Introduction: Human and Social Scientific Approaches to Death and Mortality

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In *The Seventh Seal* (*Det Sjunde inseglet*, 1957) Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman imagines a meeting between the grim reaper, a figure of death, and a knight Antonious Block, who is searching for the meaning of life/death. Despite the reaper figure, the film is not only about death but also about mortality and its importance to human psyche. The story deals with our awareness of death, our fear of it and the meanings we give to it, and through that process, the meanings we give to life. Thus, while struggling with his loss of faith, the knight muses: “Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.” Despite the gloomy atmosphere and themes of death and despair, the film portrays life in a meaningful way. As Ananya Ghoshal argues, this and other Bergman films from the 1950s were about “fragile hopefulness”, where moments of grief, suffering and failure are worth the pain for the possibility of living and loving. ¹ At the end of the film, the knight finds fulfillment in human warmth and experiences of love. Film manages to bring out how mortality can make actions, achievements, and relationships seem meaningless, useless or pointless, because death is their unpredictable end; and how ideas of mortality – and our efforts to transcend it – can also provide goals to achieve and give meaning to life.

Studying Death and Mortality

Although death has always fascinated philosophers, medical scientists and other scholars, the rise of multi- and interdisciplinary death studies, or thanatology, began in the 20th century. The increasing interest in studying death as philosophical, social, political and cultural phenomena alongside of the study of practices that

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¹ Ghoshal 2008, 338.
deal with dying and mourning can be connected to the modernization of death. The process started to take shape in the late 18th century when so-called traditional death, which has often been seen as a quick and frequent event to be handled by religious authorities, started to give room to the successes of medical sciences. A number of scholars, Philippe Ariés and Norbert Elias among them, have suggested that the role of death changed in Western societies through modernization, industrialization and medicalization. In modern societies death and the dying began to be marginalized and removed from public spaces into hospitals and other specialized institutions to be dealt with by professionals. At the same time, private experiences of death began to be excluded from public discussions on mortality.

The modernization process is framed by a desire to transcend the limits of life. Although we have not (yet) gained physical immortality, the awareness of our mortality and the desire to lengthen the human life span have motivated several cultural changes and political goals. Advances in medical sciences and treatments have increased life expectancy, but societies have also taken other actions to increase the lifespan of their citizens. Safety regulations, for example in traffic and working conditions, as well as varied safety equipment aim to help us live longer. Increases in the standard of living and of education have provided people with better accommodation, richer nutrition, access to medical care, and information about health and safety. As a consequence, life expectancy has almost doubled since the 19th century.

Both life expectancy and mortality rates have become ways of comparing the life of different nations. Interestingly, both figures measure more than lifespan; they also stand for national success and quality of life, and relate to questions of social equality and peace. Whereas nation states are responsible for some of those factors that play a role in quantitative measurements, the importance of the personal health of each citizen has become a social concern as well. For example, health communication research studies both formal and informal channels which provide public information on wellbeing and health and aim to provide social change – including such issues as hygiene, nutrition and exercise. Many researchers have argued that even when based on scientific research, health communication expresses socio-cultural values – such as ideals of beauty, and productivity issues or health care costs in which the healthy citizen is seen as a productive citizen. Health communication often idealizes some practices while discouraging others, such as smoking, drinking or overeating by provoking guilt and other (negative) emotions and connotations. Life expectancy quite often plays a role in this value-

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2 See, for example, Walter 1994, 10, 47.
4 For example, in the 1850s life expectancy in the United States was less than 40, whereas in 2013 it was closer to 79. (Haines 2007; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015.)
5 See, for example, Obregon & Waisbord 2012; Thompson, Parrott & Nussbaum 2003.
6 See, for example, Seale 2002; Parker & Thorson 2009.
based framing of health issues. Journalistic articles about health tend to count the years certain habits either give or take away from one’s life or active years. Finnish tabloids, for instance, have pronounced how childhood obesity threatens increasing life expectancies in Western countries,\(^7\) how four lifestyle changes give ten more years to over-65-year-olds,\(^8\) and how a firm handshake increases the lifespan.\(^9\) This kind of quantification of life and death works in the narration of “a good life” by representing an increase in life expectancy as the ultimate goal in which an extended lifespan becomes equated with stories of a successful nation at the social level and a good citizen at the personal level.

It might be that with advances in gene technology our ultimate goal would not only be to significantly extend life expectancy but to gain biological immortality. But even if (or when?) we manage this, several questions will still remain and others will emerge. The human and social sciences approach to this topic has tackled such issues as the definition of a person and the challenges entailed in organizing life in the societies in which we live. First of all, even when cells continue to die and be replaced, our memory might still have limitations in remembering earlier experiences, and when our biological lives are extended by decades and potentially by centuries, new experiences may drastically change our personality. In these cases, the continuity of identity becomes a personally, culturally and socially critical issue. Secondly, immortality would also raise social and political questions of who is allowed to live forever and procreate if the resources and available living space continue to be limited.\(^{10}\) Thus, the prospects of immortality would not relieve us from wondering about the meanings and definitions of life and death.

The desire to conquer death has also been witnessed in cultural institutions of art, sciences and technology. For example, during the early 20\(^{th}\) century the modern desire to erase death was used to explain cinema’s growing popularity. In 1945 the French film theorist André Bazin argued that cinema participates in the processes of preserving life and conquering death. He talked of a “mummy complex” in which film had the power to freeze time and humanity at a certain moment, quite like embalming in ancient Egypt, and bring the past alive on the screen.\(^{11}\) Some films do indeed seek to emphasize this effect of defying time. In Elias E. Merhige’s *The Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), the film director discusses cinema as a form of immortality:

\[\text{Our battle, our struggle, is to create art. Our weapon is the moving picture. Because we have the moving picture, our paintings will grow and recede; our poetry will be shadows that lengthen and conceal; our light will play across living faces that laugh and}\]

\(^7\) *Iltalehti* 2.3.2010.
\(^8\) *IltaSanomat* 27.7.2014.
\(^9\) *Iltalehti* 22.9.2010.
\(^{10}\) Questions of immortality are debated, for example, in Häyry 2010, 195–219.
\(^{11}\) Bazin 2005 (1945), 9–16.
agonize; and our music will linger and finally overwhelm, because it will have a context as certain as the grave. We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory...but our memory will neither blur nor fade.

Whereas physical immortality is a problematic goal in the light of human communality and has for this reason been critically inspected by many human and social scientific approaches, the phenomenon of striving for social immortality has motivated several constructive lines of inquiry. The studies reveal that people have sought social immortality in many different ways, by respecting ancestry and the family name, and by passing traditions on to their own children.12 Continuity has an important function for other types of communal immortality as well. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, has discussed the social dimensions of immortality at length. He argues that society, culture and religion are outcomes of our desire for immortality because they provide a continuity and meaning that exceeds individual limitations. These practices include, for example, nation states, religion’s way of tying moral solutions to afterlife issues, reputation and fame through history writing, heroic (and anti-heroic) actions, monuments (such as graves and statues), and cultural artifacts (literature, music, art, etc.). In the current mediatized culture, social recognition is also available in a new way to numerous people due to digital footprints and social media.13 All these phenomena emphasize how social immortality depends on recognition, remembrance and continuity. These also appear to be the same issues from which people seek meaning to life in ordinary practical contexts – children, family and relationships, religion, fame, achievement, and so on. Thus, in many ways, in our desire to make our lives matter, mortality and our ways to conquer its limits play an important role.

In addition, even if physical death might have been hidden to institutions, death has never left the public domain of modern societies because memories, films, books, and art have all continued to represent death and mortality. Several media scholars have argued that the media and entertainment industries, in particular, became substitutes for experiences of encountering death and gave meaning to dying in modern societies.14 The increasing recognition of the role of emotions and the rise of a therapeutic culture have been mediated publicly through the entertainment industry, including confessional tendencies in talk shows, reality television, self-help books and the social media.15 These changes also extend to the management of death. Charlton McIlwain, for example, argues that death has been given more discursive space in both fictional and factual television shows.

