

# THE UNIVERSAL FEAR OF DEATH AND THE CULTURAL RESPONSE

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CALVIN CONZELUS MOORE

JOHN B. WILLIAMSON

Is the fear of death universal? Anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) seems to think so, arguing that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man” (p. ix). There is much about death to fear: Whether by accident, disease, or intentional infliction by another human, the path to death for all but a few fortunate humans is accompanied by pain. Death can also be a lonely and isolating experience (Feder 1976). Humans are social beings, and it is our interactions with other humans that complete our existence and give our lives meaning. Death is thus separation from everything that gives our life form; it is the loss of everything that we hold dear (Hinton 1967). The loss of a loved one to death is often one of the most emotionally painful experiences that a human can have (Gordon 2000). Even when the death is not that of a loved one, simply being a witness to death can evoke a natural horror and revulsion (Malinowski 1948). Furthermore, because of its seeming finality, death presents one of the most formidable challenges to the idea that human life has meaning and purpose. Given these facts, it should be no surprise that fear has been one of the most commonly expressed responses of humans to death.

Because the idea of death evokes a number of fears, researchers have suggested that the fear of death is actually a multidimensional concept. Hoelter and Hoelter (1978) distinguish eight dimensions of the death fear: fear of the dying process, fear of premature death, fear for significant others, phobic fear of death, fear of being destroyed, fear of the body after death, fear of the unknown, and fear of the dead. Similarly, Florian and Mikulincer (1993) suggest three components of the death fear: intrapersonal components related to the impact of death on the mind and the

body, which include fears of loss of fulfillment of personal goals and fear of the body’s annihilation; an interpersonal component that is related to the effect of death on interpersonal relationships; and a transpersonal component that concerns fears about the transcendental self, composed of fears about the hereafter and punishment after death. Because of the complexity of death fears, some authors suggest using the term *death anxiety* to describe the amorphous set of feelings that thinking about death can arouse (Schultz 1979).

Because of the complexity of death fears, scholars have debated whether such fears are natural or whether they are social constructs. The most common view that runs through the history of thought on death is that the fear of death is innate, that all of life tends to avoid death, and that the underlying terror of death is what drives most of the human endeavor. The anthropological, philosophical, and psychoanalytic perspectives offer evidence and rationales that the fear of death is a natural response, given all the attempts of biological organisms to preserve life. Throughout human history, fear has been the universal response to death. In 1889, the cultural anthropologist Edward B. Tylor stated, “All life fears death, even brutes which do not know death” (p. 433). Aristotle (1941) said that “plainly the things we fear are terrible things” and referred to death as “the most terrible of things” (p. 978). According to the anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973), of the various factors that influence behavior, one of the most important is the terror of death. The most common view, then, is that fear is one of the most natural reactions to encounters with death (Charmaz 1980).

On the other hand, some sociologists argue that the fear of death is not necessarily innate; rather, it is a learned reaction (Schultz 1979). Vernon (1970) states that the fear of death is the result of an individual’s learning

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experiences, and not an internal phenomenon. Charmaz (1980) notes that social and cultural conditions may give rise to the fear of death. The industrialism and individualism of modern society, for example, may create the fear of death: "The rise of individuality with the illusion of self-sufficiency fosters an emergence of the fear of death. In societies that foster individuality, fear of death logically follows" (p. 14). In traditional and rural cultures, on the other hand, the fear of death is not as strong. Such arguments seem to suggest, however, that if the cultural response in a given society is not to fear death, individuals within that culture do not respond to death with fear. This is a premise that requires empirical validation. Perhaps the most useful conception of the fear of death may be that it is a variable subject to manipulation by social context. A society's culture may offer explanations of death that either repress or encourage fears about death according to the needs of the society.

In this chapter, we explore cultural responses to the fear of death. The fact that humans are symbolic beings allows us to construct symbolic systems that preserve the meaning and significance of life in the face of death. An examination of various cultures throughout history suggests that an underlying fear of death has always been a major organizing force in human society. Because the social construction of meaning is a fundamental element of culture, an examination of the universal fear of death and cultural responses to that fear offers us an opportunity to survey the vast human experience with death, from the earliest beginnings of society to the present. In that regard, we examine here the major theoretical contributions to our understanding of the fear of death and its relation to human culture, from anthropological studies of preliterate societies to the religious, philosophical, and psychoanalytic systems of more advanced societies.

Every culture has generated a system of thought that incorporates the reality and inevitability of death in a manner that preserves the social cohesion of that culture in the face of the potentially socially disintegrating aspects of death. Early human societies developed religious systems, including ancestor worship, that bridged the divide between the dead and the living and portrayed death not as an end, but as a transition to another world that is still very much connected to the earthly one. The Greeks used reason and philosophy to deal with the fear of death. Early Jews incorporated a variety of practices into their religious beliefs surrounding cleanliness and purity to stave off unwanted death. Christians of the Middle Ages gave themselves over to the reality of death by associating the death of the body with the freeing of the spirit to spend eternal life with God. Religious systems of the Eastern world evolved ideas of continual rebirth and the attainment of freedom from the cycle of rebirth through enlightenment or nirvana. In each case, the symbolic system accords death a place in society that offers meaning to the individual and prevents the society from lapsing into complete nihilism in the face of death.

