

Review:

*Glenys Caswell*

**Asa Kasher (Ed.) (2009). *Dying, Assisted Death and Mourning*.**  
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**Abstract:** Death research is a growing field, producing an increasing number of conferences and publications, of which this volume is one. *Dying, Assisted Death and Mourning* is a book which aims to enhance understandings of the human experience of death. Its approach to this task is to present nine chapters discussing different aspects of death and dying, written by authors from different disciplines who work in different countries. A key question to be asked of all such texts is whether the book adds to our understanding of issues concerned with death and dying, and this review is written from a perspective which addresses this question.

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### **1. Introduction**

Death is a universal, yet it has often been claimed by social scientists that it is a taboo subject for contemporary western societies, whose members are said to be in denial about death and its inevitability (WALTER, 1991). The extent and nature of the taboo, however, are subject to question, and in recent years there has been a plethora of work on the topic of death, dying, disposal and bereavement. Publications chart the experiences of individuals who are dying, particularly from cancer (DIAMOND, 1998; PICARDIE, 1998) or those who have been bereaved (SANDERSON, 2002). There are texts to help in the planning of a funeral (MORRELL & SMITH, 2006) and there are books which introduce the reader to the reflections of individuals upon the topic of death (TERKEL, 2001). The publications listed here give only a flavour of the wide variety of books available today to the general reader who wishes to pursue the topic of death and the academic world is also well represented in discussions on the issue. [1]

The field of academic research and writing concerned with death is a varied and growing one and what distinguishes the academic from the general publication is the effort to go beyond the individual experience and make use of empirical

research and theory to improve understanding of the human experience of death. Death studies are the preserve of no one discipline, but of many including the arts and humanities, social sciences, and medicine, while practitioners working in differing fields, such as the provision of care for the terminally ill or in the funeral industry, also have a valuable input to make. [2]

This book, *Dying, Assisted Death and Mourning*, is the third in a series focusing on dying and death. As a series the books are developed from international conferences and research projects run by [Inter-Disciplinary.Net](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net), and these are explicitly intended to enhance understandings of the human experience of dying and death. A key issue, therefore, when reading this volume, is to ask oneself whether the chapters included in it do add something to our understanding of death. Of course, no single volume of 170 pages can address all aspects of the experiences of death and dying, nor include all disciplines. However, it is reasonable to enquire whether the volume is truly inter-disciplinary, and what efforts have been made to cover a broad range of topics. [3]

The authors in this volume represent a cross-section of disciplines and practitioners involved in the study and exploration of death. This results in an eclectic collection of chapters, covering topics as diverse as German opera, euthanasia in companion animals, bereavement counselling and roadside memorials in Ireland. One potential difficulty in such a broad-based book is that of making it accessible to all readers. The chapter on German opera, for example, contains helpful translations of the German libretti, but the inclusion of excerpts from the musical score requires knowledge of music that I do not possess. As a sociologist I am used to borrowing from other disciplines, and it is fascinating and enlightening to read outside the confines of one's own discipline and to explore the field of one's own research topic more widely. [4]

## **2. Theory, Practice, Experience**

### **2.1 Theory**

In the introduction the editor, Asa KASHER, explains how the text is intended to present both personal experience and the fruits of scholarly research in order to enhance understanding of personal experiences related to death and dying. The presentation of personal experience may be fascinating, as in the general volumes discussed above, but there is a limit to how far such texts alone can take us; we need theory to lift the personal experience to another level of understanding. Theory can exist at different levels, from a general level at which it is intended to provide explanations and understandings which are applicable to entire social groups, through middle-range theories developed to explain some specific phenomenon, to grounded theory which is developed from empirical data and is based in people's experiences and understandings (LAYDER, 1998). [5]

Apart from a philosophical chapter (ONOF), most of the theory represented in this book takes either a middle-range or grounded perspective. ONOF, on the other hand, takes a general level theoretical approach, and develops an argument

based on the work of philosophers such as LUCRETIUS, WILLIAMS and HEIDEGGER, rather than an experiential or practical perspective. ONOF argues that death is an essential aspect of self-understanding, and that without mortality it would be impossible to live a meaningful life. [6]

Roadside crosses and other spontaneous memorials to individuals have been found in many parts of the world (EVERETT, 2002), and a chapter in this book discusses the results of an empirical study of memorials found beside one road in Ireland (MACCONVILLE & MCQUILLAN). While being descriptive to an extent, providing both written and visual pictures of such memorials, the writers also endeavour to place their empirical findings within a middle-range theoretical framework, suggesting that the practice reflects "a cultural emphasis of remembrance of the dead" (MACCONVILLE & MCQUILLAN, p.135). [7]

## 2.2 Practice

Several chapters are based upon practice, the most unusual being one that discusses the interim results of a project exploring the experiences of humans whose companion animal is subjected to euthanasia (DAWSON & CAMPBELL). Euthanasia of an animal is the subject of a decision made by the animals' guardians, as they are called in this chapter, in a way that is not possible when it comes to the decision to end the life of a human being. Humans are usually passive participants in the process of dying, both their own and others' dying, with their roles in others' deaths limited to practices such as supporting the dying and alleviating symptoms of illness that cause suffering. However, this is not always the case, and sometimes individuals are active in the pursuit of their own deaths, and sometimes individuals are active in procuring the deaths of others, whether through war, homicide, assisting suicide or euthanasia. [8]

Euthanasia is a practice by which one individual ends the life of another. Not surprisingly, it is controversial and illegal in many countries, although illegality, of course, does not mean that it does not happen (SINGER, 1994). One country where euthanasia is legal is Belgium, and the study described by De BAL, de CASTERLE and GASTMANS describes the pilot of a research project intended to explore the experiences of nurses in Belgium with regard to requests made to them by patients for euthanasia to be carried out. The authors take a grounded theory approach, with the intention of assisting in "the development of ethical guidelines that serve for positively orienting nurse involvement in euthanasia" (De BAL et al., 2009, p.73). [9]

Jeremy WEINSTEIN explores the stories that bereaved individuals, whose partner or parent has died in a hospice, tell. He takes a narrative approach and uses gestalt field theory to help him make sense of the stories he is told by research participants, in order to keep "at centre stage the stories of the dying and the bereaved themselves" (WEINSTEIN, p.14). This is an interesting chapter in which, the author notes, the "dominant voices are often those of health care workers" (p.16), and, of course, for readers there is the notion that perhaps the voice of the academic is also audible. [10]

One influential discourse in the arena of bereavement has been the idea that when an individual has been bereaved the goal of mourning is for them to let go of the deceased and return to their normal life putting the deceased behind them (WALTER, 1999). However, empirical studies discovered that many individuals, instead of letting go, maintained bonds with the deceased, and continued to do this over a long period of time (KLASS & GOSS, 1999). Such an approach is the topic of the chapter by Werner NELL, in which he introduces the metaphor of saying hello to the dead as a practice of counselling. Practices such as letter writing, using the imagination, and establishing rituals can be used to help a bereaved individual therapeutically, when the usual pattern of helping someone to say goodbye has failed. [11]

### **2.3 Experience**

The final two chapters of the book to be considered are the first and the last, and these are concerned with experience. The final chapter introduces readers to the art of Felix GONZALES-TORRES and its allusions to the death of his lover. This introduction takes place through the eyes and experience of the author, Emily HAGENMAIER, and she proposes that the art offers "a way of addressing loss that is hopeful instead of destructive, communal rather than privatized, and fluid instead of stagnant" (p.157). It is not HAGENMAIER's fault that I am unable to respond to the photos of the artworks she describes, and thus cannot appreciate them as ways "of addressing loss". The first chapter in the book is written by a poet, and reflects on her experiences as a hospice nurse during the 1990s in Texas, when she worked with terminally ill outpatients in their own homes. She feels, she writes, that "[w]e have an obligation to document our imperfect worlds as we live in them and see them" (MAHONEY, p.12). She describes the death of one patient, who died to the sound of a singer giving an open-air benefit concert in the park across the road from her home. When the nurse/poet heard the song later she "felt Evelyn again" (p.9). [12]

### **3. Understanding the Human Experience of Death and Dying**

The voice of the researcher and author is difficult to keep out of a volume such as this. The academic studying the social practices that surround death is not immune to bereavement, nor to the prospect of someone they care about enduring a lengthy death, nor even to the spectre of their own mortality. Indeed, if we accept what KASHER suggests in his introduction, this experience on the part of authors enriches their work. In a field of research such as death and dying, the strands of experience, practice and theory inevitably intertwine, and the chapters in this volume make a valiant effort to untangle those threads. [13]

The book takes forward our understanding of issues concerned with the process of dying, euthanasia and mourning, with contributions from seven different countries and spanning the disciplines of medicine, sociology, philosophy, English and creative writing, musicology, ethics and social welfare. The papers are loosely grouped into themed sections, although the connections between them are somewhat tenuous, reflecting the state of ongoing research in the field. As

with any field of academic endeavour, individuals frequently pursue their own interests, and collaborative working does not happen as much as might, perhaps, be desirable. What a collection like *Dying, Assisted Death and Mourning* does, however, is to bring those different interests together, and makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing project of learning to understand human responses to death. [14]

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## Author

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