12 See, for example, Vuolanto 2015.
13 Bauman 1992, 5–72. For immortality in the social media, see Lagerkvist 2013.
15 Furedi 2003; Richards 2007.
The increasingly open relationship with death and mourning in media has reframed “the privacy of death” as “death as a public spectacle.”\(^\text{16}\)

Therefore, instead of arguing that death is some sort of taboo in modern Western societies, it is more important to understand which dimensions of death and mortality are allowed to be part of public life and which are more confined to the private sphere. In the spring of 2012, the American Psychiatric Association’s forthcoming version of the American manual for psychiatric diagnoses, \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition} (2013), stirred a heated discussion, as it was revealed that the new edition would add mourning to the list of mental disorders. Although the purpose of pathologizing grief was to allow those mourning a loss to use their health insurance for therapy, the cultural consequence was that it transformed mourning from an emotional and mental process into a disorder that needed to be treated. This gives an impression that in Western cultures mourning and grief are understood as exclusively private processes (or problems) that do not have any role in the society at large, which values efficiency and productivity. Instead they become a disturbance to public life if they extend over socially accepted rituals, such as funerals.

In contrast to the pathologizing of private mourning, public mourning has been widely used to reinforce ideologies. Health psychologist Leeat Granek has recognized three main ways to politicize grief. First is the medicalization of grief, where definitional power is given to (medical) authorities. Second, grief can be used to generate social activism. In this form, grief and loss are used to demand social change, such as demands for increasing (or decreasing) gun control after mass shootings. And thirdly, governments can manipulate grief to justify political aims.\(^\text{17}\) National losses have been used to validate different political aims and decisions. In the United States, for example, grief has been socially and politically used to justify certain aims related to the war on terror after 9/11.\(^\text{18}\)

These short examples of the roles of both public and private grief and mourning show that there are cultural tensions of when death and mortality are allowed to enter the public domain. However, many scholars have argued that the private experiences of death and mortality are becoming increasingly important in public discussions. Social studies approaches have highlighted the importance of booming hospice and palliative care movements, where the psychological, spiritual and emotional needs of the dying and their families are emphasized alongside of medical care. The modern hospice movement started to spread in the late 1960s, and have started to gain public support in many Western countries since the

\(^{16}\) McIlwain 2005.  
\(^{17}\) Granek 2014, 61, 66–67.  
\(^{18}\) See, for example, Butler 2004; 2009; Holst-Warhaft 2000.
Thus, the dying and their families refused to be marginalized, and have demanded that their voices be heard.

The tension between the personal and social dimensions of death and mortality have always existed, because a person’s death always affects the community around him or her, and community in turn affects how these deaths are understood and framed. This tension has been handled differently in different eras and societies, and at the moment it seems that private experiences have forced death to become part of the public consciousness – but in a different way than earlier. In this volume, different scholars from the humanities and the social sciences discuss different personal and social perspectives concerning death and mortality.

**Human Mortality Project**

This volume emerges from the *Human Mortality* project (2011–2013), which provided a framework for discussing death, dying and mortality in an interdisciplinary network. The project was hosted by the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation as part of its “Argumenta” funding model. Argumenta projects are intended to stimulate dialog between researchers in different fields of science on significant current subjects of research. The *Human Mortality* project brought together scholars from different fields, such as philosophy, history, theology, law, sociology, psychology, medicine, literature, and media and art studies, to discuss different death-related topics. Earlier publications related to this project include *Death in Literature* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2014), a book about cultures of death in Finland (*Kuoleman kulttuurit Suomessa*, Gaudeamus 2014), and a theme number about media and death (*Thanatos* 2013). Within this final publication, we discuss both individual and communal perspectives on mortality and death. The articles published here are a careful selection of the most interesting topics and discussions from the events organized by the project.

The publication opens with an article by anthropologist Douglas Davies, who brings together death and emotion studies and looks into the ways emotions related to death and dying have been explained and understood in different socio-historical contexts. He discusses the relation of traditional societies to religious customs in order to cope with death, and compares these to the explanations preferred in some contemporary contexts, where philosophical, sociological and medical explanations take over. He introduces two secular models in which one sees grief in terms of the stages of an ongoing process for the living, and the other highlights the ongoing links between the living and the dead. By discussing the different ways of explaining emotions in the processes of dying and grief, Davies also critically lays out the major developments of death studies. His article, therefore, provides

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19 See, for example, Bennahum 2003, 3–7.
a valuable starting point for the volume, because it helps to position ongoing discussions on mortality within multidisciplinary death studies.