#### EARLY AND PRELITERATE HUMAN RESPONSES TO THE FEAR OF DEATH

Perhaps the most basic human response to death is flight from it. Herzog (1983) describes several groups of preliterate peoples in Malaysia and North India who had burial practices but simply fled, never to return to the place where one of their members died. He attributes this behavior to the sheer horror that accompanies the inexplicable change from living to dead as witnessed by tribal members. Another group of preliterate Malays, however, fled to abandon the dying, but later returned to see whether the person had died; if death had occurred, they buried the deceased with leaves. Afterward, they would desert the place, returning only years later. Herzog views this practice as an important stage in the psychological development of humans, the stage at which humans first confronted death. Only by confronting death could humans gradually begin to integrate the concept of death into their understanding of the natural scheme of existence.

Early humans did not always flee from death; at some point, they were actually confronted with the dead. Once confronted, the dead produced a mixture of emotions in the living, ranging from horror at the sight of a corpse to a combination of fear and feelings of loss for the departed (Malinowski 1948). The deaths of members of a society were thus traumatic and potentially disintegrating experiences for the group. The development of practices surrounding disposal of the corpse served to reintegrate the community by allowing members to assert some manner of control over the society's relationship with death and the dead (Malinowski 1948). Cultural practices regarding disposal of the corpse thus became important in all human societies. These practices were subject to an infinite degree of variation, but in all cases they served a similar underlying purpose: bringing what was once an incomprehensible horror within the realm of an ordered understanding of the role of death in the human experience.

Early humans understood death to be a gateway to an afterlife. The belief that humans live on after death is almost universal (Frazer 1966). According to Malinowski (1948), preliterate humans were actually incapable of imagining death as the annihilation of being. This can be attributed to the fact that humans are symbolic beings; although human bodies are confined to a series of single moments in time and space, the human mind is able to traverse many temporal and spatial dimensions simultaneously. Humans are able to imagine, reflect, and dream. Tylor (1889) notes that animism, the most preliterate form of religion, originated in primitive explanations of dreams, visions, apparitions, and other products of the imagination. Similarly, Durkheim (1915:66) says that humans' belief in the spirit world originated in early humans' attribution of equal reality to the waking world and the world of sleep and dreams. Because humans, through these mental processes, could form images of persons who had died, they could use these images and the effects that memories

of the dead continued to have on the living to reason in the most elementary fashion that humans live on after death.

The prevailing attitude of early human societies toward the dead, with some exceptions, was fear. Frazer (1966) notes:

While it would be foolish and vain to deny that [the savage] often mourns sincerely the death of his relations and friends, he commonly thinks that their spirits undergo after death a great change, which affects their character and temper on the whole for the worse, rendering them touchy, irritable, irascible, prone to take offence on the slightest pretext and to visit their displeasure on the survivors by inflicting on them troubles of many sorts, including accidents of all kinds, drought, famine, sickness, pestilence and death. (Pp. 10–11)

Evidence of this fear has been found in most preliterate societies. This is to be expected. For many millennia, life on the whole for humans has been brutal and short, yet the natural tendency of preliterate groups was to view life and health as natural, whereas sickness and death required supervening causes that required explanations (Malinowski 1948). The obvious culprits were either disgruntled dead relatives or higher-order beings who took a special interest in human affairs.

Because of fear of the dead, gods and ancestors became the objects of attempts at either appeasement or control by the living. These two goals, says Malinowski (1948), branched off in two directions: religion and magic. Religion is essentially the attempt to appease, whereas behind magic is the desire to control. Religion sustained fears of the gods and focused on efforts to supplicate them; magic purported to transfer power to the hands of the magician, giving that individual a degree of control over forces that affected human lives. In one sense, magic was intensely psychological, as it involved convincing participants of the power of its wielder. Magic also involved experimentation, however, and some of that experimentation eventually laid the foundation for more formal scientific experimentation (Malinowski 1948). In the anthropological distinctions between religion and magic, then, we can see the foundation for humanity's ongoing efforts to overcome the fear of death through the opposing tactics of belief and control.

## RELIGION AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

Cultural practices surrounding death combined with ideas about what happens after death to form the basis of religion, which is one of the cornerstones of all civilizations. Malinowski (1948) asserts that religion "is as instinctual a response as the fear of death which underlies it" (p. 29). He states, "Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of greatest importance" (p. 29). Durkheim's (1915) simple definition of religion is "the belief in spiritual beings" (p. 44). According to Durkheim, the purpose of religion is to regulate humans' relations

with these beings through "prayers, sacrifices, propitiatory rites, etc." (p. 44). Religion sets up a fundamental distinction between the sacred and the profane. It establishes a priesthood that acts as guardian of the sacred and serves as interlocutor between the physical and spiritual worlds (Berger 1969).

Religion orders human behavior by setting up a series of taboos and prescriptions surrounding sacred objects and rites (Durkheim 1963). It thus forms one of the most elemental institutions of social order. It represents the human attempt to unite social organization with cosmic organization—to order human society, the spirit world, and the cosmic and animal world in which humans are immersed into a comprehensible reality.

Cults of the dead, mythical heroes, ancestor worship, and totemism are all forms of religion that embody a combination of social organization of the living with attempts to influence relations with the dead and that act as the gateway to a desired type of immortality. In this manner, religion addresses two of the most basic fears of humans: fear of the dead and fear of what will happen to us after we die.

