

How do we talk about Death?

We usually don't think or meditate on death in our modern culture, with its obsession with youthfulness and longevity, there is a taboo around death. Aside from religious convictions about the inevitability of death, we don't think much about death in our everyday life unless we encounter it personally, as when someone we know dies or collectively as in a state of war or, like now, during a global pandemic. It is then that death becomes what it always is, an essential experience for all living things. Death then goes from the personal, individual experience to something that has to be managed, monitored, combated and even legalized (as in when is it legal to end someone's life or when to punish those whose actions resulted in the death of someone).

Death as Derrida would say is essentially an individual experience, its inevitable, irreplaceable and terminal. No one escapes it, no one that has died has "come back from the dead" (long after they died, and not just with clinical and medical support/intervention when their vital functions are affected). And yet we lack the terms to be able to talk about it, how to understand it and understand our history in dealing with it and what can the inevitability of death mean for us, practically, philosophically but also ethically.

In this course, we will try to explore the general contours of death as a phenomenon, we will look at historical, anthropological, scientific, religious and philosophical sources that tried to examine and understand death, and what that says about the human experience. In doing so, participants collectively with the instructor would develop their own lexicon and terms in understanding and dealing with death. A central aspect of the course, that the participants relate what they read to their own subjective experience and are then able to have a meaningful engagement with the readings on hand and with their own everyday experience on the other. Thus a close reading of the materials and engaging in dialogue are absolutely essential for this course.

Session (1): Intro: Towards a History of Death

Ch. 1, 2 and 3 in Douglas Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2005

Chapter 2: 'Charting Death's Evolution and Life's Extension' in Stanley Shostak, *The Evolution of Death: Why We Are Living Longer*, State University of New York, 2006

Session (2): Where to Begin?

Ch.4 and Ch. 7 in Geoffrey Scarre, *Death (Central Problems of Philosophy)*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007

Session (3): Philosophical Perspectives

Ch. 1 Death and Philosophy in *Death and Philosophy*, Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (eds.)
Optional: Ch. 11 Death and Authenticity

Ch.2 "Problems of Post-Mortem Identity" in R.W. K. Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life After Death*, Palgrave, 1995
Optional: Ch. 6 The Concept of the Afterlife

Session (4): Philosophical Perspectives contd

Bernard Williams (1973). "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in Samantha Brennan and Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *Philosophy and Death: Introductory Readings*, Broadview Press, 2009

Samantha Bernnan (2006). "Feminist Philosophers Turn Their Thoughts to Death" in Samantha Brennan and Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *Philosophy and Death: Introductory Readings*, Broadview Press, 2009

Session(5): Religious Perspectives

Ch.3 and 4 in Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, Vintage Books, 2008

Ch.2, in Jane Idelman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, Oxford University Press, 2002

Session (6): Plagues, Epidemics and Understanding of Death

Ch.5 Responses to Plague, in Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*, Yale University press, 2019

Ch.11 'Plague in Medieval Islamic Society' in Joseph. Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, Greenwood Press, 2006

Session (7): Contemporary Perspectives

Raymond L. M. Lee, Eternity Calling: Modernity and the Revival of Death and the Afterlife in Helaine Selin and Robert M. Rakoff (eds), *Death Across Cultures: Death and Dying in Non-Western Cultures*, Springer, 2019

Ch.5 in Paolo Palladino, *Biopolitics and the Philosophy of Death*, Bloomsbury, 2016