Introduction

Through the ages death, mortality, and dying have been the official subjects of religions great and small. Almost by definition, death was then a blank spot on the map of human identities.

In ancient and traditional times, the good death, usually in battle, was a semiotic limit on mortality as the eraser of individual human worth. Heroes, knights, and a few heroines might die, such as Beowulf or Gilgamesh, in a cosmic struggle with the evil ones, thus to be remembered forever in an accretion of fictions that over centuries would attach to whatever kernel of fact remained in the cumulated legends that in time became the truth of the matter. A myth exceeds a legend, as a symbol outruns a sign, by virtue of being elevated to a transcendental status beyond the logic and proofs and that came to certify alleged facts as true accounts of some reality. Yet, even with all the powers of myth and legend, we know from the close historical record that from prehistorical times down to the modern death and dying, as deep considerations of the meaning of human life, have undergone a good number of transformations. Perhaps none were more perplexing that those that arose, roughly in the middle centuries of the modern age, from Hobbes and Descartes through Kant and Hegel; then William James and Freud brought down to the present time, nearly simultaneously, and anti-religious skepticism that has waxed and waned, nearly along the same aberrant curve as the concept of self-identity has slowly, but incompletely, wrenched itself away from the religious and cultural myths of the eternal soul.

Historical and intellectual development

History of changes in attitudes toward death in the absence of an identity concept

Attitudes toward death changed, quite naturally with changes in human interactions with their surrounds – both natural and social. This almost obvious fact is striking in inverse proportion to the small number of comprehensive histories of the death and dying. One important exception is Allan Kellehear’s A Social History of Dying (2007) with its focus on historical and
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archeological material and sources that provide a reliable road through the quite different and changing stages of human experience. In Kellehear’s first stage in the social history of death and dying – the Stone Age – he speculates that death must have been an “otherworldly journey.” Archaeological findings indicate that the burial practices in the early prehistory of human society were based on religious beliefs about the afterlife (Kellehear 2007: 35). Dying was a displaced experience, shifted into an afterlife and out of the individual’s control. This of course is a bit unremarkable when considering, as Kellehear does, that the earliest human communities were organized in the unpredictable world of the hunter and gatherer for whom death came suddenly and unexpectedly. Under these severe nomadic conditions, with all of the risks attended to changing sources of food not to mention predators, there was little opportunity, or even one might say “reason,” to reflect on mortality. Death was common – so common that it would have been uncommon for social groups at this stage to engage in anything like a systematic or even narrative preparation for death. Dealing with death was not, therefore, part of the interior aspects of individuals (if we can even speak of the human “individual” at this early evolutionary stage). Instead, death, dealing with death, was the work of the group and thus a dispersed element in the cultural background of group identity (if again, we can speak of “identity” at this stage). Collectively, death was a recognizable even familiar aspect of social life and one that in a sense was accounted for in a group’s understanding of itself but not an experience that could be anticipated (ibid.: 25ff).

Kellehear’s second stage in the social history of death and dying is, quite naturally, the period of settlement and early agricultural economies – which he labels the Pastoral Age. In part due to the somewhat great density of the settled populations as well as their sharper demarcations from one another, the experience of death increasingly came in the form of infectious diseases, famines, and warfare. Death became more predictable and, in this sense, Kellehear suggests one finds the traces of what he calls a “participating self” in respect to human mortality. Then emerged the outlines of the social concept of a Good Death whereby the dying could engage in ritualized and narratives preparations for death in cooperation with the family and community. The otherworldly journey starts in this life or this world and dying became “a living thing in this world” (ibid.: 86). With the Good Death, Kellehear defines a further development of a new awareness of dying which gave the dying person some control but also involved the entire community. Of course the flipside of this development is the Bad Death, which hits unawares and leaves no change to make any preparation.

Another important resource for the social history of the social understanding of death is Philippe Ariès’s now classic works Western Attitudes Toward Death (1974) and The Hour of Our Death (1983). In the latter, he examines the history of burial practices and identifies among settled cultures the first signs of a shift from the anonymity of a person to, in his words, a “desire to be oneself” or “the discovery of the individual, the discovery, at the hour of our death, of one’s own identity, one’s personal biography, in this world as in the next” (Aries 1983: 293). In these times, roughly from Kellehear’s Pastoral Age (in the West the Middle Ages) down to the earlier formations of the premodern village (again predominantly in the West), the immortal soul came to be the centre of what in latter times came to be known as the personality or the individuality itself. The soul was understood to be safe from harm after the demise of the mortal body – and this as the faculty wherein is located the capacity for a self-conscious notion of the moral worth of the mortal individual. Here, as Ariès put it, death was tamed and it became normal to speak of the anticipation of mortality. The tame death was, in effect, an accompaniment to a religious belief in a peaceful and subdued afterlife – still, to be sure, a deeply religious notion, but (and especially in the West where the major religions were monotheistic) a notion that contained already the kernels of the soul as the essential interior feature of the individual;
hence, centuries later, as we will see, from the taming of the dead soul would come the modern idea of self-identity.

Through discovery of the own death, a tame death, there arose the elemental secrets of individuality (Aries 1974: 51). Beginning with the eighteenth century, death had a new emphasis – the death of the other fused with Romantic melancholy to make death admirable in its beauty (ibid.: 68). Mourning, thus, became an act of exaggeration and the death of the other was more feared than one’s own death (ibid.: 68). This reluctance to accept the death of a loved one formed the basis of a cultic veneration of the dead. Criticism toward the churches, which seem to fail in caring for the souls of those who have died, arose and this in turn slowly gave way to a new belief system and a merely private handling of death. By cultivating the memory of a loved one, a new form of immortality strategy emerged that was no longer anchored in religious belief in some sort of afterlife. Due to the intolerance of another’s death, friends and relatives had no longer the courage to tell the truth to a terminally ill person. This new attitude soon led to another development, a major characteristic of modernity. In Aries words:

One must avoid – no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society’s sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person – the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so.

(ibid.: 87)

Hence, the tensions between medieval and early modern attitudes toward death clashed. In this fray the hidden seeds of the modern idea of the individual could be found – thus, in turn, of identity as related simultaneously to self-understanding and, in effect, the death of the self. Of course, it would be some time before the modern idea of self-identity would surface. These advances were, to be sure, accompaniments of the social changes of the later medieval period.