Religion thus forms one of the basic elements of authority of humans over other humans (Weber 1956). The fundamental problem of society is the preservation of social order. Humans quickly realized that disorder ultimately leads, through chaos, to death. Order and organization represent a flight from death. Religion, which capitalizes on the innate fear of death, is one of the most efficient methods of achieving what Durkheim calls "mechanical solidarity," which is social order premised on the understanding that all societal members follow the same behavioral norms.

Underlying religion is power, and the foundation of all power is that of life over death. As Lifton (1979) notes, the final meaning of religion is "life-power and power over death" (pp. 20–21). Persons in positions of authority, whether priests, warriors, or kings, assume their power by controlling who will live and who will die, by playing upon the fear of members of society that to disobey authority means not only death, but also the possibility of an unpleasant afterlife. Rulers cannot rule by force alone. The combination of rule by force and rule through religious authority has been one of the most effective means of assuring the obedience of a population. Many monarchies share this characteristic (Sypnowich 1991).

Every society remains continually under threat of revolution and disintegration from below by its youth, because of the power of the sex drive (Freud 1936). Each generation must therefore be forever diligent in the transmission of rules of behavior to the succeeding generation. The collective superego uses both the fear of death and fear of the dead to enforce the rules and preserve social order. Societies have different levels of success in generating symbolic systems that are powerful enough to maintain allegiance over time. Wars, migration, and trade, as well as constant reflection by later generations on the previous generations' experiences, often lead to transformations of

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symbolic systems. The most enduring systems are therefore those that are best able to adapt their symbolic systems to the present set of human conditions.

### KILLING, SACRIFICE, AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

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Even though humans instinctively fear death, they also willfully participate in death through killing. Shapiro (1989) suggests that killing by early humans may have been a response to the fear of death. Killing is seen to enhance life, to make it eternal. Killing energizes the killer. Killing allows the killer to confront death immediately and intentionally, and with that confrontation comes a sense of power. By killing, humans master the fear of death, showing death that they are not afraid to face it, and even bring it into being. For early humans, death was a nameless and formless horror; participation in the act of killing allowed them to identify themselves with death, to give shape and form to death, and, in so doing, to begin to understand it. The power behind death thus becomes recognizable.

Killing evokes a complex set of psychological responses in humans. Killing was problematic for early humans. Even when they killed animals, they performed ceremonies as magic practices to “cancel out the event of death” and thus allay its horror (Herzog 1983). Herzog (1983) describes the practice of murdering the elderly and diseased group members in many preliterate societies; the variety of methods used included suffocation, strangulation, burying alive, feeding to wild animals, and abandonment. It was shameful in some cultures for adult children to allow their parents to die a natural death. Herzog thus suggests that a measure of guilt may have accompanied these acts even if they were viewed as necessary and life affirming.

Ceremonies performed prior to these killings may have served the psychological purpose of expiating feelings of anxiety that surrounded the murderous acts. They also may have alleviated feelings of being overwhelmed by death by suggesting that humans indeed had some authority over life and death. Once humans connected death with life and came to see that death is part of the cycle of life, that it is even required for life, participation in the act of killing may have come to be seen as an act of affirming life. The attitude toward killing progressed from one of anxiety to one in which killing was seen as pleasing to the gods (Paul 1996). Killers, particularly warriors and hunters, were glorified and given great positions of honor in society (Herzog 1983).

Killing by sacrifice allowed the priest who conducted the ceremony to proclaim mastery over death to those who witnessed the sacrifice. The symbolic language system that surrounded the sacrifice enabled the religions’ adherents to believe that power over death also means power over life. According to German psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1936), the sacrifice of the other “lessens the death fear of the ego,” and “through the death of the other, one buys oneself free

from the penalty of dying, of being killed” (p. 170). Ritual sacrifices also had the purpose of instilling fear in those who witnessed and took part in the ceremonies. Sacrifice necessarily evoked a visceral reaction of horror and brought each witness into direct confrontation with his or her own hidden fears of death. Beneath the idea of sacrifice is power; priestly sacrifice represented the efforts of priests as a class to consolidate power in society by exploiting the group’s natural fears about death.

### THE BODY, CULTURE, AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

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The concept of death is intricately tied to the human body. It is the body that dies. The body is corruptible; the body is the recipient of disease and subject to decay. It is the physical corpse that rots away, whereas the soul, according to many belief systems, is set free and lives forever. The body feels pain, and bodily misery is the source of most human misery. Passion is of the body; contemplation is of the soul. Man’s body can thus make him a slave to passion while the contemplative power of his spirit sets him free. This basic fact is behind many religious practices, philosophical systems, and science (Heinz 1999). A major function of culture, then, is to structure pleasure fulfillment of the body in a manner that supports the continuity of society. Reason, law, religion, science, even magic—all products of the contemplative mind—discipline the body, structure bodily movements, and set restraints on the desires of the body (Jones 2001). The primary struggle throughout human history is thus that between reason and passion, between the mind and the body.

