Death

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The variety of ways in which death has been handled in human societies has been a source of much scholarly fascination. In this brief overview, anthropological approaches to the study of death are identified and explained. The emphasis is on death as a social event rather than the mere cessation of bodily functions. The piece describes classical anthropological approaches to death rituals and specifically as these are found in the work of Robert Hertz. Consideration is then given to the transformation of death and the way that mortuary practices have changed over time. In these changes can be seen the way that the lives of the dead are conceived in relation to those who are left behind. Contemporary examples of this relationship are drawn from biomedicine and the practice of organ transplantation and from instances where those killed in political violence are exhumed. The piece ends with a brief reflection on the future of the afterlife.

Introduction

> *Mortal immortals, immortal mortals,*
>
> *Living each other's death and dying each other's life.*

Fragment 46, Heraclitus (2001)

We are all going to die! In physiological terms the deaths that all will die will be broadly similar, in the sense that either suddenly and unexpectedly or maybe over a long period of time, the systems that keep us active and sentient will cease to function. However, throughout the world, people make important distinctions between a body that has expired and a dead person; that is, as someone who is connected to others through complex social relations which bring into question any simple notion of a finite ending. Complex and varied imaginaries can carry the dead person beyond any simple cessation of bodily functions. In other words, there is no easy way of separating the facts of death from those of life; they come all-of-a-piece.[1]

Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic thinker, captured the conundrum well in the famous aphorism with which this piece begins: the living and the dead are never far apart. This entanglement led the philosopher Hans Jonas to characterise death as an archetypal human problem (Jonas 2001: 8). From the earliest glimmerings of sentience and self-reflection, evident in what he refers to as 'panvitalism',[2] humans had also to make sense

of the plain facts of senescence. Where did the person go? Western philosophical approaches to this question have tended to treat death as an abstract totality. As Buckingham argues, death is the point at which philosophers are most likely to think outside of time and history (Buckingham 2013: 21). Heidegger, for example, doesn't see the person as going anywhere. Death is final and non-relational and the challenge is to confront this truth in the quest for existential authenticity (Heidegger 1962). Being in the world (*Dasein*) is only fully realised when death and finitude are faced. In contrast, the question 'where did the person go' has been answered in different ways across time and according to different ways of life. It is this variation that anthropologists studying death and mortuary practices have tried to capture and make sense of. Anthropological interest is thus not so much in the abstract death that all will die but in the socially and metaphysically distinct circumstances in which each death actually occurs. In other words, death is not merely a biological event but is, as we will go on to see, a profoundly social, cultural, and political one.

People might experience their own deaths up to a point. There might be idioms in which to contemplate death and compelling reasons for doing so. For example, Buddhists in Sri Lanka are encouraged to cultivate 'mindfulness of death' (*maranasañña*) which, as Langer (2007: 53) suggests, is aimed at 'the final liberation' and disengagement from society. In a very different setting, Irvine takes us with great insight into the thoughts and feelings that people living with HIV/AIDS have as they approach death (Irvine 2016). Similarly, Das and Han question any simple symmetry between death and dying but rather seek to understand the ways in which death features as part of day to day life and, indeed, the ways in which life and death have what they refer to as an 'intimacy' (Das & Han 2016: 623). The contributors to their collection show how, even in the most dire of circumstances, people strive 'to die well' (624). However, in this brief introduction to the topic of death, the focus is not so much on the problem that death poses for the dying and the dead but rather the problem this poses for those who are left behind.

Here, attention shifts to those who are in a primary relationship with the dead – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, husbands, wives, brothers and sisters – whose responsibility it is to dispose of their dead and to manage the ending of mortal attachments and the loss and grief that this brings. It also encompasses wider family and community relationships as well as the rather more impersonal bureaucracies of the state and its responsibilities for categorising and disposing of the dead. But it is not only that significant social networks are activated by a death. A substantial literature in anthropology demonstrates how the cessation of life is a point at which distinctive, and often expert, routines are put into practice to ensure that, for the living as well as the dead, the corpse undergoes a meaningful transition to an afterlife, a re-birth, a place of memoriam. The list of ways in which bodies might be disposed of to the satisfaction of the living (and the dying) is long. It encompasses preparing the dead by washing, shaving, dressing, and ritually disposing of the corpse through burial, cremation, and other funerary rites. Encounters with ghosts, spirits, and ancestors all attest to the ways in which the dead have influence and agency in the worlds of the living.