Early forms of urban development in the Late Middle Ages when the beginnings of global and region trade required larger economic conglomerations and destinations – roughly, the beginnings of the Age of the City – gave rise to the middle classes. The mercantile classes were, in effect, the occasion of the gentrification of the Good Death. The attitude toward death as a natural event in life was replaced with more anxiety and fear of death. The loss of one’s dignity in a slow process of painful dying was at the center of the urban middle-class anxiety. In Kellehear’s words:

Dying, from the perspective of the anxious middle classes, could no longer be viewed as “good” if the severity of suffering took every dignity from one before the end, if one lost some of the most important values integral to one’s identity: personal control, the ability to think and choose, even to arrange one’s affairs with a clear mind.

(Kellehear 2007: 145)

The Good Death was replaced with a “Well-managed Death” in which professions such as official authorities and lawyers, as well as clergy, played a major role. As the city grew into its more complex modern forms, notably in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, once tight-knit communities and personal relationships shifted to more professional and reserved interactions. This of course is part and parcel with all of the familiar dichotomies of the emergence of modern life – from rural to urban, from traditional to rational, from mechanical to organic solidarity, from feudalism to capitalism, and so forth.
Yet, in specific reference to death and dying, it was also a time in which the medical professions emerged in their modern form as agents associated with the process of death and dying. Hence, the irony that Michel Foucault, in *Birth of the Clinic* (1973), identified – the modern practice of medicine (and thus the institutional of the modern hospital) required a relaxation of moral prohibitions against the physician examining the body by palpatting its surfaces and orifices. In this very act of modern diagnostic medicine, the professional at once became more intimate with the patient as the patient was inserted in the modern technologies of health and care for the body. As a result, insofar as care of body entailed attentions to its morbidity, awareness of death and dealing with it was bit by bit removed from everyday life. As the urban middle classes became increasingly privatized and sequestered from community involvement with the masses, so too did their attitudes toward death and dying. This gradually became an “individualist model of the Good Death” where the dying person assumes as much control as possible over her own death in order to please her individual desire (Kellehear 2007: 152). Kellehear concludes:

Dying in hunter-gatherer societies was viewed as “unlucky”, malevolent or perhaps “mercifully quick” deaths for their communities. And among settler societies dying was viewed as morally “good” or “bad” for both individual and communities. But among the urban middle classes all these moral prescriptions and judgments were transferred to themselves as individuals alone.

(ibid.: 152)

Kellehear may somewhat over state the case by his rather stark periodization of the major ages in the evolution of human understandings of death, but his scheme is a reliable enough representation of the uncertain role that mortality played in individual and collective self-identifications, and of how one might suspect that only in the Modern, Urban Age would death assume a clear place in identities and identifications. But, still again, an irony as the modern culture of individual self-identification emerged in association with the urban middle class, death actually slipped away to hide behind what Ernest Becker and others called the denial of death.

**Major claims, developments and key contributions**

**Death as a source of identification work and the modern culture of denial**

Elsewhere in this handbook, the reader can find a more explicit and detail presentation of the history of the identification concept (see Chapter 1). For now, the challenge before us is to account for the remarkable slippage between the emergence of modern concepts of self-identification and the ironic denial of what we call identification work as also the hard work of coming to terms with mortality.

From a bird’s-eye view, this denial is a familiar story, first told in modern times by Max Weber whose famous *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is the *locus classicus* of the theory that modern capitalism required a spirit (or ethical disposition) of rational calculation which he labeled *this-worldly asceticism*. While Weber cleverly teased this widespread disposition out of earlier Calvinist doctrine, his highly influential theory entailed the assumption that the original religious effect would fade away, leaving his spirit of capitalism as a purely secular ethic. The genius of Weber’s analysis is the insight that, in spite of its other-worldly purpose, the Protestant revolution in modern thought rooted in the ideal of a free individual able to reflect on his individual choices – in the seventeenth century on the choice to believe, in the twentieth century on the choice to engage in entrepreneurial activities that require free, rational calculations as
to the costs and benefits of his actions. Quite in contrast to his contemporaries, Durkheim, the
descendants of Marx, and even Freud, Weber’s individual was, first, middle class, and second,
an individual with, if not a clear self-identity, at least the mental equipment needed to reflect
on the future consequences of his actions – hence, in effect, to formulate an ideal of where, so
to speak, and who he wanted to be in the future. Yet, in keeping with the paradox that Becker
and others later diagnosed, Weber himself (like most classical social theorists) could not account
for the finality by which the meaning of actions would come to an end in death. This basic prin-
ciple was of course a condensation of the already powerful (in Weber’s day early in twentieth
century) Enlightenment and Classical Economic theory that human economic progress implied
growth without end – which, in turn, at the level of the individual identity, necessitated a denial
death and at the level of the modern ideology of human history required, in effect, that the
nature of human history was that it would not end; or, that history itself would always make
progress and, to be sure, never die. Hence the denial of death.

Yet, it hardly need be said that modern, urban and economic, culture still had to invent
fundamental ways to deal with death – that is, to anticipate or deny it. Either way, both atti-
tudes generate the creative energy, which is culture building, but they also shape our identity
in unconscious ways.

To overcome the bleakness and void that mortality threatens, even in the modern period
(and this is another irony) human cultures sought shelter from what Kierkegaard calls the sick-
ness unto death (or what be might be called the death anxiety). This is one reason that in spite
of the general theory that the modern era was a profoundly secular age, in point of fact religion
never really died away and instead, along with secular analogies (of which Marx’s classless
society is the most famous), contributed to the generation of a sense of life’s meaning through
creating unities and religious imagination. Thus, though in the modern age death was denied,
it remains a powerful feature on the horizon of innovative solutions for the problem of human
identity. In an odd sense the repression of death drove the engine to create bigger unions and
make meaningful connections.

Needless to say, in a scientific age, the absence of evidence about a hereafter or an immortal
soul makes it difficult for the modern and rationally trained mind to embrace the thought that
life continues after the body dies. Near death experiences, for example, have been declared
as hallucinations arising from chemical reactions in the brain. Scholars have split opinions
regarding this issue. Looking back at history it is obvious that people not only frequently
encountered death but also had customs to embed death in their daily life. However, in the
nineteenth century things started to fundamentally change. Thus, to understand modern
(or, if one wants, postmodern) attitudes toward death, it is important, as next we will do,
to engage the key contributions to the dilemma of modernity’s riddle – how can death be
both a fact of life and source of meaning. We suggest that in general terms this involves deal-
ing with the contradiction between the anticipation (or certain knowledge of) death and
its denial.