The thrust of human culture in response to death has been to overcome the limitations and pains inflicted on the soul by the body. Underlying many religious practices is the function of controlling bodily impulses, purifying the body through practices of mortification, asceticism, celibacy, and other forms of self-denial. Much of human culture, therefore, involves the establishment of rules surrounding bodily orifices. In the Old Testament creation myth, Adam and Eve sin by eating of the fruit of the tree of life. Their eyes are opened and they subsequently have sex. They also learn that they must die. Their sins thus involved the two bodily orifices that can be most subject to conscious control, the mouth and the genital organs. Their once-perfect bodies were corrupted by these acts, and Adam and Eve were required to leave the Garden of Eden and live by the sweat of their brows.

The myth of Adam and Eve sets the foundation for a system of religious practices that revolve in large part around food and sex and that may underlie practical considerations about the relationships among food, sex, cleanliness, and death. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas uses the Book of Leviticus to explore ideas about pollution of the body and hygiene and their incorporation into religious ideas about uncleanness and ritual purity.

Leviticus sets forth the laws for the children of Israel, and many of those laws involve food. The laws set forth in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus are laws of God as delivered by Moses; pragmatically, they are early attempts to address the potentially corrupting effects of filth and uncleanness. The laws require priestly inspections when there is evidence of leprosy and prohibit sex when there is discharge from the penis of a male or when a woman is menstruating; they set forth explicitly what foods may be eaten and prohibit the consumption of animals that die before they are killed (Porter 1976). Attempts to cleanse and purify are closely related to human societies' attempts at order, which in turn serve to defy death and chaos; as Douglas (1966) observes, "Reflection on dirt involves the reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death" (p. 5). Religious categorizations of what is clean and unclean are thus further indications of humankind's attempts to build barriers to slow the encroachment of death by seeking to protect the body from the corrupting effects of filth.

The anxieties associated with sex in all societies have also been linked to the fear of death (Brain 1979). Sex is linked to aggression and causes men to kill other men; it is thus a source of disorder and death. The sexual organs are also very close to the anus, which is a source of corruption, disease, and death. The smell of sex can thus resemble that of feces and is a reminder of death. Sex itself can be a corrupting agent; filth can enter into the human body through the act of sex. Humankind became aware of germs only relatively recently, but sex has historically been the cause of numerous diseases that can lead to bodily discomfort, pain, and—in the case of diseases such as syphilis—incapacitation and death. In modern society, AIDS has solidified the link between sex and death; it has been associated with higher levels of death anxiety in gay men as well as among doctors and health workers who treat patients with AIDS (Bivens et al. 1994; Essien et al. 2000; Hayslip, Luhr, and Beyerlein 1991). It is no small wonder, then, that humans have such anxiety surrounding sex. In all societies, sex is the most regulated behavior. Rules surrounding sexuality constitute the strongest taboos in almost all human societies and are at the core of many religions.

Whereas Old Testament taboos focus on cleanliness and dietary practices (Douglas 1966), the New Testament is particularly focused on sexuality. Sexual morality became one of the cornerstones of the Christian Church. It was one of the major themes of the writings of the apostle Paul, one of the principal authors of the New Testament, who himself confessed to an ongoing struggle with the sins of the flesh. Sin is yielding to the desires of the flesh, becoming a slave to passion, and "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is the gift granted by God to help humans fight against the sins of the flesh and is the source of life everlasting. Overcoming the sins of the flesh became one of the principal paths to the freedom granted by the New Testament God, a

freedom that included not only life eternal, but also a new and perfect body to inhabit in that life. The Catholic Church subsequently placed great emphasis on sexual immorality and structured the practice of confession around expiating the Christian of impure thoughts and deeds, which were primarily of a sexual nature (Foucault 1990a). Christianity thus portrays the human body as weak and corruptible and the major source of sin, and promises those who strive to be of the spirit that they will overcome those weaknesses with eternal life and new bodies.

Christians of the Middle Ages despised the body. Mysticism thrived among the monks of that period; practitioners sought to overcome anxieties about death by ignoring the welfare of the body, allowing it to suffer and using that suffering as a path to freeing the spirit from the flesh (Carse 1980; Clarke 1978). Cultural productions of the Middle Ages reflected a desire to be free of the body completely (Helgeland 1984). There was an obsession with the macabre (DuBruck and Gusick 1999). The figure of Death was one of the most popular representations in artwork of the age (Aries 1981). The ideal human figure as represented in art was that of an emaciated saint whose eyes reflected the desire of his soul to depart from his body. The overall picture that emerges of the Middle Ages is one of an era that conceded the victory to death and used its cultural productions to express the people's overwhelming despair (Worcester 1999).

Yielding to death was that culture's particular solution to the problem of meaning in life, for giving oneself over to death could be interpreted as the supreme sacrifice. When one sacrifices the self—in particular, the body that one knows death will inevitably acquire—one is taking an absurd and meaningless death and giving it meaning. Foss (1966) suggests that the significance of sacrifice operates on two levels: First, the sacrificed leaves behind in society a memory of the sacrificial act, so that the life of the sacrificed acquires meaning in the world left behind; and second, the sacrificed gives over to death the body that is the cause of so much suffering and the primary hindrance to salvation. Making the supreme sacrifice of one's body prepares one for the transformation to new life and a new body free of the world's ills. The act of self-sacrifice thus becomes a subversion of death's power: Victory by death was turned into victory over death, for in the act of sacrifice, life achieves its supreme significance (Foss 1966).