Photographs, tombstones, heirlooms, and archives might similarly give death immanence in the midst of life. This theme is currently being carried forward in novel ways with the advent of information and communication technologies (Arnold *et al*. 2018). People the world over are, as Heraclitus put it, 'living each other's death'. Desjarlais goes so far as to argue that there is a deep-felt need to bring something into existence at the very moment that a person ceases to be (Desjarlais 2016: 654-5). Describing death and dying among the Yolmo of Nepal, he sees their responses to death as a creative act of making a new reality. Among the Yolmo, the ritual processes that accompany the death of a person set in motion a re-configuration of relations between persons, objects, and memories.[3] It is the attempt to make sense of this mixing of social relationships, ritual practices, and metaphysical beliefs as it is found in different societies that has made the study of death such an engaging and intellectually challenging field within anthropology.

Hertz: death as transformation

The study of death in anthropology is one that has a long and important pedigree. Through the study of classical mythologies, James Frazer and Johan Jakob Bachofen attempted to decipher the rituals and symbols of ancient mortuary practice. Consistent with the intellectual preoccupations of the second half of the nineteenth century, their interest was in origins, evolution, and the traces and survivals they believed they could see in the world around them. In an important turn away from the classically-oriented collages of mortuary practices that that these approaches tended to produce, Robert Hertz laid important foundations for the anthropological study of death as a distinct field (Hertz 1907, Parkin 1996). Hertz was a member of the *Année Sociologique* group working under Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and others. In keeping with Durkheim's overall project, their main achievement was to transform a predominantly theological approach to the study of religion into a fundamentally sociological one. In the case of Hertz, this entailed showing how individual feelings and sentiments evident at the death of a member of society were made sense of, and indeed shaped by, shared and durable patterns of beliefs, values, and ideas. These were Durkheim's 'collective representations'[4] and Hertz saw them as evident and consequential in the orchestration of ritual, symbol, and myth on the occasion of a death.

In an early and important exercise in comparative anthropology, Hertz analysed detailed ethnographic accounts of burial practices in Borneo and Indonesia (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 34). In these rites, known as secondary burials, the corpse is ceremonially separated from the living and kept for an 'intermediary period' in the earth or in special pots. In his attempt to understand this process, Hertz drew inspiration from the French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1873 -1957). Van Gennep had earlier succeeded in gathering a wide range of materials on rituals held to mark important transitions such as births, marriage, and deaths (Van Gennep 1960). From these he was able to extract commonalities and identify what he referred to as *schema*. He described these in an important work called *Les rites de passage* in which he showed how transitions commonly feature acts which separate and then marginalise

ritual participants before re-aggregating them back into society (Hockey 2002). In his work on death, Hertz was particularly interested in what Van Gennep had referred to as the liminal phase of *rites of passage* (Van Gennep 1960, also see Turner 1969 and Berger & Kroesen 2016). In this phase of the ritual, the corpse, the living, and the souls of the dead are in an ambiguous and dangerous relationship. The corpse rots and, over time, loses its mortal appearance and becomes an object of dread. Eventually, all that is 'wet' (flesh) becomes 'dry' (bones). In the final stages of the rite, the corpse, amidst great celebration, is moved to a more permanent place of keeping; that is, the dead are moved irreversibly from the world of the living to join the souls of the dead: they have become ancestors. As Hertz put it, the purpose of funerary rites is 'to make a material object or living being pass from this world to the next; to free or create the soul, it must be destroyed [...] As the visible object vanishes it is reconstructed in the beyond, transformed to a greater or lesser degree' (Hertz 1960: 46).

In this process of moving the dead out of the world of the living, Hertz identifies a very important *dramatis personae*. First, there is what might be thought of as a metaphysical dimension to mortuary practice overseen by those concerned with ensuring that the soul – or what it is that is believed to abide beyond death – is safely conducted to the afterlife. Second, there are those who live on and in various ways feel their loss, which introduces an important emotional dimension to Hertz's analysis. Questions of attachment and loss and how these are collectively managed are seen as a key function of the ritual process. Third, there is the corpse and its eventual interment which signifies the ultimate extinction of the social person. The essential Durkheimian point in Hertz's analysis is that society is transcendent and, whilst an individual death is often portrayed as a dangerous tear in the ordered fabric of society, it is one that its members can repair. As Hertz himself put it: 'the collective consciousness does not believe in the necessity of death, so it refuses to consider it irrevocable [...] the last word must remain with life' (1960: 78).

The influence of Durkheim is strong in Hertz's work and often leads to a problematic over-reification and -personification of society: can society really have power and agency in the way that they presume? Notwithstanding this important criticism, Hertz's work has continued to be an important stepping-off point for scholars interested in the topic of death. One reason for this sustained interest is that his work brought diverse and widely observed phenomena – mortuary rituals, fear of the dead, impurity of the corpse, and the performance of mourning – into a single analytical framework. Davies points out how focus on the fate of the corpse within this schema was a precursor of the more recent interest in materialization and embodiment in religious practice (Davies 2000). Similarly, Hertz's interest in the powerful emotions that are unleashed in bereavement, or what he referred to as 'internal partings' (Hertz 1960: 81), anticipated later interest in ritual and emotion and the relationship between inner states and outward actions. Finally, Hertz's work was also an important precursor of work which focused on themes of birth and regeneration that are commonly found in mortuary rites (for example, Bloch & Parry 1982). In many traditions, the symbolism of tombs and wombs are never far apart. Death is an ending – we are indeed all going to die –

but it is also a moment of transformation, potentiality, and beginning. The work of ritual officiants and the participants they assemble enable the dead to be resurrected and regenerated in ways that are meaningful to those that are left behind.

The transformation of death

Although originating in a tribal society in Indonesia, Hertz's work has provided a number of important and durable themes that are often referred to in the anthropological study of death. In particular, his work provides a useful framework for understanding death as the occasion for action that is both collective and transformative. Where it is less effective is in understanding the ways in which such processes change over time and how conceptualizations of death itself are transformed. In what follows I provide two examples of such transformations.

The first is taken from Piers Vitebsky's ethnographic work among the Sora, a tribal group found in the state of Orissa in the east of central India. Based on material collected in the 1970s and 80s, he produced an important monograph, *Dialogues with the dead: the discussion of mortality among the Sora of eastern India*' (1993). This work details how Sora people are brought into connection with their deceased relatives through the agency of shamans. The shamans are orchestrators of the memories of the dead (*sonum*), and by way of the 'dialogues' they initiate, the living and dead communicate over matters such as illness and its causes, the emotions triggered by attachment and loss, and how to deal with the jealousies that come with managing inheritance and property. A dominant theme of the book is that death is not the negation of life but rather a matter of its transformation and continuity, albeit with relatives who now dwell in the underworld along with all the other spirits of the dead.

Vitebsky returned to the Sora several decades later and reported on their present circumstances. In his book, *Living without the dead: loss and redemption in a jungle cosmos* (Vitebsky 2017), he describes how in the years since his original sojourn among the Sora, there had been a remarkable transformation. Young people had turned away from their traditional cosmology and the beliefs that upheld it. In response to the incentives and encouragements of evangelical Christians and fundamentalist Hindus, new routes to education, social mobility, and respectability were beckoning. Yet embrace of the new religions came at a cost. Becoming a Christian meant that there was no place for the dead in the lives of the living. After death, good people went to heaven rather an underworld from whence they could continue speaking to the living. The shamans, who had routinely put the living into contact with their recently dead relatives, were replaced with male priests whose job it was to construct and maintain a very different relationship with the afterlife. For many Sora, this silencing of the dead was a source of profound sadness and anxiety: how could they grieve without the reassurances, and indeed the wisdom, of the dead? What would it be like to die and not be spoken to by one's children? Whilst the Sora might have been gaining access to new modes of redemption and eternal life, an entire register of emotional and existential life was being erased in doing

so. Vitebsky's account highlights the deep and distressing existential rupture which opens as people shift between radically different ways of understanding death and the place of the dead in their social world.