**From the tame death to shameful death – the erasure of identity**

In premodern times, and what Aries called the tameness of death, people surrendered to the
violation of their routine through plagues, wars, floods and the like. Before the Age of Reason,
death was no secret nor was it an extraordinary event. Death was everywhere present, immu-
table, inescapable, and integrated in daily life. And, in this sense, identities where given in the
sense that “everything was stuck to its place in the great chain of being and things ran their
course by themselves” (Bauman 1992: 97). Zygmunt Bauman thus puts flesh on the bones
of Aries’s idea of the tame death – a taming brought about by bringing death more or less consciously into the normal, if unsettled, core of human cultures.

Tame death or the anticipation of mortality is, therefore, the oldest death there is (Aries 1983: 29). The eighteenth century was the first time when death was “conceived as a major scandal of the whole human adventure” (Bauman 1992: 133). The effort of the Enlightenment was to change human fate and to turn the world into a better place controlled by reason. Thus, as we have said, began the process of radicalizing the tame death by denying its centrality – a move that was essential to the development of modern this-worldly moralities.

As Kellehear emphasizes in this historic development of the issue, in attitudes toward death that came with urbanization, increasing wealth, social power, education and secularization led to a questioning in the belief in an afterlife, was called into question. Death could no longer be a Good Death since it was senseless, savage, incomprehensible and thus seen as a threat. The decline of religious imagination meant that suffering had lost its meaning (Kübler-Ross 1976: 14) This in turn lead to a series of scientific attempts to explain, at least, the stages of dying, of which the most famous is the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. Death had to be brought under human control, it was no longer tame, it had to be tamed and these attempts to account for the stages of dying allowed, at least, a methodical attitude toward the anticipation of death and, in turn, to the now wide-spread science of palliative care for the dying.

Still these developments were in the context of other developments, beginning late in the nineteenth century and contributed to the other pole of tension between anticipation and denial. Death became largely anonymous. Malignancies and chronic diseases had become more common even with the anticipation of a long life, supported by the facts through the twentieth century of a noted rise of life expectancy. Still, after what Foucault called the birth of the clinic, dying people came to be isolated from the rest of the society. They were, first in the middle classes but later more universally, removed from everyday experience and in effect absorbed into medical institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes (Aiken 2001: 16) and, in due course, hospices for the palliative care of dying. The key to the modern practice was the evolution of official institutions for the removal of death from ordinary life. The practice itself was, however, now new. In pre-industrial societies people removed themselves from contact with the dying individual after death. Bodies were kept of course in the home, or otherwise put on display, but they were quickly and routinely buried. In the Modern Age the community retreats and people retire before the individual dies, leaving his fate in the hands of medical personnel and specialized technologies (of which various homes for the aging are not well studied as part of the technologies of abandonment of the dying).

That which was once the domain of church has today become the domain of medicine and its many extension and apparatuses. Through this transition, so argues Elisabeth Kübler-Ross among others, death has lost its human dimension. Dealing with the chronic and terminally ill is mechanized, depersonalized, and dehumanized (Kübler-Ross 1976: 12; Hunt 2005: 208). Yet, the transformation was not without other adjustments in the ancient doctrines. Even though the medicalization of dying came to be absorbed in a new institutional section, medical progress extended the life span and permitted another rather contradictory notion to enter the culture of death. The “good death” was thus to become the death of one who lived to old age – a death often considered good even as the elderly are abandoned to their own or institutional devices. The corollary thus became that the “bad death” was the death of the young. This of course had its culture corollaries (ones that went beyond the personal tragedy of the experience of the death of a child). A pre-mature death became in effect a threat to the natural life sequence, which itself had been medicalized through various psychologies of life’s normal developmental ages, most of which portrayed death as the climax of old age and thus natural for those who enjoy
longevity. Logically, death of a child or youth is perceived as particular dramatic (Howarth 1998: 673) precisely because in a culture where the meaning (or identity) of human life is an integral aspect of a general ideology of progress without limits, the “bad death” was one that, in youth, reminded all of the improbability of that general culture faith. In this ideology of denial one can see the traces of death’s powerful grip on the human imagination. A culture may deny (which is to say: put out of sight) death but in the death of the very young (including those who die in war) the finitude of the self and thus of self-identification is omnipresent.

Death thus is a confounding puzzle to the very idea of modern self-understanding. Modernity is nothing if it is not a culture of mastery over everything – even those realities that do not fit into its paradigm of progress, growth, and security. Modernity in effect offered the promise of an erasure of the unpredictable, the unavoidable, the unexpected, and the unknown. And, to be certain, its remarkable scientific and technological innovations and advances lent plausible support to the promise. But death to be sure is another matter altogether. It cannot be overpowered or outrun. Jokes are made about this obvious fact: “There are only two things I must do: die and pay taxes.” But since many do not actually pay taxes, somehow the joke implies the absurdity that death too need not extract its toll. As a joke, it is sad, as many jokes are – sad because the very wish to escape death reveals just how much it is deeply felt to be a betrayal to high, improbable promises of modernity. This explains the impossibility of the culture which individuals must face. The way we made a science of the stages of death’s anticipation, and certainly to build institutions to remove the suffering of the dying from ordinary life, are nothing more than strategies for an emphatic denial death which was in and of itself the death of everything modernity stood for.

Thus, it happened that, amid all the wondrous courage of modern culture, death has lost its place in human life and become the silent enemy that humiliates those who cling fiercely to modernity’s promises. Death, in our day, became indecent, dirty, and polluting and now is seen as nothing but waste in the production of life. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, the modern attempt to deconstruct mortality is a way of constituting the Other. We regurgitate our enemies because death is indigestible and coping with this constituted presence threatens us (Baumann 1992: 131). Death becomes a guilty secret, clandestine, and unmentionable. As we vomit in secret, so we die in secret.