The ancient Greek philosophers used truths evolved from rational discourse about the relationship between the body and the soul to determine practical rules concerning bodily restraint. The Greeks despaired over death precisely because life and the body offer so many pleasures (Choron 1963). They also realized that completely succumbing to the body's demands for pleasure is the path to death. The problem the Greek philosophers addressed was therefore one of controlling the body's excesses. Foucault (1990b) terms the classical Greek approach a "moral problematization of food, drink and sexual activity" (p. 51). In Greek thought, the goal was for the human not to be ruled by the

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passions of the body, but rather to temper the body's passions with reason.

To the Greeks, the problem of the body was not a religious one but a moral one. The body thus required attention because it was subject to abuse; bodily excesses were associated with sickness and death (Foucault 1990b). The Greeks, too, linked bodily abuse with the mouth and sex organs. Plato's *Laws* refer to three basic appetites that involve food, drink, and reproduction, and Plato notes the unique strength of the sexual desire in particular (Foucault 1990b). The goal of the Greeks, then, was the proper management of the body's desires for pleasure.

Bodily desires are also made problematic and linked to death in Eastern religions. "Desire is suffering," says Buddha, anticipating both the apostle Paul and Freud. The fear in Buddhism is not of an unpleasant afterlife. Rather, the fear is that unless freed from bodily desires, the individual will remain trapped in the birth-death cycle that prevents the self from being united with the oneness of the universe (Prabhu 1989). Oneness is the state of nirvana that Buddhists seek. Rather than fearing the annihilation of the self, practitioners of Buddhism seek such annihilation. The body and bodily desires act as hindrances to the attainment of nirvana. The body and its desires maintain the separateness of the self from the universal one as long as the individual remains enslaved to bodily passions (Toynbee 1976; Carse 1980).

The self is an equal restraint in Hinduism, in which the individual also seeks self-annihilation and union with oneness (Glucklich 1989). Whereas the Greeks emphasized thought as the path to freedom, Buddhism and Hinduism emphasize meditation (Carse 1980). "Meditation is in truth higher than thought," states a master in the Upanishads, the great Hindu philosophical/religious work. Meditation with the mind is the path to freedom and nirvana in Hinduism and Buddhism, but both Eastern and Western systems of thought reverberate the overall human theme of restraining the body's passions through self-discipline and self-denial.

The cultural practices of many human societies resonate with the idea that bodily desires are related to death and the restraint of bodily desires is the path to freedom from death, for both the individual and the society. Two psychological processes are evident in acts of self-denial, and both are guided by the idea that excesses of the body lead to death: First, self-discipline can serve the goal of increasing the individual's pleasure in the present life by making the body healthier through moderation; second, self-discipline can be interpreted as pleasing to the gods or as a path to reunion with an uncorrupted world after death occurs. Individuals and societies gravitate toward one or the other of these two interpretations and construct symbolic systems to support their choices.

Three dominant methods have evolved to enforce self-discipline. Traditional religions use external coercion to force the body into submission through the threat of punishment from the gods. The Greeks constructed a moral system guided by practical reason. Eastern religions set

forth rules and practices that allow practitioners to control bodily desires through meditative practices. These are the three major routes that humans have taken in their attempts to flee from the body's death. The goal in all cases remains the same: to overcome death by achieving freedom from bodily desires.

### REASON, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

One of our major premises in this chapter is that human societies can exist because symbols and the objects in the worlds that they represent are organized into conceptual systems that provide coherent explanations of human existence (Samuels 1993). Human reason underlies all such efforts. The logic of existence flows from the human capacity to reason. Reason informs all but the most irrational superstitions about the causes of death (Murphy 1993). What distinguishes advanced societies from societies that are less advanced is the range of worldly phenomena accounted for within their conceptual systems and their reliance on logical proofs to validate truths about the world. The discipline of philosophy in advanced civilizations represents humankind's most rational attempts to deal with the problem of death. "Death is the true inspiring genius, or the muse of philosophy," says Schopenhauer (1957:249).

Even in philosophy, however, conclusions about death are socially grounded; the pervasiveness of a set of conditions may lead to an era in which a singular philosophical attitude toward death prevails, or the social conditions in the life of a particular individual may determine whether that person determines that death is to be feared or not feared. The ancient Greeks took philosophy to some of the greatest heights known to humankind, but their philosophy regarding death exhibits the duality that has pervaded the remainder of history: On the one hand were the materialists, who argued that the soul dissolves at death, and on the other hand were the idealists, who argued that the soul lives on independent of the body in some form after death.

Each approach was determined by the focus of the philosophical inquiry: The materialists were early scientists concerned with the organization of material phenomena in the world, and thus saw the human as tied to the change and dissolution in the material world; the idealists, in contrast, set their sights on the seemingly perfect and unchanging conceptual world that reason ordered within the human mind, and could thus discern the possibility of a world beyond material experience in which the concept of the human, as represented by the soul, could live on (Sutherland 1978). Classical Greek society itself epitomized the precarious relationship between change and decay of the material world on the one hand and universal ideals of the conceptual world on the other: It was always challenged from both within and without by the forces of decay, and yet its leaders and thinkers were also able to

construct ideals, such as truth, freedom, democracy, and justice, that seemed eternal.