The second examples are taken from the works of Geoffrey Gorer and David Cannadine and their accounts of how world wars in Europe changed ideas of death and the way that people perceived their relationships with the dead. In his speculations on the impact of war on public expressions of grief, Gorer suggests that extensive losses of relatives on the battlefield led to very visible expressions of grief and mourning. Most notably, widows would wear black for prescribed periods of mourning. As the body count grew on the battlefield, the visibility of 'widow's weeds' on the streets at home increased accordingly. Gorer argued that, at the time, this was perceived as bad for morale and the war effort; consequently, such public displays were discouraged by the British establishment. This, he suggested, played a key role in making death the occasion for private rather than publicly expressed grief. A similar argument was made by the historian David Cannadine writing about the aftermath of the First World War (Cannadine 1981). The level of loss across Britain (and indeed the whole of Europe) following the First World War is difficult to comprehend. Cannadine argued that such was the swell of raw grief in the aftermath of the war that accepted routines were, in a sense, overwhelmed. In Durkheim's terms, the tear in the social fabric was simply too enormous to be repaired by resorting to existing practices of memorialization. With the absence of bodies over which to mourn, this was a time in Britain when there was a significant rise in spiritualism, spiritualist churches, and the practice of holding séances in the hope of having 'dialogues' with the dead. In a way, the direction of travel was opposite to that described by Vitebsky for the Sora – whereas the Sora turned away from their dead as active in their lives, British mourners, with the help of spiritualists, actively sought them out. Crucially, the First World War not only changed a nation's relationship with death but also, for a time at least, its relationship with the dead.

Although very different, what both these examples show is that death and the kinds of contact that the living might then expect to have with the dead are subject to change over time and according to circumstance. This is particularly so where change is sudden and traumatic. Phillipe Ariès, in his monumental [history] of death in Europe, attempted to plot such changes across a longer *durée* (Ariès 1974). His evidence was drawn from a variety of historical sources regarding mortuary practices, gravestones, wills, artworks, literature, and other clues as to the social life of the dead in former times. He concludes that there has been a transition over the last 1000 years from what he calls 'tame' death to 'wild' death. Tame death is used to characterise death in pre-modern Europe. It is seen as a kind of repose and one accepted as part of the natural order, and its management by family, kin, and community was consistent with this framing of death. It was an event for which the tramlines of meaning were very clearly laid down and for which appropriate preparations could be made by the living and the dying. By contrast, the wild death of modern times is portrayed as a troubling intrusion for the living and one for which collective and shared routines are unclear. In Ariès' work, Europe becomes the arena for a particularly 'modern' kind of

death; that is, one seen as an individualised site of resistance rather than one of collective acceptance. Medical rather than spiritual interventions at the deathbed are likely to be the norm in managing this kind of death (Illich 1974, Porter 1989). To varying degrees across western societies, death had become the object of taboo. Privatised, medicalised and secularised, it was seen as sequestered away from family and kin and with no prospect of a happy meeting in an afterlife. To get to this point, Ariès makes some broad sweeps across time and space. However, what is lacking in this account of 'modern' death is an ethnographic specificity which captures how death is actually managed and just what it means for those involved. In the next section, I turn to some of the more recent anthropological work on death. I briefly explore three themes: death and contemporary biomedicine; new immortalities; and thanato-politics.