Thus arose the secrecy that for a long while surrounded certain diseases such as cancer, AIDS, and Alzheimer’s, among others. Although, as time passed, deadly and often long lasting diseases gradually were allowed into the public imagination. They began as stigmatizing afflictions and none more so than AIDS. Kellehear observes:

The sheer numbers of people who now do not have “good deaths” or “well-managed deaths” because of age or AIDS are instead dying in shameful ways. The shame comes from the projected attitude and behaviour of younger and non-infected people on older and infected groups but also the internalised emotional and social responses of those victimised by these other people.

(Kellehear 2007: 210)

Kellehear focuses primarily on Western societies’ attitudes toward AIDS, where people die too young from a stigmatizing disease. Strikingly, in the decades since AIDS was first diagnosed in the 1980s even it has lost some of its public shame, but, and here Kellehear is particularly insightful, aging remains an object of revulsion. Alzheimer’s and other forms of senile dementia are part of this revulsion, or better put, fear. But, again, popular sayings about the elderly such as “She is very, very old but her mind is clear as a bell” is as much a mark of the fear of losing one’s
mind in one’s own old age as a special virtue of the elderly who, even at enormous cost, are still sheltered away in institutions, many of which are profit centers for large corporations. For the industry they are good, for the individuals they are often miserable. Kellehear thus emphasizes that dealing with the elderly who are taking “too long” to die are objects of economic and social rejection because they are unmanageable and unrecognizable. This is a way of saying that the terminal ill and elderly have in effect lost their identities. They are the dying who in taking too long to die are transferred to the realm of the shameful death.

The anticipation of death has been transformed into an act of judgment of the individual’s lifestyle regarding a “good death,” which in turn has become a convoluted concept, especially when it leads by logic if not overt wish to the expectation that the elderly would die well if theirs was a sudden, uncomplicated death. Needless to say this notion, often held in silence, bears on the deeper complications of the identity status of the very old and their ambiguous states in the system of modern values.

**Grief and the recovery of identity**

Just the same (and in spite of the code of silence covered bad deaths), it is possible to investigate other, less brutal cultural attitudes toward the unstable position death holds in modern culture. One of the most striking new areas of research and, we must add, practice is the study of and practice of grief in respect of both the anticipation and the denial of death. In the latter respect, grief could be said to be, like the medicalization of dying, a systematic field offering instruction for methods of grieving as a practice of “letting go” of the dead and as is often said “getting on with life.” In this very personal realm, the death of the beloved Other always has a powerful impact on the individual’s personal view of mortality, which in turn cannot help but affect the individual’s sense of her identity.

If, as it is in modern culture, the meaningful life is achieved through the establishment of meaningful bonds of intimacy, creative living in community, and productive labor in the economic sphere, then in a culture where the death ends these connections, the self (or, as moderns still may say) is left in a lurch between life and death. While, needless to say, belief in the continuation of the life in the other world remains a widely held notion, death itself becomes a bond an individual has with other people. Oddly this is initially a status shared in the moment of death by the dead and their beloved survivors. Grieving, therefore, becomes a practical method (again, very often technically taught and learned) whereby the survivor redefines his relationship with the deceased. In this respect, grieving is part of the work in which the surviving individual transformations his or her identity – and transforms it in ways much deeper than being a member of a well-labeled social category such as an orphan, a widow or widower, a survivor of loved one’s suicide, or mortal sacrifice in defense of the motherland at war. Those who outlive the dead undergo lifestyle changes as well as changes in the emotional and psychological landscape. Grief has come to be understood as the work of effecting those changes and, to be sure, those who attempt to hide their grief by putting on a good front of bravery experience changes whether they want them or not.

In the literature on the subject of grief, one finds this theme, as for example in Silverman and Klaas’s edited work *Continuing Bonds – New Understandings of Grief*. One among a number of comments along these lines is:

When we discuss the nature of the resolution of grief, we are at the core of the most basic questions about what it means to be human, for the meaning of the resolution of grief is tied to the meanings of bonds with significant people in our lives, the meaning of our
membership in family and community, and the meaning we ascribe in our individual lives in the face of absolute proof of our own mortality.

(Klaas and Silverman 1996: 22)

The twentieth-century model of grief supports the belief that successful mourning means disengagement with the deceased and the past. To continue to maintain a relationship with the dead is seen to be a pathological situation that hinders the individual’s ability to make new attachments. In *Continuing Bonds* an alternative view is offered in which grief is adjusted to allow for a continuous attachment to the dead person. Studies and discussions in this book suggest that bonds with the deceased are maintained through memorializing and remembering, as well as a heightened awareness of the presence of the dead person that persists into the inner life as well as into outside interactions. To the skeptic, this line of thinking may seem vaguely mystical, even quasi religious in its way, but if we are to say (as we argue) that self-identity is as much (perhaps more so) social as well as personal, then the whole question of whether the death of a salient Other could or should erase the social status associations requires a great deal more thought and research than it has thus far received.

Though the studies collected in *Continuing Bonds* are a small sample, they are sociologically interesting and, we might say, a hopeful sign about future attitudes toward death and identity. Whereas the prevailing definition of death requires that grief serve as a taming of death and, thereby, a loss that needs to be rationalized and “worked through” in order to “get on with life,” studies reported in *Continuing Bonds* give some good evidence that a significant loss can include adjustment both to the anticipated loss and to the final act of the death. Even in a secularized culture where belief in resurrections and eternal lives are less prevalent, what we find here is the idea (once again, a medical or mental health principle) that there is no need to cut the bonds of a former life. We would ask, if old lovers from the long ago still hover in our sense of our personal and social biographies, why not all the more that beloved dead of recent, adult life? Survivors will confirm that, if they embrace the facts of their own lives, one retains what has been lost and most especially in the form of the social identity that was gained by the lost one: once a mother, daughter, or wife, always such a one. At the least the experiences remembered remain alive so to speak in the continuing life – if, that is, the survivor allows them to live. And this, again, is the key issue in grief work in which many contributors to *Continuing Bonds* would seem to suggest that “working through” the loss need not be an erasure so much as a coming to terms with the absence of a continuing presence. To be sure, the death of a beloved requires a complex relation between continuation and change in personal identity. And against the background of a heightened awareness of one’s own mortality death, continuing bonds with the deceased can be shaped just as much as transformed. There is much more to be understood on this subject, but even in a minimalist form we are able to note that, if what occurs is no more than only a sublimation or projected identification, the status of the continuing bonds between the living and the dead is a much under studied subject with a great deal of potential for identity studies and for an appreciation of the power of the denial of death in modern cultures.

