Human Mortality as a Philosophical Problem: What Is

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Background

• **Global welfare** and **human health** are among the key topics of, e.g., the alumni and donor relations campaign of the University of Helsinki.

• In a broad sense, almost all research conducted within the human and social sciences, including much of the research at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, can be regarded as relevant to these topics.

• An ineliminable dimension in most, if not all, of the problems surrounding the notions of welfare and health (and the related notion of the **good life**) is, however, the “darker side” of...
Argumenta project: "Human Mortality"

• The Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies received an Argumenta project grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation for the "Human Mortality" project to be implemented in 2011–2013 in the form of a series of seminars and workshops, both strictly academic and intended for a broader audience.

• The purpose of the project is to promote interdisciplinary cooperation on the topic of mortality as well as to offer contributions to the general social and cultural debates on this and related issues.

• Project leader: Sami Pihlström; steering group: 9 specialists on different dimensions of the topic
Other indications of the growing academic relevance of the topic

• In addition to the Argumenta project, mortality is the topic of the targeted calls of the HCAS in 2011–2012 (synergy value).
• Nordic Network of Thanatology (Finnish symposium in May, 2011; future activities planned for 2012?).
• Finnish Association of Death Studies (Suomalainen kuolematutkimuksen seura), founded in 2011.
• Interdisciplinary publications and journals, e.g., Death Studies, Mortality.
Interdisciplinarity

- Human mortality is a serious research topic potentially attracting the attention of scholars representing a wide variety of academic disciplines:
  - Philosophy
  - Theology and religious studies
  - History, literature, and other humanistic disciplines
  - Social sciences
  - Psychology and education
  - Law
Disciplinary perspectives:

• **Theology and Religious Studies.** The topic of mortality has obviously been central in religious thought in several different traditions, raising deep questions often connected with philosophy:
  – What do the great world religions teach about death, mortality, and immortality; how have these teachings developed historically; what kind of social and political influences have they had throughout history?
  – How have religious beliefs on immortality been developed, maintained, and spread in religious communities?
Disciplinary perspectives: humanities

• **History (of ideas).** How have conceptions of death and mortality been transformed in the course of history? How have they influenced society? How has mortality been conceptualized in great turning points in history, e.g., in wars?

• **Literature and the arts.** How has death/mortality been thematized in literature and the arts? Are there aspects of human mortality that can only be adequately “examined” artistically, rather than scientifically or philosophically? Are some specific genres of literature (e.g., gothic, crime, war) more relevant than others in this regard?

• **Cultural anthropology, geography, architecture, etc.** How is mortality dealt with, represented, etc., in
Disciplinary perspectives: humanities (cont’d)

• **Linguistics.** How have the linguistic expressions related to death and mortality developed and changed? How do the world languages differ in this respect? Are there interesting linguistic differences in different areas or social segments of the same language community, etc.?

• **Gender studies.** What kind of gender differences have there been in the practices of caring of the dying? How has the situation changed in modern societies? How should phenomena such as dying, suicide, crime, and genocide be studied from the gender perspective? What kind of life– and death–related symbolic representations of the woman have there been in Western culture?
Disciplinary perspectives: social sciences, psychology, education,

• **The social sciences.** How do conceptions of death and mortality affect contemporary society (in Finland and elsewhere)? Is death something that cannot be spoken about publicly – does our culture attempt to hide mortality, to avoid discussing it openly?

• **Psychology.** How is mortality, and/or human beings’ realization of their mortality, related to the human psyche and its well-being? Is a “healthy” attitude to one’s mortality possible, or does dying inevitably cause trauma and anxiety?

• **Education.** How should children be educated regarding death and mortality? How can one grow into a mature acknowledgment of one’s mortality? Should religious teachings play a role here?