Death and contemporary biomedicine

Franklin and Lock explore the question of how, in modern medical and bio-sciences, the conundrum of life, personhood, and cessation is dealt with at cellular, bodily, and species levels (Franklin & Lock 2003). The linkage with earlier insights into the symmetry between death and regeneration remains a potent theme throughout their account. Yet, the distinctions between culture/life and nature/death that run through earlier anthropological accounts of death are held up for critical scrutiny. These analytical distinctions may no longer be quite so useful in a world where new technologies render biology an object which is not merely given but made. Novel distinctions are now made across the former binary and new fields open up to ethnographic enquiry as death becomes differently visible. Work carried out in regenerative medicine, tissue engineering, and genetic modification is a case in point. These technologies have profound implications for life and also for death, in that ideas of body, personhood, and value are increasingly inflected with those drawn from the world of technology, markets, and capital.

Margaret Lock, for example, gives an account of the emergence of the concept of 'brain death' and the increasing possibilities for a misalignment of a social death and biological one (Lock 2003). Within the biomedical world, biological death was hitherto thought of as a self-evident and clear boundary between life and death, and marked by indicators such as the cessation of pulse and respiration. However, the possibilities for technological intervention at the end of life mean that failing bodily functions can be overridden mechanically. As a result, attention has now shifted to other places in which vitality might be located, specifically: the brain, the display of neocortical activity and, by inference, the presence of consciousness (also cf. Kaufmann 2000). The idea of a 'persistent vegetative state' (PVS) *sans* sentience and intentionality but with continuing blood flow and respiration gives rise to some complex ethical and philosophical reflections. How are we to understand the relationship between life and death at a point where this fundamental binary appears to collapse? As Lock shows in an illuminating comparison between approaches to this problem in the US and Japan, the meaning of death is historically and culturally situated and deeply contested (Lock 2002). Whereas in the US, consciousness and the location of personhood have

been moved up into the brain, so to speak, in Japan, life is seen as running through every part of the body and cannot be so easily partitioned off. As a consequence, criteria that were put in place in the US and Europe to help make sense of PVS were not compatible with Japanese ideas about the locus of vitality and how legitimate organ retrieval could be distinguished from first degree murder (Lock 2002). One important consequence of this different reading of brain-death in Japan was that organ transplantation was for many years severely restricted. The inverse corollary of this reading of the unconscious-but-still-living body was that in western countries 'brain death' enabled access to a new source of large organs for transplant (Sharp 2007, 2014). Hearts, liver lobes, kidneys, lungs, and cornea are just some of the organs and tissues that are now ex-plantable from the body of a 'brain dead' person. Indeed, there is a significant and widening repertoire of ways in which the organs and tissues of one body might find use in another. If we expand the use of cadaveric tissue beyond the therapeutic, to encompass educational and research purposes, then there is now little that cannot be meaningfully recovered from a body at the point of death or shortly thereafter. Amidst shortages of organs and tissues for these secondary uses, death as closure and finality begins to give way to death as opportunity and resource. This is an important shift. It signals some profound changes in the way that death is made meaningful in a growing number of contexts.

New immortalities

Secularization has been an important theme in studies of death in contemporary societies. This is often taken to mean the stripping away of the religious trappings of death as they featured in earlier times and other places. In recent work I have argued that secularization does not make for any simple nihilism but that new kinds of meaning making emerge which are of ethnographic note, particularly when it comes to post-mortem tissue and body donation (Simpson & Douglas-Jones 2017; see also Asad 2016). Indeed, in answering the important question posed by Cannell (2010) – 'what does death look like without religion?' – the possibilities afforded by the modern imaginaries of medicine, education, and research come into view as novel vehicles for immortality. Moral and social sensibilities are tapped in donor campaigns which play on the rhetoric of the 'gift' to elicit commitments to donate (Simpson 2011). The corporeal rhetorics of such campaigns offer the public glimpses of how the living might imagine their own mortal transformation as having value and perhaps a presence beyond the finality of death (see, for example, Hallam 2017 for an account of whole body donation for medical education).