**Denial of death**

Kellehear argues that, by nature, humans are not death denying and that historically humanity has evolved as a death-anticipating society through traditional customs and belief systems. Yet, if Kellehear and others come down on the optimistic side of this issue, there is another stream of thought that emphasizes the sheer terror that mortality poses and how humanity tries to overcome it. This alternative line of thought has, as you would expect, been informed by, and to an
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extent influenced by, the culture’s death denial attitudes to which there are exceptions and even bold theories of the centrality of death to human nature and experience.

Of these exceptions none is more bold – and thereby more regularly ignored or in many cases scorned – than Sigmund Freud’s dual drive theory, first announced in his 1920 paper “Beyond the pleasure principle.” Here is where he enunciated the controversial idea that, in effect, life and death are the two most basic human drives. The one drive, Eros (mistaken as a merely sexual drive), is the drive (or instinct, an awkward translation of the German Trieb) of constructive energy that moves humans to build relationships and by inference engage in all manner of constructive social forms; the other drive, later labeled as Thanatos by Herbert Marcuse, is in effect the death drive by which Freud meant the instinct that moves humans to destroy relationships and social life itself. For Freud, one cannot speak of death without speaking of life. In an equally controversial work, Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), Freud extended his drive theory (itself in 1920 influenced by the atrocities and destruction of the First World War) into a weak but evident social theory of the deadliness of modern warfare and aggression. In the decade between 1920 when “Beyond of the pleasure principle” essentially renounced the earlier simpler ideas of pleasure, sexuality and libido in favor of the primacy of the life-preserving drive, he came to see (as few thoughtful Europeans could fail to see) that the drive toward death and destruction was no less powerful and, at certain times (notably those of that period of war and economic despair), violence and aggression actually dominated collective life. How much this insight was a historical one is hard to say (though some argue reasonably that it was), certainly Freud’s clinical work led him to the dual drive theory in which the life and death instincts were locked in a seemingly irresolvable struggle not only in the human psyche, but also in human culture itself. By 1930, in Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud was examining the question of why war gave men unconscious satisfaction that could not be derived from the need to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Bocock 1983: 72).

At the least Freud put death back on the table of, if not public discourse, a prominent sector of social and psychological thought. He was far from alone in the middle decades of the twentieth century in, as some might put it, bringing death back. The shock of the two world wars from 1914 through 1945, of the Holocaust and the Gulag, of economic despair led many, some not as acute on the subject as was Freud, to realize that in modern society death has many faces. Wars, threats from weapons of mass destruction, epidemics of various kinds and, in more recent times, AIDS, school shootings, and the ubiquity of terrorism (which in some ways had become by the end of first decade of the twenty-first century a vague, almost empty term, to describe the terrors of a world gone wild – gone, that is, violent). In the interim, the threat of global warming brought death back in still another more global way as representations of death and violence in mass media brought them into the most personal circles of modern culture. The entertainment industries that by the 1950s and 1960s were intruding in the home and personal life through the development of televisal and later personalizable entertainment media were not only broadcasting sounds and images never before seen openly in public but were also, so to speak, getting inside the heads, or psyches, of post-war individuals.

These many and various aspects of a destructive force are symptomatic of the repressed flip-side of human desire. Again Freud and many of his followers put the theory of the two basic instincts to good use (if that is the word) in providing an important resource for the study of modern and late modern culture – a culture that could not, after Freud, be any longer simply characterized as one that promised life forever and better but gave, instead, unrelenting death and a new magnitude of large scale destruction.

While Freud’s theory of the psychical apparatus, which he maintained to the very end of his life, falls far short of a satisfying general social theory of the relations between death and identity,
it did take a giant step in the direction of making the connection even if by the perverse means of investing the individual’s self-identifications with a feeble precipitate of pressures – both internal and external – that are largely beyond his individual control and certainly not when it comes to the acting out of the destructive drives.

**Denial of death and the hero systems**

Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* (1973) took up the ideal of human heroism as a reflex of the terror of death. The hero is an object of fascination, even in modern times, because heroic actions or lives encourage confidence in the possibility of immortality. Becker’s explanation for the urge to heroism is narcissism. One of the main aspects of narcissism is the feeling that everyone is expendable except ourselves (Becker 1973: 2).

In man a working level of narcissism is inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth. . . . his sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea compose of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means, that man’s natural yearning for organismic activity, the pleasures of incorporation and expansion, can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into mortality.

*(ibid.: 3)*

Again, we see in Becker, a bold attempt to account for the basic riddle that death is real, yet not real enough to escape denial. The Unconscious does not recognize either death or for that matter time. Thus in the hero the conscious individual is drawn to the warm spark of an inner feeling of immortality; reflexively, the terror of mortality moves the individual toward heroism:

He must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he counts more than anything or anyone else. . . . It is still a mythical hero system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning.

*(ibid.: 4–5)*

Becker further points out that “society has always been a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviours, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism” and thereby “every society is a religion” *(ibid.: 5).* Thus heroism is an issue of self-esteem that seeks affirmation and recognition in the outside world. Furthermore, heroism is effectively an “ideology of justification” that allows people to face death and to go on with life because it, paradoxically, transforms human fear of death into the illusion of self-perpetuation *(ibid.: 217).* Through this, the human quality of self-preoccupation in the name of self-preservation demands much of a tight-knit structure of heroic outlets. By pursuing an identity in the name of heroism, an identity shows superiority in comparison with another individual; individuals have uplifted themselves toward immortality by giving their lives a meaning that might outlive death. This, as Becker recognizes, establishes an odd kind of moral competitive market for the status of a hero, thus for the possibility of attaining an enduring life. Or is it an identity that is sought after? Society, hence, is divided into winners and losers, which opens a deep gap on the sharp end of human interdependency and the work of self-sustaining and self-expression.
The fear of death is behind all our functions, which feeds the self-preservation drive, but this mechanism is also pushing us away from the intensity and depth – and hence greatness – that mortality bestows upon our lives. Humanity faces an existential paradox of having a dual nature, to be half animal and half symbolic. The individual is within and without nature through self-consciousness. And from this double nature arises the vital lie of the human character. So humankind does not only fear death, but we also shy away from life in contemplation of our individuation and compelling life experiences. Becker observes: “We might call this existential paradox the condition of individuality within finitude. Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history” (Becker 1973: 26). And further: “all our meanings are build into us from the outside, from dealings with others. This is what gives us a ‘self’ and a superego. . . . and we never feel we have authority to offer things on our own” (ibid.: 48). Thus the overwhelming terrors of this world not only challenge one to become a hero, but also, and ironically, it demands that individuals shy away from “the all consuming appetites of others” (ibid.: 53).