The duality is most evident in the logical systems of Plato and Aristotle and their respective schools of thought. To Plato, reason supported the existence of an ideal world beyond universal time and space, whereas Aristotle argued that reason can allow knowledge of the experienced world but can never prove a world beyond experience (Crescenzo 1990). Democritus, a student of Aristotle, also saw death as dissolution; he argued for learning to accept death as a part of life. Similarly, the materialist thinker Epicurus argued that religious thinking inflicts the living soul with fear of gods and fear of the hereafter (Gill 1995), but there is no need for such fear, because the soul dissolves upon death. According to Epicurus, the fear of death is the main obstacle to pleasure; individuals can achieve peace of mind by maximizing their pleasure while they are living (Rosenbaum 1993).

The rational approaches propounded by the Greeks yielded to an obsessive fear of death during the Middle Ages, but classical ideas resurfaced in Western societies during the Renaissance. People again began to think that humans are not bound by fate and death and that they can take their lives into their own hands and learn to live fully and creatively (Choron 1963). The Renaissance spirit is exhibited in the ideas of the French essayist Montaigne (1993), who argued that it is the fact of death that gives life its value. To Montaigne, life is a gift made all the more real by death.

The age of reason and science that flowered in the 16th century yielded proof of a mechanically ordered universe that operates according to logical and discernible principles. The possibility of eternity seemed to exist in the ordered, efficient operation of the world. Philosophical approaches to the fear of death often reflected the orderliness of the universe. Thus Descartes (1984) argued that we need not fear death because the mind/soul is eternal; the decay of the body need not imply the destruction of the mind. Kant (1998), reasoning from the perspective of his very orderly and circumscribed existence, argued that we cannot disprove God, freedom, and immortality, so reason supports their existence. There is no need to fear death, said Kant, because death is change.

Much of 20th-century existentialist philosophy reflects the need to find meaning in a world shaken by catastrophic wars. The great world wars brought forth death and human evil on such a massive scale as to strip human life completely of the meaning that Western culture had built around it in preceding centuries. Modern philosophers thus express a need to find personal meaning in human lives constrained by the finality of death. Martin Heidegger's (1996) concern is in demystifying death, teaching the individual to develop a proper attitude toward death and to learn to live life "authentically." Karl Jaspers (1963) argues that proofs of immortality are faulty, and also echoes the Stoic notion that individuals should deal with the horror of nonbeing by learning how to die. Jean-Paul Sartre (1992)

echoes the same notion with his arguments that individuals should accept the finitude of death and seek their freedom through the knowledge of how to die.

What can we conclude, then, about philosophical approaches to the fear of death? Underlying them all is the same mind/body duality of old, and all of these thinkers prove the limitation of human thought through their ability to consider only two options: Either death need not be feared because it is the release of an immortal spirit or death is complete annihilation of the being and can offer no further punishment to the being. The conclusions of each philosopher remain products of both his era and the social conditions unique to his life. The entire philosophical enterprise, however, can be viewed as a highly evolved human cultural response to the fundamental problem of death.

## THE FEAR OF DEATH AND MODERN THOUGHT

Much of the modern project involves overcoming the historical human impotence in the face of death. Underlying the modern project is the discovery of the individual and the attempt to liberate the individual—whether from the strictures of past group practices that are no longer functional or from the limitations and miseries heaped upon the individual by the very nature of existence, including death (Giddens 1991). There are many fronts to this project, and it employs the full array of tactics accumulated through millennia of human experience and subsequently ordered by human reason (Webb 1997). Science, medicine, psychoanalysis, philosophy—are all adapted to the ultimate liberation of the individual (Momeyer 1988). Psychoanalysis seeks to balance the individual personality by providing the ego with psychological tools to cope with the reality of its ultimate dissolution (Minsky 1998). Science offers technology to protect the body against the harshness of nature, while medicine attempts to slow and even halt the processes associated with the body's natural decay and corruption (Conlin 1988).

In modernity, death recedes further and further from day-to-day human experience. Humans are no longer constantly faced with death, and when they do confront death, it is usually presented in a sanitized form, with the sting of its horror far removed from everyday reality. We witness death through the mass media, but in heavily filtered fashion. When a death is anticipated, the individual is sent to a hospital, and his or her dying is left to the care of professionals (Fulton 1977). Humans today have access to a great deal of information about the process of dying (Walters 1988). Humans still attempt to reduce the shock of death by confronting and understanding it, but individuals are more informed about the process of dying than ever before (Prior 1989). Advances in medicine have generated drugs that serve to reduce the pain and discomfort associated with death (Kothari and Mehta 1981; Kass 1971).

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Progress, however, has not come without a price: Modern societies have been traumatized by confrontation with death in magnitudes not experienced in previous eras; the devastatingly efficient wars and genocides of the 20th century killed millions and revealed the persistence of great evil in humanity. All humans currently live under the shadow of potential nuclear annihilation. Modernity further fuels an existential crisis within individuals by generating knowledge of a world of overwhelming size and complexity, a world in which individual lives and projects seem increasingly meaningless (Slote 1978). The sheer scale of existence thus furthers perceptions of the pointlessness of individual lives. As a result, death anxiety has not receded, despite all human advances over the millennia.