One way in which these secularised framings of death, transformation, and continuity are becoming more evident is in the growing expectation that individuals will take responsibility for their own deaths by way of pledges, donor cards, living wills, and end of life directives as these relate to tissue and whole body donation. These pre-mortem acts carry with them glimpses of post-mortem sociality and the responsibility that others will have after a person's death. Even more compelling are the ways in which transplant technologies mean that parts might 'live on' in spite of, or outside of, the body. New kinds of kinship

connections come into existence as parts of dead relatives are assimilated into the bodies of strangers (Kaufman, Russ, & Shim 2006; Sharp 2006, 2007). In one such case, the newspaper headline read 'Bride Is Walked Down Aisle by the Man Who Got Her Father's Donated Heart'.[5] As people imagine themselves living on in one another in this way, possibilities open up for how grief might be expressed and managed. In Durkheimian terms, cadaveric donation becomes once again an occasion for the repair of the social fabric which death has opened up. Relatives and friends might gain solace from their ability to transform a death in their midst into something productive, such as the saving of another's life or the anatomical training of a medical student.

Thanato-politics

Operating at a rather different scale, the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault attempted to map the changing relationship between death and the state. Central to his thesis was the emergence of biopolitics, a term he used to capture the ways in which knowledge and power translate into regimes for the management of human life and well-being. As part of this thesis, Foucault also identified how, *in extremis,* biopolitics encompasses the administration of death, or what he referred to as the 'thanato-political' (Foucault 1976). The most absolute form of thanato-politics was seen in the quest for racial hygiene perpetrated under National Socialism in the 1930s. Under a totalitarian regime, those who were deemed to threaten this project, either by reason of their ethnicity or political views, were systematically incarcerated and reduced to a state of 'bare life' (Agamben 1995). This loss of citizenship and identity was often followed by what we might think of as a 'bare' death: an unmarked and uncelebrated desecration of the person. The use of terror and violence by the state in the name security and stability did not, however, start with National Socialism in Europe and nor did it end with it).[6] The misuse of state power in relation to minorities, the marginalised, and the displaced constitutes an important theme in the anthropology of death.

One anthropological response to the use of state violence has been attempts to recover ethnographically the ways in which death is managed and given meaning by those who are left behind. Here we are dealing with what Hertz referred to as inauspicious or 'bad' deaths (Hertz 1960 [1907]). These are deaths in which survivors are often unable to carry out appropriate rituals of disposal and mourning and are left in despair at the circumstances of the loss and separation they have experienced. Understanding the specificities of what happens under the heading of thanato-politics has generated anthropological interest in topics such as searches for those who have disappeared during conflict or political violence, exhumations of the disappeared, and the use of forensic science and genetics in enabling the living to make connections with remains of the dead. Examples of recent work in this area include Francisco Ferrándiz's account of exhumations of those summarily executed by the Franco regime at the end of the Spanish civil war. In this work he documents some of the 'technical, political and legal skirmishes' that arise as the present

government confronts the skeletal remains of those exhumed from mass graves (2013: 44). In a similar vein, Isias Rojas Perez's account of relatives' search for missing victims of the counter-insurgency violence in the Highlands of Peru documents the efforts of relatives to identify and seek recognition for victims of political violence. Here the emphasis is on how remains figure in emerging narratives of memorialization and possible reconciliation (2017). Covering similar issues, Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Arely Cruz-Santiago's participatory research on 'citizen forensics' shows how the families of the disappeared in Mexico are using DNA evidence from bodily remains to challenge state versions of atrocity (2016). Verdery traces the 'the political lives of dead bodies' in Eastern Europe in a different direction. In her study of post-socialist Eastern Europe she describes how the bodies of now dead leaders, artists, and poets become part of symbolic efforts to configure state politics after communism (2000). Similarly, Heonik Kwon describes how, in post-conflict Vietnam, beliefs about the wandering souls of the war dead continue to animate contemporary culture and politics (2008). Describing responses to other kinds of 'bad' death, Sarah Green has written about how the bodies of unidentified migrants are treated by the Greek authorities on whose beaches they wash up (2012). In a similar vein, Claudia Merli and Trudi Buck have described the different treatment according to nationality of bodies identified in the aftermath of the tsunami which hit Thailand in 2005 (2015). In each of these ethnographies, the imperatives of grief, memorialization, and immortalization are seen to work strongly to prevent a 'bad' death becoming a 'bare' death.