Becker, though drawing also on Freud, underscores an opening up of symbolic culture as a defining resource for the modern individual’s deep confusion with death as a threat to personal identity. Surely repression is a protective response to this fear of death, and through repression and promises of immortality modernity has disconnected heroism and the nature of death (ibid.: 11–12). Still what remains is that to deny mortality, and by giving into illusions of security, modern man makes himself vulnerable. Human heroism is a blind “driveness that burns people out” (ibid.: 6) and thus may well be the weakest link in the chain of the modern search for a heroic life beyond the end. To nourish the hunger for self-esteem, the individual chooses to make life valid by creating greatness through sacrifices, degradation and destruction. In the end, this is a back door that brings death hauntingly back into life itself.

**Strategies of immortality**

Zygmunt Baumann in *Morality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (1992) stresses that it is impossible to define death, which for all intents and practical purpose is in absolute contrast to being. If death is non-existence, it is an unimaginable “hovering beyond reach of communication,” the end of all perception (Bauman 1992: 2). However, one can perceive the death of others and hence get an idea of one’s own mortality. The reason why the death of others is shattering and painful is because it does not affect the continuity of one’s own perception so much as create a void that remains after the demise of the other.

Modern societies, especially in its industrial and post-industrial phases, are forced, one might say, to deconstruct mortality for many of the reasons already mentioned – the failure of the liberal ideal of ever progressive life and growth, the spread of everyday and global violence, out of control environmental problems, scarcities of clean water and air, not to mention nourishment and global epidemics. Bauman offers his own list of the realities that threaten even the tenuous modern notions regarding death and its overcoming (ibid.: 9). Here Bauman is thinking along the lines of Norbert Elias who pointed out mankind’s “longing for immortality constantly misleads them into to symbols of immutability” (Elias 1985: 81). The power of humans is limited and therefore the unavoidable nature of the human finitude means a threat to the social order. This is the reason why the dying need bystanders but this is also the reason why people avoid everything that reminds them of their mortality. People may attempt to die a tame death, noiseless and hygienic, leaving no trace of our connections of life and death (Keleman 1975: 63), when in larger perspective even the departure of one individual threatens for those in her presence the very fabric of social order.
As Bauman points out, the awareness of mortality is the ultimate condition of cultural creativity as such. Culture is a “never stopping factory of permanence” and thus enfold as a suppression of mortality awareness. Culture itself, as well as the study of it, allured us into engaging in tasks and projects (making money, gathering of knowledge, etc.), which aim for a kind of fulfillment that will reach beyond our biological existence. Hence death is a threat to the social as it interrupts the creative yearnings induced by culture.

Human societies have always, we presume, encouraged and supported strategies for dealing with death – strategies that Bauman (and Elias) call strategies of immortality; which is to say, methods in ordinary life that promise to extend the meaning of an individual life beyond the individual himself. Immortality relates to surviving, to getting beyond death, denying it. Immortality strategies seek to take the sinister and horrifying significance off death. Immortality is something, especially in the modern age, that human individuals need to build in order to prevent them from getting caught up in the open loop of ontological bleakness: “immortality is not a mere absence of death; it is the defiance and denial of death” (Bauman 1992: 7). The very collective project of creating a death-defying culture has the effect of making the creators effectively God-like; hence the continuing appeal of various religious and spiritual practices in a reputedly secular age. Living, as it were, above the fact of human finitude creates meaning and purpose of a very special and very probably very basic kind. One thinks here of course of Emile Durkheim’s classic idea that religion, or at least the transcending of social bond, lends to the individual the sense of community that allows the most basic (and to Durkheim only) identity the individual can have – that of belonging to something bigger than one’s self. Yet, as Baumann notes, this kind of meaning cannot be generated or maintained without suppressing the awareness of death (ibid.: 8). Once again, even in the latest stage of the modern age, death haunts all strategies to identify one’s self as an enduring individual. Of these, mass culture entertainment is the prominent example.

Death as entertainment that buttresses death-denying identities

It is well known that from the 1920s onward there has been a long tradition of criticism of the destructive elements in mass entertainment: Theodor Adorno’s deep criticism of modern mass cultures and media, the writings of his friend Walter Benjamin on the commercial origins of public spaces, and culminating, some would say, in Herbert Marcuse’s biting attack in One Dimensional Man (1964) on the depoliticizing effects of repressive desublimation, operating through the over-stimulating effects of televisual and other media. In this line of thought, taken in relation to the parallel, if more psychoanalytic, lines we have presented to this point, there is an obvious tension between the (public) absence and the (private) presence of death.

To look at death from another perspective, be it a death drive or a need to integrate mortality into daily life, is to look at common media and there to encounter again the death issue. Deaths are so common in news media, magazines, computer games, cinema, and televisual dramas that their sheer number disappears behind an almost constant, numbing, exposure to death in media of all kinds.

Without now getting into the finer points of debate about capitalism’s role in the phenomenon, death has suffused a virtually limitless range of public images and sounds. It has become for all intents and purposes a phantasmagoria accessible for consumption. Though hard to diagnose from surface evidence, the effects of capitalism on individuals and their concepts of love and death as well as sustaining as sense of socially accepted self-identity are a matter of serious importance. As the main character, advertiser Donald Draper, pointed out in the TV series Mad Men “Love is invented by men like me in order to sell nylons,” not only the desire for love, but also human’s natural curiosity about death is channeled for entertainment and capitalistic purposes.
However, death in the media is dramatized, glamorized and trivialized and reflects a misconception and misinterpretation of death. This kind of illusion does not mean it fulfills a possible desire to anticipate death. It barely touches us beyond media portrayals since this representation of death is lacking a connection with people’s own experiences.

