



Making sense of “the inevitable”

Mary Ann G. Cutter (ed): *Death: a reader*. University of Notre Dame Press, Bloomington, 2019, 314 pp, \$29 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-268-10053-7

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Published online: 8 April 2020
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Mary Ann Cutter, professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, has edited an extraordinarily useful and comprehensive anthology for anyone seeking a thanatology “reader.” This volume’s usefulness might be most keenly noted in its utility as a pedagogical resource for undergraduate university faculty who teach death survey courses. But its usefulness potentially extends to the inquisitive general reader looking for a starting point to better understand the foundational ideas undergirding the experiences of dying and bereavement, a foundation that is sorely needed in contemporary Western cultures that so frequently underappreciate the experiences of loss. Rarely does one find in a single location an anthology that is so complete.

Organized into four distinct sections, the editor has assembled a collection of unusual depth and breadth. Early in the book, Cutter lays out in chronological order the more than eighty texts chosen for inclusion. Selections range from the Australian dreamtime stories dated to 8000 BCE to several passages about end-of-life ethics published in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Moreover, the selections represent the diverse spiritual perspectives of the Hebrew Bible, Christian New Testament, Bhagavad Gita, and Qur’an as well as multiple philosophers including Plato, Descartes, Heidegger, Kant, and Hume. The geographical and sociocultural diversity of these texts is a sight to behold: literally every inhabited continent and region is included, and the editor pays special attention to those isolated people groups who would generally be out of reach for most undergraduate students. Cutter covers a vast terrain in fewer than 300 pages.

Cutter begins where many of us do in our survey courses: with a reasoned explanation of why we think about death and a thorough introduction to some of the varied ways people have made sense of it throughout the history of humankind. In a section that is particularly illustrative of the broad selection of Cutter’s

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texts, readers encounter the interplay of Aristotle's understanding of death as "loss of heat" interposed with Descartes's "lack of movement" perspective and the definition of death proposed by the 1981 (US) President's Commission as codified in the Uniform Determination of Death Act.

The volume continues in logical sequence from this focus on death as physical disintegration to a focus on death as psychological disintegration. Then, after establishing the human view of death as disintegration, the volume "reconstructs" death in several of its most notable meaning-making contexts: reincarnation, resurrection, medical immortality, and digital immortality. For those of us who teach twentysomethings, this notion of digital immortality will likely prove to be especially engaging to our students. I was especially gratified to see the work of my friends and colleagues Carla Sofka, Illene Cupit, and Kathy Gilbert included; I have heard them present their ideas on "thanatechnology" at the conferences of the Association for Death Education and Counseling and their work is as fine as it gets in this arena. Cutter has clearly chosen her texts from some of the field's leading voices.

Cutter proceeds in the volume's second part to entertain death's "value" by examining, in turn, the philosophical constructs regarding whether death is bad, good, or something altogether different. Included in this section are a dozen passages examining traditions as diverse as East African folktales about death's origin and meaning and Japanese Shinto perspectives. A passage from the ancient text *Phaedo* introduces students to the possibility that death can be good through Plato's description of the death of Socrates and the summation that death marks "the release of the soul from the chains of the body" (p. 49). Then, in turn, Cutter's choice of texts helps readers wrestle with the possibilities (or not) of fear in death and the question of how—and even if—humans grieve death-related losses.

The third part of the book takes up the multifaceted contemporary issue of hastened death by examining three core issues in their separate chapters: suicide, refusal of treatment, and physician-assisted death. Again, each of the chapters presents diverse perspectives, ranging in the case of the chapter on suicide from the ancient text of Seneca, to the work of David Hume, to the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church.

In a brief final section, Cutter prompts the reader to return to a reflection question posed at the end of chapter 1: "What is death?" (p. 253). Inviting reflection on the benefits of examining matters of life and death, three brief passages encourage readers to consider that death might provide an opportunity to give thought to how one lives, to ruminate on the meaning of life, and to contemplate a "lesson" about what it means to lead a "good life" (p. 260). With a clear nod to the lack of philosophical training many readers of this survey might possess, Cutter includes a handy four-page glossary of philosophical terms at the end of the book.

Throughout *Death: A Reader*, Cutter takes great care to incorporate questions and exercises for reflection. When asking readers to contemplate their own funeral or memorial service or to write out their living will, Cutter encourages rigorous self-reflection; along with the readings themselves, these activities provide rich content for class discussions about the meaning of the texts and their application to a well-examined life. I also appreciate the publisher's simple provision for differentiating

the texts themselves from the introductory comments by setting them in two distinct typefaces.

Surveys, by their very nature, often display materials without significant editorial commentary. Because materials are presented as though they are of equal value, perspectives could be inadvertently assumed to rest on a high degree of evidence rather than merely on oft-repeated opinion. Such is the case with Cutter’s reference to the oft-repeated but never empirically verified five-stage model of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. As a clinical scholar and social science researcher in the field, this representation is my only significant complaint about the volume.

The way I teach Kübler-Ross to my own undergraduates is through an appreciation of the theory as an historical artifact rather than as a serious scholarly supported model that effectively and accurately describes the grief process—a point, by the way, that was completely beyond the scope of her original work with dying patients anyway. The fact that so many nursing and medical texts still treat Kübler-Ross’s five stages with admiration is a relic of adherence to a memorable, culturally ingrained pattern, rather than a testament to serious appraisal of the evidence. It is an error that can be forgiven insofar as most textbook authors do not profess to be experts on grief theory or practice. However, there are far better models of the bereavement process that are widely accepted by clinicians and scholars in the bereavement field, and I would appreciate the consideration of supplementing this text with something more in keeping with current thinking in a subsequent volume.

Curating a “reader” that proposes to survey more than 10,000 years of writing and thinking on death is a Herculean task by any measure. In her introduction, Cutter describes this task as providing an overview of texts in the field that represent the historical and cultural diversity of the planet we share. This compendium hits the mark better than any anthology of its type I have seen.

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