aktualität der kantischen Philosophie

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853813435>

Willaschek, Marcus (Oxford [u.a.],2023)

Death and existential value : in defense of Epicurus

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853811653>

Willaschek, Marcus (München,2023)

Kant : die Revolution des Denkens

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1840501006>

Willaschek, Marcus (Cambridge,2018)

Kant on the sources of metaphysics : the dialectic of pure reason

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1025108124>

Willaschek, Marcus (Frankfurt am Main,2003)

Der mentale Zugang zur Welt : Realismus, Skeptizismus und Intentionalität

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Willaschek, Marcus (Stuttgart,1992)

Praktische Vernunft : Handlungstheorie und Moralbegründung bei Kant

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=119230607>