One of the recurring questions during the project was how can or should death be defined because its definitions vary according to historical, cultural, social and practical contexts. Whereas biological definitions of death have changed due to the development of medical technologies and theories – from the lack of cardinal signs (heartbeat and breathing) to the lack of brain function – the cultural and social meanings of death alternate depending on larger social, political and material contexts. For this reason the Human Mortality project also focused on the cultural and philosophical definitions of death. The challenges of coma, euthanasia and the treatment of dying people have encouraged new discussions on how we should understand death and dying. Andrea Marlen Esser argues in her article “Human Death as a Concept of Practical Philosophy” that human death is always more than a mere biological process. The human significance of death makes it a philosophical problem with large-scale cultural and existential implications. John P. Lizza continues this debate by critically discussing the limits of different brain death definitions which are often common ways of determining death. He also challenges the view that death is an objective or biological fact, and highlights death as a matter for metaphysical, moral and cultural reflections.

Alexei Yurchak also opens up the problematic relationship between scientific possibilities and the symbolical meanings of death. He discusses the scientific processes and the political-cultural aims of preserving Lenin’s body in the Mausoleum in Moscow. In the preservation process Lenin’s body is constantly processed and adjusted so that it maintains the form of Lenin. He contrasts this continuing resculpting to the incorruptible bodies of Christian saints, whose holiness depends on an intact form. Yurchak argues that the difference in the approach to bodies is symbolical, not biological. Lenin’s body is a living sculpture that represents Soviet history.

The relationship between medical/biological definitions of death and philosophical, social and cultural definitions is often tense in modern culture. However, a tension has always existed in our desire to understand death. Kathryn Edwards’ discussion on the roles of ghosts in the 15th century reveals similar questions on theological, political and social needs to define death. In her analysis of the supernatural afterlife she highlights the ongoing relationships between the dead and the living, and changing social roles and power relationships. As discussed throughout this collection, death is not only a personal phenomenon but also a social and political one.

The social importance of death is crucial also to philosophical questions concerning good life and its conditions. Sara Heinämaa offers a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of death and mortality. She distinguishes between different meanings of death – death as an event, death as an impossibility, 20 See, for example, Kellehear 2009.
and death as a threat – and thus clarifies the significance that the awareness of mortality brings to our lives. Moreover she argues that Epicurean wisdom of not caring about death should be understood as a wisdom that concerns our possibilities of living. Sami Pihlström approaches the question of good and bad death, or the good and bad life as an emotional experience of mortality, and the emotion of guilt in particular. He identifies transcendental forms of guilt which deal with questions concerning the meaningfulness of human life. These questions become increasingly important when we look beyond the so-called “natural” or “normal” death resulting from illnesses or old age. For example, ethical questions of euthanasia, suicide or violent deaths create a tension between personal and social interpretations of acceptable solutions concerning ending one’s own life or the life of others. Hanna Ronikonmäki turns the focus to the topic of voluntary death and discusses the definitions of suicide employed in recent Anglo-American philosophy. In her article “License to Die?”, she asks whether a person can be allowed to (rationally) choose to die.

In academic discussions of death, suicides, as well as crime and war deaths have often been regarded as “bad” deaths, as their unexpectedness and violence disrupt society. However, these questions can also be approached from the perspective of what kind of “good” can violent deaths provide. In our collection, Anna Lenkewitz discusses how death penalties were used as a form of justice in turn-of-the-century Russia. In her article “The State as a Murderer”, Lenkewitz opens up the development of pluralized perceptions of justice, a process in which the legitimacy of autocratic power was challenged. Ilona Pajari also approaches the question of death from the nation’s perspective when she discusses the supposedly glorious deaths of soldiers. She discusses the logic of sacrifice and ways to give meaning to the soldier’s death in the context of Finland during the Second World War. The volume closes with an address about death, killing and war by Jeff McMahan. In this article he introduces several urgent questions concerning death and killing that he has discussed at length in The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life (2002), and in Killing in War (2009). He argues that in order to have a coherent understanding of violent death, we should keep separate the two types of harm that are often lumped together: the badness of death and the evil of killing.

References


*Iltalehti* 2.3.2010. Lapsuuden lihavuus lyhentää elämää.


