

ELEVENTH EDITION

# DEATH, SOCIETY, AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE



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# CHAPTER 2

## What Is Death?

# IDEAS ABOUT THE NATURE AND THE MEANING OF DEATH

Not only do individuals differ in their attitudes and feelings toward death, but the same person may differ from situation to situation.

What we mean by “death” becomes of practical importance when we communicate with others who have a different conception.

# DEATH AS OBSERVED, PROCLAIMED, AND IMAGINED

Islam – Death is final when the soul leaves the body.

Epicurus – Death is one of many events that have no meaning or value.

Hindu – Reincarnation; we are born to die, and die to be reborn.

Christianity – Death and sexuality are intertwined; sexual sinfulness can lead to death.

New Age – Death is a transition to the next life.

# Death as Symbolic Construction

We need a mental construction because death has so many important referents, associations, and consequences.

Our concept of death is influenced by movies and television.

Deaths are often sensational and violent.

Males are six times more likely to instigate death.

Females are twice as likely to be victims.

# BIOMEDICAL APPROACHES TO THE DEFINITION OF DEATH

## Traditional Determination of Death

- Lack of respiration, pulse, and heartbeat
- Failure to respond to stimuli, such as light, movement, and pain
- Lowered body temperature and stiffness
- Followed later by bloating and signs of decomposition

Jack Kevorkian developed a method based on the status of the eye.

Observed 51 patients in 1957, published his findings in 1961.

Specifically checked the eye for:

- segmentation and interruption of blood circulation
- a haziness of the cornea
- appearance of homogeneity and paleness

# Ways of Being Dead

Medical advances have made it possible to maintain the body in a nonresponsive state for an indefinite period of time.

Under such circumstances we may hesitate to evoke either category: alive or dead.

A decision may have to be made that will require a definition of "deadness."

# Brain Death and the Harvard Criteria

At first, the concept of brain death served mainly to help physicians decide that additional medical procedures would be of no benefit to the patient.

Biomedical advances such as organ donation led to ethical and moral dilemmas.

Both the health care and justice systems felt the need for guidance.

# The Harvard Criteria

- Unreceptive and unresponsive (to any external stimuli or internal need)
- No movements or breathing
- No reflexes
- Flat EEG (no brain activity or brain waves)
- No circulation to or within the brain (no oxygen or nutrition to the brain)

# The Current Scene

Akinetic Mutism	Sensorimotor pathways are preserved but cannot initiate actions or speak. Bilateral frontal lobe dysfunction and possibly other brain injuries are involved.
Brain Damage	General term that has become of limited usefulness.
Brain Death	Prolonged nonreversible cessation of all brain activity with complete absence of voluntary movements, response to stimuli, brain stem reflexes, and spontaneous respirations.
Catatonia	Immobility, muscular rigidity, mutism, posturing, grimacing, stupor; sometimes giving way to sudden outbursts of violence, panic, or hallucination. Considered to be a neuropsychiatric disorder.
Coma	A deep state of unconsciousness from which the individual cannot be aroused. Usually associated with injury or dysfunction involving both cerebral hemispheres or the brain stem.
Locked-In Syndrome	Neurological condition in which a person is conscious and able to think but cannot move any part of the body except the eyes, which can be used for communication.
Minimally Conscious State	Severe impairment that can be distinguished from coma or vegetative state by occasional and limited behavioral evidence of awareness.
Permanent Vegetative State	All cognitive functions, including awareness, are absent, even if eyes are open and sounds and nonpurposive movements are made. Sleep-wake cycles, autonomic control, and respiration continue. Condition is of long duration.
Persistent Vegetative State	(See transient and permanent vegetative states.) The condition is known to have been caused by brain damage that might be moderated or reversed.
Transient Vegetative State	(See persistent vegetative state.) However, condition has been caused by drugs, extreme cold, or injury with possibility of recovery.

*Sources:* Burns, Login, Bruno, Kimura, Crisci, Sacosnik, Beslac-Bumbasirevic, Ercegovic, & Wijdicks (2004); Giacino, Ashwal, Childs, Cranford, Jennett, Katz, Kelly, Rosenberg, Whyte, Zafone, & Zasler; (2002); Iserson (2003); Jennett (2002); Wade & Johnston (1999); Wijdicks (2001).

# **“Total Brain Failure”: An Emerging Concept**

An alternative to prevailing concepts and practices, the focus is no longer entirely on physical symptoms and systems.

The view that even the severely impaired person continues to interact with the world and may be fighting for survival.

(Zamperetti & Bellome, 2009)

## EVENT VERSUS STATE

Death is sometimes treated as an event; the same word also refers to the state that follows the event.

# WHAT DOES DEATH MEAN?

- Death is an enfeebled form of life.
- Death is a continuation of life.
- Death is perpetual development.
- Death is waiting.
- Death is cycling and recycling.
- Death is nothing.
- Death is virtual and, therefore, not really death after all.

# INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DEATH STATE

## **Enfeebled Life**

Transformed into a repulsive and pitiable creature, a decremental model of misery

## **Continuation**

Transition to more of the same existence

## **Perpetual Development**

Transition to a freer mode of existence in which continued spiritual and evolutionary growth occurs

## **Waiting**

Tension between death and an end-state; waiting for judgment; in limbo or suspension

## **Cycling and Recycling**

Death is one position on a constantly turning wheel

## **Nothing**

Dying and the death even can be observed, but death is the absence of life, process, or quality

## **Virtual, Therefore Not Death**

Death is something without dimension or place, similar to imaginary virtual computer worlds

# Implications of the Ways in Which We Interpret Death

Death has been viewed as clean or unclean in various cultures.

Death can be viewed as an end, a beginning, or a transition.

# CONDITIONS THAT RESEMBLE DEATH

## **Inorganic and Unresponsive**

Death as stone or rock – cold and hard

Death as a mechanical failure

## **Sleep and Altered States of Consciousness**

Death as a deep sleep

Drug and alcohol-induced states are likened to death

# Beings Who Resemble or Represent Death

Winged hybrid beings, such as Homer's sirens, who brought death

The Muses, who sang at funerals and guided departed souls

Orpheus, who had power over death through song

The skeleton (utilized since ancient times)

# DEATH AS A PERSON

- Objectifying an abstract concept
- Expressing feelings that are difficult to articulate
- Serving as a coin of communication
- Absorbing some of the shock, pain, anger, and fear experienced during traumatic events
- Providing symbols that can be reshaped during emotional healing and cognitive integration

# How We Personify Death: The First Study

- The *macabre* – ugly, menacing, vicious, and repulsive characters
- The *gentle comforter* – serene and welcoming
- The *gay deceiver* – elegant, sexually alluring, tempting, and then traps you
- The *automaton* – bland, shell of a person who just goes about his business

## The Follow-Up Study

Death is still represented predominately as a male, but there is a sharp increase in female personifications.

Gender differences:

Women favor the *gentle comforter*.

Men site a “cold and remote” person.

The *gentle comforter* is still seen as an elderly person, but that is no longer true of the others (*macabre, gay deceiver, and automaton*)

# CONDITIONS THAT DEATH RESEMBLES

## Social Death

Must be defined in context or by situation

Based on how a person is treated by others

Person is ignored, discounted, and excluded

## Phenomenological Death

Type 1: partial death, loss of part of the body or identity

Type 2: total self takes on a deadened tone

# THE UNDEAD

## The Fertile Dead

Life gives way to death, but death also gives way to life.

## From Beast to Dark Lover

An invitation to revisit the darker side of our own natures where life and death do not obey the rules of strict rationality.

## Bringing the Vampire Down to Earth

Are vampires/zombies real? Positive evidence for their existence is not abundant.

# DEATH AS AN AGENT OF PERSONAL, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

## **The Great Leveler**

Death makes no distinction between people  
Ignoring, for example, race, gender, age, IQ, finances,  
religion, and personal power

## **The Great Validator**

A person's worth in life can be reflected in the level of  
mourning and size of the funeral or memorial

## **Death Unites/Separates**

Unites us with those who have already died

Separates us from the living

## **Ultimate Problem or Ultimate Solution?**

Ends our opportunities to achieve

Closes down our inner experiences, consciousness, and awareness

Death takes us away from all our life-related problems

The death of others removes some of our problems (for example, death of criminals)

## **The Ultimate Meaningless Event**

Random and senseless

No answer to the question of why a death occurred

# GLOSSARY

Brain death

Catatonia

Coma, comatose

EEG

Intravenous fluids

Martyrdom

Minimally conscious  
state

Revenant

Transient vegetative  
state

Vampire

Vegetative state

Virtual reality

Zombie