Fortunately, the evidence is slowly dawning through the study of and reflection up mass media. As Richard Kalish in *Death, Grief, and Caring Relationships* (1985) points out, intellectual knowledge that death could occur at any moment does not mean that death becomes an emotional reality (Kalish 1985: 89). The consumer always has the possibility to avoid death scenes if the pictures get too disturbing; yet few do it seems. Thus, even as she is bombarded by death images at every turn, the individual, some say, is tempted to “maintain the illusion of personal invulnerability and even exemption from the curse of mortality” (Akien 2001: 6). The interest in violence in popular consumer culture could very well be conceived as a manifestation of Thanatos in the culture itself. And we might add that until, or if, a better *general* concept – as distinct from the theory – comes along it might as well serve its purposes. However, better to begin, least, to understand, say, obsession with morbid themes – from countless images of Saddam Hussein’s dead body in the news or entertainment such as violent TV shows and ego-shooter games. These, and much more, are sign (or, better put, symptoms) of the depth of infatuation with, and a presence of, the death theme in late modern social and cultural structures.

Whereas death in the context of entertainment seemingly has no emotional impact, the death of a celebrity such as Princess Diana or public personages such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or President Kennedy are evidently capable of precipitating mass mourning – a mourning that extends even to the annual recognition of these very public deaths. Here again Ernest Becker’s ideas are apt. The fascination with an idol or a leading charismatic hero figure is a “reflex of the fatality of the human condition,” the fear of life (Becker 1973: 145) behind which lurks the need for security or the “oceanic” feeling of embeddedness out from which the individual is seldom able to grow. This, obviously, is not a philosophical claim as to human nature itself, but a way of isolating, however indirectly, the historical and cultural factors in shaping, and reshaping, the ways in which humans societies try to understand themselves, individual and/or collectively, as mortal beings.

Whether or not it is sufficient to call the mechanism for this very human struggle a transference effect, it certainly seems that whether the object to which the fear of death is transferred is a sacred or heroic figure, the same process is at work. The individual gains some sense of immortality by aspiring to and identifying with the transcending object. Simply being close to this object of transference, the immortalized person or figure, terror of death is, again, tame by the displacement, which can have the psychological effect of creating the sense of gaining immortality. This is of course most explicit in religious objects, especially those of the Abrahamic religions of the West where monotheistic Gods – Allah, Yahweh, Christ – are, if not exactly heroes, certainly other-worldly objects. Surely, the this-worldly hero as transference object has less power over the identity of his or her followers. The bereavement of masses after the loss of such a heroic idol reminds the follower of his own mortality and of our transient state of existence (Becker 1973: 148), while, as Becker and others allow, also creating the sense of at least proximity to continuing of life or self after the time of one’s death.

**Criticism**

We who dare to examine the relations between and among identities and morality bear an unusual burden, not faced, we suppose, by other students of identity. There simply is not a vast literature in social sciences on the subject. Those we have examined in this chapter serve
the good purpose of, at least, introducing the classic theories about death and dying. But, as we have seen especially in the modern age, there is a very limited body of literature on the role of death in identity formation – and what there is, while very challenging and helpful, tends to bear a great relevance to the study of the cultures of death. We, as others have, honor Freud for his insights and thus enduring influence on ties between the death or destructive drives and the fate of the individual ego or psyche. Yet, there remains a serious gap in the study of the positive elements of self-identification. It is, we might suggest (even if the thought is a bit defeatist), that Bauman is right – that mortality is simply part of the unthought–of human life. Death is clearly a limit of some kind and, in an individual experience, it would seem (and no one can be sure of this) that the very modern concept of self-identity, nurtured as it was in modern, liberal cultures, simply cannot handle finitude. Here, however, more philosophical writers such as Emmanuel Levinas in books such as *Time and the Other* and even the later writings of Jacques Derrida might be useful guides for social theorists and scientists.

For the time being, until a new generation of social researchers decide, if they do, to take up the subject more directly, we must rest with the advances that have been made. Becker, for one notable example, while he alludes to it, finds fault with Freud’s death drive theory. He is arguably right, though not entirely convincingly so, that Freud introduced the idea of the death drive in order to sustain his theories about humans as merely pleasure-seeking individuals. Yet, whatever the limits of his wider theories, Freud realized that identifying humans as mainly pleasure-seeking creatures failed to explain the destructive tendencies in the world. In this sense, death helped Freud to keep his theories about the pleasure-seeking individual intact while at the same time opening up, late in life, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the importance of a historical and cultural examination of destructive drives. Yet, Becker and others are right in setting the limit on Freud’s foundational ideas. In Becker’s words: “The fiction of death as an ‘instinct’ allowed Freud to keep the terror of death outside his formulations as a primary human problem of ego mastery. He did not have to say that death was repressed if the organism carried it naturally in its processes” (Becker 1973: 99). Certainly later writings that took Freud into account opened other avenues of research. But even they fell short of what we might call a positive theory of death – or better perhaps – of the dead in the life of the individual. Some of the more clinical works such as *Continuing Bonds* are a beginning of movement in this direction.

Kellehear, too, though his purpose is mostly to survey the history of the social concept of death, offers the prospect of new work and understanding. At the least, he emphasizes the failure of psychoanalysis to move beyond slim and hardly useful works such as Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* into a fully disciplined embrace of sociological, ethnographic or even biographical approaches and the data they might offer. Since the main psychoanalytic agenda is rational, materialistic-logical, it also fails to acknowledge society’s religious and quasi-religious work to come to terms with human mortality (Kellehear 2007: 55). Whether it is fair for Kellehear to say, as he does, that followers of the psychoanalytic approach have little or no empirical support of their theories (ibid.: 57–8) is a point on which we would demur, if only because, on the one hand, clinical research is itself empirical and, on the other, there are countless preliminary studies from various psychological instances.

Still there are continuities as well as differences in more recent studies. As with Bauman’s immortality strategies, Kellehear opposes the definition of death as radically opposed to life. Bauman is right, we think, to say that death is unthinkable, but this does not prevent him from denying its reality as a human experience. Historically speaking death has proven itself an experience capable of transforming life and lives, and this sense of supporting both the individual’s and the culture’s constructive strategies. Kellehear, for one, even doubts, that death poses such a threat to life that other thinkers believe it does. Kellehear did, after all, described the
cultural programs early in human social history whereby death came to be anticipation and, thus, through religious and other mechanisms, able to exert a telling influence of a positive kind on the living. These surely were not traditions that spawned a mindset in which death could be taken into self-identity and, as we say, this may suggest a kind of limit.

In fact, though it is not the primary purpose of our chapter, one task that lies ahead may well be the complete rethinking of self-identity or, as some such as Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) have suggested of the very concept of ego-identity as arising from a stable interior faculty, in earlier times called the soul but in modern times the Self.

**Future developments**

Whatever becomes the fate in future social studies of identity and self-identification (which, we remind, is a related but separate issue from social identification), it is perfectly obvious that death and mortality are at the core of the human condition. Attitudes and ways of dealing with death change over times, but death itself remains and cannot be gotten around. As a consequence, it seems quite apparent that as death becomes more, not less, a fact of social life, and that the most urgent general future development required is at the least to advance the study of death itself in human societies and thereby to come to terms with a fact of life, to be sure, but also a fact that by its sheer persistence defies received ideas and beliefs as to meaning of this life.

Life expectancies have dramatically increased within the last century. According to the World Health Organization, in 1900 the global average lifespan at birth was just 31 years, and below 50 years in even the richest countries. By the mid-twentieth century, average life expectancy rose to 48 years and in 2005 to 65.6 years; the life expectancy even reached over 80 years in some countries such as Japan. By 2030, average life expectancy at birth for women in countries such as the USA will be 85 years. From this point of view it might be assumed that these numbers as they apply to the core and semi-peripheral areas of the global push the issue of death further away from the place it requires in modern thought.

But, there is another story globally, and that is the extreme numbers of earlier deaths among children in the peripheral zones of the modern world – especially Africa where AIDS and malnutrition are epidemic. But also, worldwide where the numbers of homeless peoples – either refugees or squatters – created zones of exclusion wherein millions are simply ruled out of whatever liberal state benefits provide citizenship. Immigrant workers in America and still parts of Europe are victims of sometimes cruel methods of exclusion, many urban conglomerates such as North Jakarta, Lagos, Sao Paulo, Mumbai include either at their centers or on their margins millions of displaced individuals seeking some chance for mere survival from civil strife, disease, or hunger and yet are for all intents and purposes dead to what civil societies may exist in those urban centers. Even the affluent and modernizing states, in the West and East, experience threat of war, famine or natural catastrophes. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center has become a symbol of the vulnerability of even the core nations. Some such as Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) have proposed that attacks from outside to the centers of wealth are basically reminders of the realities that most of the global population faces – that the global reality is effectively a desert: a desert of death. This kind of thinking is developed in different ways by Achille Mbembe in his famous essay, “Necropolitics” (2003) that begins to drawn together ideas from writes such as Arendt, Foucault, Agamben and others into a theory of these zones of exclusions as the elements of the politics of the late modern global society – a politics not of life but of death; hence necropolitics.
Even if radical proposal of the kind presented by Žižek and Mbembe among others are too strong to consider for the time being (and certainly they require much more empirical research), there is evidence close to home, so to speak, that are not far from the normal perceptions of ordinary life. However, despite medical progress, new diseases are cropping up. Obesity and diabetes, among other prominent examples, are threatening the progress made in increasing life expectancy. Before modern hygienic standards, people died from extrinsic causes, but namely diseases. Now over 70 percent of people in the Western world die from the new – and one might say self-induced – endemic problems, such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Then, too, though it would appear to be another extreme case, we would mention the case of natural catastrophes. Once floods, fires, as well as epidemics, were considered either acts of the gods or, in a more secular vein, as acts beyond human control. Yet, increasingly, it is apparent that floods are not immune to environmental causes and that many disasters could be anticipated, or, at least, those beyond anticipation could be responded to in a more timely way. It explains what can only be called the social incompetence in the now many oil spills and the tardiness of clean-up efforts, or of the floodings and earth quakes in New Orleans in 2005 or Haiti and Pakistan in 2010 to which the response of governmental and non-governmental agencies have been slow or even actively frustrated. Some positive thoughts can be assigned to the global threats of climate change that awareness of these global realities may stop the “erosion of awareness of dying” (Kellehear 2006: 210). They will certainly challenge the way we think of ourselves, and think of life as such.

One of the more sensational yet philosophical well ground advances is Peter Singer’s proposal of new ethic approaches toward life and death in *Rethinking Life and Death* (1994). Quite in addition to the natural catastrophes approach, Singer argues that the border between the living and the death is blurred by a technical medical world which is able to freeze embryos in liquid nitrogen, transplants organs and allows brain dead women with no chance of recovery to carry a child to term. Many object mightily to some of the conclusions Singer seems to infer from this obvious fact of life, but he does frame for consideration the question of what is to be done about the over-ageing societies. When medical and biological technologies promise for some of a much longer old age, even in the face of pain and loss of quality life prospects, there will be a need to discuss the highly controversial issue of the right to commit assisted suicide. Singer observes that the traditional views about the sanctity of life need to be revised. Aging aside, cases of anencephalics, cortically dead infants, patients in a vegetative state, and those who are medically declared brain dead, show that a definition of death has no clear and set criteria anymore (Singer 1994: 191–2). In either case the question of when and how (in the case of assisted suicides) death may occur demands a profound revision in what we would call the ethics of self-identity. As tragic as the individual cases may be, Singer and others open up an important new aspect of ethical and scientific research as a field of opportunity for rethinking death as both a personal and a social issue. Indeed, much progress has been made among medical ethicists and that work needs to be taken more serious into account by social sciences.

In conclusion, if we were to single out one line of development that might be more fruitful than others, we would suggest the necessity of thinking about death and identity as global problems. To the same extent that globalization has forced a rethinking of personal identity as either, all too simple, a matter of ethnic or national associations, so to it opens the prospect of identity itself as a through and through global prospect. To be sure, self-identities will be shaped by family, groups, communities, and states. But in a world in which the included and excluded alike must think more deeply about their identities in references to the wide array of global differences – social, cultural, and economic – so too will this necessity bring individuals, as it has brought nations and corporations, face to face with the sometimes deadly zones of global life.
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and global process. Whatever else terrorism stands for, it at least represents a prominent feature of destructiveness that arises from global exclusions of all kinds – exclusions that are localized mostly in the periphery, but also ones that presented themselves in the global cities where beggars and homeless people, and in some places the dead on the streets, present irrefutable evidence that as this world becomes more global so too must individuals rethink who they are and rethink in the face of an ever-increasing omnipresence of death.

References


