WhY IS DEATH Bad AND 
WHAT MAKES IT LEAST Bad? 


Death has always been a topic of vital interest within philosophy. In one sense death provides an inducement to philosophize as our impending death leads us to ask certain practical questions: What happens to human beings after death? What are the best and worst ways to die? Which deaths should we try to prevent? Is death ever preferable to continuing our present existence? In another sense philosophy can prepare us for death. For to the extent that philosophizing leads to wisdom, it may make death seem less significant provided that wisdom is viewed as a good that is complete in itself. As preparation for death, we may be led to ask questions such as: Do those who have realized important life goals have less or more need to be saved from death? Do persons who have enjoyed more conscious experience have less or more claim to continued life? Is it better to prepare for death by making life as good as possible even if this makes death a greater loss?

F. M. Kamm and Margaret Pabst Battin take up the abiding philosophical concerns that death raises with different starting assumptions and philosophical techniques, leading them to reach different philosophical and practical conclusions about death. Kamm's inquiry focuses primarily on what makes death bad and on which people's deaths it would be worse to let happen. Among the topics that *Morality, Mortality* addresses are whether a person's nonexistence after death is worse than that person's nonexistence prior to life; whether in giving aid it is always best to save the

greatest number of lives; and what the most just way is to allocate scarce medical services, such as organ transplantation. In contrast to Kamm, Battin assumes that death is bad and goes on to ask what kind of death is least bad for the one who dies. Whereas Kamm considers the badness of letting different deaths happen, Battin's central focus is to compare allowing death to happen with taking active steps to hasten death. Specifically, *The Least Worst Death* considers whether it is worse when death occurs as a consequence of withholding and withdrawing medical treatment, or after physician-assisted suicide, or as a result of active euthanasia.

Each author brings to bear a distinct philosophical method. Kamm's technique may be called "casuistry," if this term is understood in the broadest possible sense. Like the traditional casuist, Kamm begins by eliciting our intuitive judgments about concrete cases. Yet, unlike the traditional casuist, she includes among her stock of cases purely imaginary ones in order to bring greater precision and clarity to her ethical judgments. This approach might more accurately be dubbed "philosophical casuistry," in order to distinguish it from casuistry as a branch of applied ethics. The main focus of *Morality, Mortality* is not practical ethical problems, but cases that are hypothetical, often bordering on the fantastic. Moreover, the immediate point of this book's inquiry is not to help us make practical ethical decisions, but instead to unearth the general ethical reasons and principles that may underlie our psychological responses to cases. Kamm's approach bears some resemblance to philosophers such as Thomas Nagel, Allan Gibbard, and Annette Baier, all of whom attempt to incorporate psychological insights within ethical and philosophical reasoning.

Working in the tradition of applied ethics, Battin brings biomedical ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice to bear on real-life decisions surrounding death in the medical setting. At the same time, however, she supplements traditional bioethical principles with insights from other disciplines such as law and religion; with cross-cultural comparisons to other countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany;