

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 with euthanasia, for example). When is it legal to end someone's life, or when to punish those whose actions resulted in the death of someone.

Death as many would say is essentially an individual experience, it's 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. The course will centre a feminist understanding and conception of death and its meaning. Despite the fact that death is the great equalizer, gendered notions of death persist in ways that most of us would still find difficult to fathom.

Through discussion and reflection, the 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.

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): Ethnographic Perspectives: Rituals, Customs and Social Constructs

Iman Mersal, *On Motherhood and Violence*, Makhzin, Issue 2: Feminisms, September 2015

<http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/on-motherhood-and-violence>

Chapter 8: (M)Other Love: Culture, Scarcity, and Maternal Thinking in Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, University of California Press, 1992

Zohreh Bayatrizi and Hajar Ghorbani, *The Bureaucratic Professionalization of Funeral Rites in Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery*, from *Across Cultures: Death and Dying in Non-Western Cultures* (2019)

Session (3): Philosophizing about Death

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

Thomas Nagel (1979). "Death" in Samantha Brennan and Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *Philosophy and Death: Introductory Readings*, Broadview Press, 2009

Session (4): Philosophizing about Death Cont'd

Vigdis Songe-Møller's Ch. 9 "Antigone and the Deadly Desire for Sameness: Reflections on Origins and Death" in *Birth, Death and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment* (2019)

Sara Heinamaa's Ch. 4 "The Sexed Self and the Mortal Body" and Ch. 5, "Being Towards Death" in *Birth, Death and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment* (2019)

Session (5): Making Sense of Death

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

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

Optional: Ch. 11 Death and Authenticity

Session (6): Asking the Hard Questions:

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

Session(7): Religious Perspectives

Chapter 1, Introduction: Death and Dying in Comparative Philosophical Perspective by Timothy D Knepper in Timothy D. Knepper, Lucy Bregman, and Mary Gottschalk (eds), *Death and Dying in Comparative Philosophy of Religion*, 2019

Ch. 8, The Ritualization of Death and Dying: The Journey from the Living Living to the Living Dead in African Religions.

Session (8): Religious Perspectives Cont’d

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 (9): 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 (10): 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