To combat death anxiety, however, modern society produces a full array of diversions that take our minds off of death. At the core of all human endeavors, says Ernest Becker (1973), is the terror of death. Because all individuals instinctively fear their own annihilation, death confers a narcissistic need to preserve the individual's self-esteem in the face of the pointlessness of life. What humankind fears most is not extinction, says Scimecca (1979), but "extinction without meaning" (p. 67). According to Becker, society provides a "cultural hero system" that creates and perpetuates the myth of the significance of human life. Cultural hero systems provide channels that allow the individual to contribute to the human enterprise. All members of society can strive to be heroes through their contributions, however large or small, thereby allowing the gratification of narcissistic impulses and the maintenance of self-esteem. Society thus creates the illusion of the significance of life by creating heroic projects that galvanize members of the society. If the illusion is lost, despair is the result (Scimecca 1979). Heroic projects focus our attention and give life meaning and purpose.

"Culture opposes nature and transcends it," says Becker (1973:159). Transcendence is thus not an otherworldly phenomenon. Transcendence occurs with each heroic human effort to counter the devastating effects that nature has on humanity. Society itself is a transcendent being, constructed by the combined heroic efforts of all the individual humans who make up society. Culture thus offers immortality. Culture offers an opportunity to preserve the memory and works of the individual within the context of the heroic project that is society itself. Culture overcomes the fear of annihilation, the fear of being forgotten. Culture preserves an individual's productions and thus allows the individual to achieve a form of "symbolic immortality" (Lifton 1979:23).

Following Becker's ideas, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2000) argue in their "terror management theory" that the awareness of mortality produces a potentially paralyzing terror in humans. We require cultural worldviews that mediate this terror by instilling in individuals the idea that they are valuable members of particular communities. Humans thus create symbolic systems that are shared among all members of given communities in

order to preserve self-esteem mutually in the face of the underlying terror of death. This idea offers the needed boost to self-esteem that humans need to overcome the paralyzing fear of death. Cultural worldviews thus produce the means for death transcendence, and so are critical for helping humans to overcome the fear of death. Solomon et al. also assert that when societies are exposed to terror or the direct threat of annihilation, they embrace their worldviews even more strongly, often to the derogation of opposing worldviews. This derogation of other worldviews is necessary because alternate conceptions of reality dispute their own and challenge the underlying sense of self-esteem that their worldview is designed to protect.

Advanced societies provide a wide array of institutional structures that construct appropriate sets of goals and symbolic systems to imbue human actions with meaning and purpose (Hollach and Hockey 2001). Little time is thus left for any void through which the repressed fear of death may resurface. Modern society perpetuates elevated ideals and places noble projects before humanity, keeping members ever striving toward reform for the betterment of humankind. Eradicating diseases, feeding the hungry, sheltering the poor, controlling the population, managing resources, protecting the environment, exploring inner and outer space, developing human potential through sports, art, and entertainment—all of these projects become endowed with significance that makes those who participate in them heroes and role models for generations to come.

The institutions through which meanings are transmitted are continually subjected to critical inquiry against the objective standard of whether or not the institution extends or better human lives. Even religion is rationalized and reconciled with philosophy and science at its highest levels and participates in rather than presides over the human project. A delicate balance is struck. Religion allows continued belief in an afterlife, but its approach is more pragmatic and this-world oriented than in the past; "love thy neighbor" translates into proactively building community, doing good, and abstaining from harming fellow human beings as the path to everlasting life. The goal of building a society that best assures that members live the longest and healthiest earthly lives possible is thus reconciled with the goal of assuring entry into a rewarding afterlife.

### CORRELATES OF THE DEATH FEAR

Studies suggest that the fear of death varies even within modern cultures. Social institutions can manipulate fears about death. The fear of death has thus been found to correlate with religious affiliation, religiosity, and exposure to death education, although in each case, the correlates are complicated by the multidimensional nature of the death anxiety. Hoelter and Epley (1979), for example, found that religiosity serves to reduce certain fears about death, such as fear of the unknown, while heightening others, such as fear of being destroyed, fear for significant others, fear of



the dead, and fear for the body after death. Patrick (1979) reports that Christian religions are more effective at reducing death anxiety than is Buddhism. Studies of the relationship between death anxiety and death education have yielded mixed results. For example, Davis-Berman (1998–99) found that among a sample of college students, courses on death education served to decrease the fear of death, whereas other studies have shown mixed effects of death education on death anxiety (Knight and Elfenbein 1993; Maglio and Robinson 1994).

The fear of death has also been found to vary with sex and age (Drolet 1990; Florian and Snowden 1989). Firth-Cozens and Field (1991) found that women tend to have a greater fear of death than men. Drolet (1990) suggests that older adults are better at establishing a sense of symbolic immortality than are young adults and thus may experience less death anxiety than the young. On the other hand, Roth (1978) notes that the fear of death is “widely prevalent among old people” (p. 554), although deeply repressed, and may be due to such factors as low self-esteem and the low value that modern society attaches to the aged. Cicirelli (2002) suggests that the fear of death among the aged is variable and may be related to weak religiosity, lack of social support, and low self-esteem.

The degree of advancement of a society may determine how far that society can remove the actual experience of death from the day-to-day existence of individuals. The further death can be removed from common experience, the more of an abstraction it becomes. The abstract nature of death makes the fear of it even more subject to social manipulation. Modern societies have created a variety of institutional mechanisms for removing the actual experience of death from everyday life. In addition to traditional mechanisms (such as religion), hospices, drugs, death education, psychotherapy, philosophical belief systems, and other secular mechanisms all serve to remove, sanitize, and ease the pain of the transition from life to death. It thus becomes ever easier for societal members not to fear such an abstraction.