Afterword/afterlife

In this brief excursion into the anthropology of death, two powerfully recurrent themes stand out. The first is that the ways humans make sense of death are always deeply entangled with the question of how they live. The second is that the work of the creative imagination works to transform death into a celebratory assertion of continuities of one kind or another. Such continuities are often conceived through the imagery of rebirth, regeneration, and reincarnation. These are powerful planks on which the experience and sense-making of death have been built. But what if these planks were removed? What if the endless circularity that Heraclitus' aphorism conveyed at the outset was catastrophically ruptured? Scheffler, in an important essay entitled 'Death and the afterlife' (2013) asks just such a question. He does this not from any metaphysical standpoint but from the very obvious and deep-rooted idea that as humans we live with the idea of a future that extends beyond our own mortal span. When I die, I assume that the species will not die with me. There will be others that outlive me, and yet others that will follow after them. These future people will in turn become ancestors. Scheffler, however, asks what life would be like if this assumption did not hold and we knew this to be the case. Let's say that, in these times of anthropocenic anxiety, our failure to manage the environment upon which we depend means that we come to know definitively that there would be no one to follow. What would happen to ideas of life and death if we, as humans, had to confront the imminent extinction of our species? Anomie or a frantic affirmation of people and things that we value? A dystopian fragmentation of social and cultural orders or a celebratory assertion of a deeply human

sociality? One would hope that we are never in a position to see this philosopher's thought experiment concluded. Rather, we should perhaps see it as but another demonstration of how much we can learn about life from our reflections upon death and the deep call to compassion that lies at the heart of Heraclitus's aphorism.

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Note on contributor

Bob Simpson is a professor of Anthropology at Durham University. He has written widely on the anthropology of bioethics, biomedicine, and biotechnologies. His current research interests centre on tissue economies and moralities as these relate to organs, gametes, and embryos. One of the main themes he works on is the procurement and use of cadaveric tissue. As well as numerous publications on this topic he also he convenes the New Immortalities network which brings together scholars interested in this topic. His work has also explored the encounter between challenging technological developments and local systems of values and beliefs in South Asia. His forthcoming monograph (co-authored with Salla Sariola) is *Research as development: clinical trials, collaboration and bioethics in Sri Lanka* (Cornell University Press).

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[1] This raises an interesting problem: the word 'death' refers to something out there that there is a deep compulsion to name, but in so doing it is deeply and inevitably inflected by each person's own beliefs and values. It is the kind of word that, following Derrida, we should place 'under erasure'. We ought really therefore not to write ofdeath, but of ~~death~~. Were I to use this convention, the erasure would serve to indicate that whilst the term is not quite up to the job we are expecting it to do, it is the best we have.

[2] The term 'panvitalism' refers to an elementary belief that everything in the world is alive and possessed of a life force.

[3] Desjarlais lists the objectives of Yolmo mortuary practices as follows: to make things more or less concrete or virtual; to alter or fashion the appearances of the world; to shape or change the consciousness of someone or something; to sense or perceive the world in a particular way; to shape memories; to change the form of someone or something; to teach someone something significant or lasting; to create relations between forces in the world; to alter the ways in which relations take form or proceed; to bring forth something previously dormant or hidden or germinating; to play with the forms and formations of life; to unmake something: to dissolve something or take it apart (Desjarlais 2016: 654-5).

[4] The term 'collective representations' features in Durkheim's theories of religion and describes specifically how beliefs and values come to have power in society. Essential to his definition of collective representations was the fact they are external to the individual and operate autonomously and collectively.

[5]   (a v a i l a b l e
o n -
line: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/fashion/weddings/bride-is-walked-down-aisle-by-the-man-who-got-her-fathers-donated-heart.html)

[6] The idea of thanato-politics has been refined in a number ways. For example, Mbembe has developed the idea of necropolitics and the systematic and state legitimated use of lethal violence in African settings (2003). Similarly, Rojas Perez has identified what she refers to as necro-governmentality in an exploration of the way the Peruvian state has managed political disappearances (2017).