• **Law.** How can, e.g., the conceptual/philosophical
Disciplinary perspectives: philosophy

• **Philosophy.** It has been suggested that not only religious thought but philosophical thought as well emerges from human beings’ realization of their own mortality. From a philosophical perspective, death, dying, and mortality raise a number of conceptual issues that need clarification, both systematically and historically:
  - The existential meaning of mortality: “living toward death” (cf. Heidegger).
  - The definition and criteria of death: what are death, dying, and mortality; what should we mean by these concepts, how exactly should we define
Philosophy (cont’d)

– The Epicurean controversy: is death/mortality bad (an evil) for the one who dies; is it in any sense possible to die a “good” death? (Modern debate: cf. Thomas Nagel 1979.)

– The metaphysics of death: is it in any sense possible to survive death (materialism vs. dualism, etc.); how is death connected with fundamental metaphysical problems regarding persistence, individuation, modalities, etc.?

• In addition to these theoretical philosophical problems of death and mortality, there are hot issues in **applied ethics**: abortion, euthanasia, suicide, killing and dying in war, capital punishment, genocide, terrorism, etc.
Interdisciplinary problems: examples

- **Aging as an individual and social phenomenon.** Is aging the most natural, or even in some sense the “best”, way to die?

- **Death in one’s immediate social surroundings.** The experiences of death and mortality in one’s family and other close social groups can be studied from various perspectives: the psychology of loss and mourning, the dynamics of family relations, etc.

- **Body, embodiment.** Mortality challenges us to examine the embodied, and therefore essentially vulnerable, nature of human existence from various standpoints, including philosophy, the social and political sciences, and the arts.

- **Climate change and the possibility of human extinction.** The global climate change (and the
Social relevance

• Given the nature of this problem area, it can be expected that the results of interdisciplinary research on human mortality will have wide-ranging relevance not only within the academic community but in society at large.

• It is not unlikely that leading individuals and institutions representing different areas of social life, including politics, health care, art, business, law, and even the military forces, might be interested in the results and approaches of mortality project.
  – It has often been pointed out that death and mortality are “hidden” in contemporary society: death is not widely “seen” but remains confined to hospitals and other special places and contexts.
  – Is this still true? Or is there, rather, a “cult of death” in modern societies (especially in popular culture – cf.
Social relevance: examples

One may easily imagine mortality–related problems that non–academic people in different sectors of society, engaging in quite different human practices, need to face in their work:

• Prioritization issues in health care.
• Safety concerns and regulations in various professions (we must in our everyday life continuously trust our lives on other people and their professional skills).
• Political decisions that may be, literally, matters of life and death (e.g., again, in the context of climate change).
• The concept of human finitude (the limits of a normal human life–span) in finance and insurance business, and the related legislation.
What is philosophical

• While death and mortality can be approached from a number of different academic perspectives, interdisciplinary and (more traditionally) disciplinary, it can be asked what specific role the philosophical perspective might play in inquiries into mortality.

• What is **philosophical thanatology** (in addition to, or over and above, special-scientific or empirical thanatologies)?
  – Would some specifically philosophical question(s) concerning human mortality remain after all the ”scientific” questions had been adequately answered?
  – Or can the phenomena of death and mortality be thoroughly understood scientifically/empirically
Philosophical thanatology and philosophical anthropology

• This metaphilosophical problem resembles the problem concerning the status of philosophical anthropology generally: is there any specifically philosophical problem concerning humanity (human existence, human life, ”human nature”) that only philosophical inquiry could adequately resolve, i.e., a problem that no empirical perspectives can ever finally settle?

• Philosophical thanatology can be understood as a sub-field of philosophical anthropology.
  – However, sometimes philosophical anthropologists fail to even mention the problem of mortality! (Cf., e.g., P.M.S. Hacker 2006.) One might expect philosophical anthropologists to be more sensitive to this problem.
Naturalism

- According to naturalism, there is "no first philosophy" (cf. W.V. Quine): there is no privileged philosophical perspective over and above, or more fundamental than, the various scientific/empirical perspectives from which, in principle, all genuine questions about the way the world is can be answered.
- Is humanity an exception? Or human death and mortality in particular?
- Or is naturalism itself problematic: does the persistence of the problem of mortality demonstrate that naturalism is seriously one-sided and must be rejected, at least as a general conception concerning the relation between
Philosophical problems of mortality: non-naturalizable?

• Arguably, there are fundamental issues concerning human mortality that cannot be thoroughly "naturalized":
  – The "first-person" character of death: I am living toward my death (cf. Heidegger); the problem of solipsism (cf. Wittgenstein; Valberg 2007) – death not as an event in the world but as "the end of the world". How is this related to my need to acknowledge the mortality of the Other (cf. Levinas)?
  – Purely conceptual problems concerning, e.g., the meaning of death. However, empirical perspectives can be relevant here, especially regarding the criteria of death. Empirical understanding of death and dying may also change our ways of employing these concepts.
Philosophical problems of mortality (cont’d)

• Philosophical thanatology can be expected to critically reflect on the significance of these and other problems from the point of view of a mortal human being.

• For example, the "first-person" perspective on death and mortality may highlight the problem of suicide: far from being "merely" an issue in applied ethics, it can be (and has sometimes been – cf., e.g., Camus) regarded as one of the most fundamental philosophical problems related to concepts/issues such as absurdity, nihilism, etc.
  – Cf. Wittgenstein: suicide is an "elementary sin", because it is a voluntary destruction of the world–constituting transcendental subject and thereby also a
Memory

• Memory: an example of a philosophical issue concerning mortality and our relation to the dead (and the past generally) that cannot be reduced to any non-philosophical special science (cf. Margalit 2002).
  – Epistemological, ethical, political, religious (etc.) aspects.
  – The ”moral witness”.
  – Forgiveness and forgetting?
  – The close link between ethics and religion!
  – Being remembered as the secular counterpart of religious immortality?
  – The philosophical discussion of memory (etc.)
Past and future

- **Pragmatism** is a promising approach to philosophical anthropology generally, emphasizing normatively structured yet naturally emerging human practices. Hence, it should be applicable to philosophical thanatology, too.
  - Turning toward the future – conceivable expected experiences/results, etc. (the pragmatic method).
  - Presumably, these may include experiences concerning an individual’s most remote future possibility, death.
  - Also the past (memory) gains its pragmatic significance from its relation to our future. But is this an adequate ethical approach: can we sufficiently acknowledge the Others (e.g., past victims), if we conceptualize their past (and death) in terms of our future expectations and experiences?
  - This issue goes back to the fundamentally first-person character of human mortality: death as mine – or as the
Philosophical thanatology as transcendental philosophy

• Philosophical examination of human mortality proceeds from within our mortal condition: human finitude is examined from within our finite lives themselves (reflexive, "transcendental" investigation).

• Reflecting on the conditions for the possibility of meaningful life: mortality itself can be seen as such a condition for meaningfulness (or for meaninglessness experienceable as genuine lack of meaning), because we can (arguably) only appreciate the requirements of ethics/morality from within a perspective on the world conscious of its own finitude.

• A crucial aspect of this finitude is the precariousness of the moral perspective itself (or any perspective potentially rendering life meaningful): death/mortality threatens to make that (or any) humanly apparently extremely important perspective illusory (nihilism, absurdity: nothing ultimately matters, if we die?).
Conclusion: philosophy and thanatology

• Philosophy cannot be the (or even a) foundation of thanatological research (disciplinary or interdisciplinary): contra foundationalism, dogmatism.

• However, this does not mean that there would be no role for philosophy to play after all the empirical sciences have had their say on the problems of death and mortality.

• Philosophy can, and must, still (i) coordinate the various (disciplinary and interdisciplinary) empirical perspectives into a coherent whole, and (ii) consider the significance (especially ethical significance) of the achieved results from the perspective of the individual and society/culture.
  
  – In particular, the significance – and limits – of "first-person" significance itself ought to be philosophically explored.
References

• Hacker
• Heidegger
• Johnston
• Levinas
• Margalit
• Nagel
• Pihlström
• Valberg
• Wittgenstein