When the veils over death that society has provided are suddenly stripped away, however, scholars have an opportunity to assess the most basic human response to death. Research findings suggest that a lingering fear of death is one of the most consistent outcomes of traumatic encounters with death (Solomon et al. 2000). Death fears have been linked to individuals’ experiences of traumatic events such as air disasters and the experience of trauma surrounding the deaths of loved ones. Chung, Chung, and Easthope (2000) found, for example, that residents of a town in England near which an airliner crashed exhibited higher death anxiety than did members of a control group. Florian and Mikulincer (1993) found the fear of death to be positively related to the loss of significant others. Even exposure to death through the media has been found to increase death fears (King and Hayslip 2001–2). In each of the cases cited above, the sense of security that society had provided between death and the individual was suddenly

stripped away, and the encounter with death became direct and immediate.

One of the starkest examples of the relationship between the fear of death and trauma is provided by the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001. In that instant, all Americans simultaneously came face-to-face with death. A terror of death suddenly resurfaced from beneath the comfortable, security-generating symbolic universe that had served to repress that fear. The anthrax attacks soon after September 11 produced the same response of fear, as does the general threat of nuclear annihilation. The general response to these threats seems to suggest that fear is a natural response to the threat of death, and that direct confrontation with the possibility of death can erode the symbolic buffers that cultures erect between individuals and death.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence suggests that human progress is indeed ultimately driven by the fear of death. Death, in all its complexity, finality, and absurdity, its challenge to existence, its ugliness, pain, and isolation, and its power to deprive, continues to hold sway over humankind. The anthropological record suggests that early human societies experienced death as children might—as a faceless, nameless horror that sought to deprive them of the few pleasures offered by existence. There were understandably mixed reactions to death—accept its lordship, make excuses for it, create a more powerful friend to humankind and enemy to death, avoid it, embrace it, or deny its finality. Experience with the world over time suggested a variety of means for incorporating the unwanted and yet ever-present guest into the human household. The history of humankind represents the sum total of the various experiments that have evolved to minimize the effects of death’s constant presence in the midst of human society.

Death has been inextricably linked to the death of the body and the body’s fallibilities—its susceptibility to disease, injury, and death. Humans have sought to blame themselves for the body’s weaknesses and have established practices aimed at strengthening the body, through morality, diet, exercise, medicine, magic, and supplications to the gods. The spirit or soul, on the other hand, has come to be conceptualized in most cultures as the seat of reason, hope, truth, and immortality. Humans have dichotomized themselves and convinced themselves that if only they could be free of the body, then they could be truly free. Yet most still fear the prospect of a bodiless existence, so much so that many religions offer a new body on the other side of death.

One of the most basic responses to death in all human societies has therefore been to place restrictions on the fulfillment of bodily desires. Yet excessive self-denial of the body by an overreaching conscience can be equally harmful to the being. Societies can lean toward either too little discipline and too much self-indulgence or too many restrictions on human desire and creativity. Both paths

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can lead to the very death whose avoidance is sought. The theme of psychoanalysis for individuals and for societies should therefore be the same—to prevent individuals or societies from being overwhelmed by either the desires of the body or the strictures of conscience and law. The goal is to develop a healthy balance of the two forces, so the personality of the individual or society can live life with maximum success, which means maximum happiness and pleasure and minimum pain and suffering. It is this ideal that is embodied in the modern human project.

Culture is the primary vehicle through which passion and reason are mediated, and by which the pangs of death are lessened. Culture ennobles efforts at self-restraint and turns into heroes those who deny the self and face the possibility of self-annihilation for a larger cause. Through culture, the insulting banality that death confers on life is transformed through symbolism into a noble quest for being, a heroic struggle against the forces of evil. Funerals, birth ceremonies, remembrances of the dead, memorials, holy days, and other rituals, as well as art, literature, and drama, all seek to clothe the stark, absurd events of life and death within a system that gives human history meaning and purpose. Cultural productions order seemingly random and meaningless events into coherent narratives whose ultimate goal is to grant dignity to humans in the face of the utter disregard that nature seems to have for life. In sum, although death's sovereignty will persist for some time to come, the human spirit will forever struggle to deprive it of its central place in human existence.

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Culture (social science). Death and Dying. Is the fear of death a cultural universal? Or do people in some cultures have no fear of death? Update Cancel. Question merged. This question is read-only because it has been merged with Is Death the biggest fear of living being or more particularly humans or is there something else to be more feared than Death? Undo Merge. View Stats and Log. I think we all spend some time pondering death, no matter who you are or what color. I am not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of dying in a certain way, I don't want to drown, or suffocate, if I were to be murdered I would prefer a gunshot to the head. That's if I don't die peacefully in my sleep. Now, my husband is horrified of dying in his sleep. Culture of fear (or climate of fear) is the concept that people may incite fear in the general public to achieve political or workplace goals through emotional bias; it was developed as a sociological framework by Frank Furedi and has been more recently popularized by the American sociologist Barry Glassner. Nazi leader Hermann Göring explains how people can be made fearful and to support a war they otherwise would oppose:

