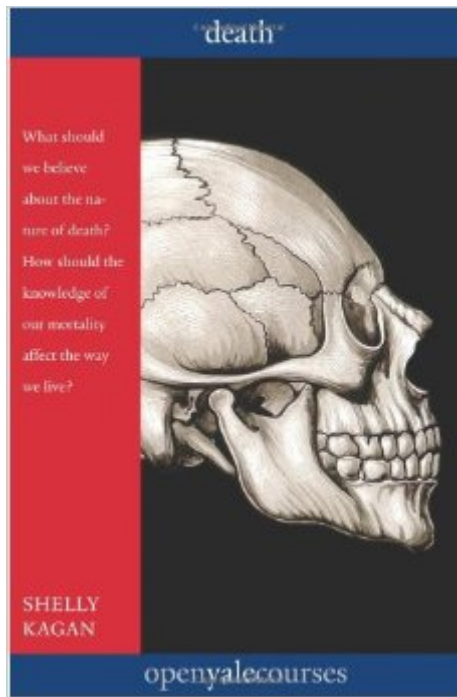


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Death (The Open Yale Courses Series)



Synopsis

There is one thing we can be sure of: we are all going to die. But once we accept that fact, the questions begin. In this thought-provoking book, philosophy professor Shelly Kagan examines the myriad questions that arise when we confront the meaning of mortality. Do we have reason to believe in the existence of immortal souls? Or should we accept an account according to which people are just material objects, nothing more? Can we make sense of the idea of surviving the death of one's body? If I won't exist after I die, can death truly be bad for me? Would immortality be desirable? Is fear of death appropriate? Is suicide ever justified? How should I live in the face of death? Written in an informal and conversational style, this stimulating and provocative book challenges many widely held views about death, as it invites the reader to take a fresh look at one of the central features of the human condition—the fact that we will die.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is based on a series of lectures on 'Death' Kagan gave in Yale University. These lectures and in fact this book can be seen on YouTube. Kagan introduces the book by making it clear what he is and his not doing. He is going to think philosophically about Death but he is going to exclude any religious material or consideration. He will first consider what the person is, consider the body-mind question. He will make an effort in the work to prove that the soul is not real. He also says that he is not dogmatically trying to teach any doctrine about Death. He is going to explore certain basic questions regarding Death and is eager that each student will think through these questions. He

does this in a generally clear way, though I suspect that certain chapters of the work will be pretty tough going for the general reader. He works hard to analyze the notion of personal identity. He concludes the work with the question of whether Suicide can be moral or not. He in the course of this evaluates different value systems. He also has a chapter on how we live when we know that we are going to die. And he too argues that Immortality is not a desirable alternative. In other chapters he discusses why Death is Bad. It is possible to learn a great deal one does not necessarily want to know from this book without endorsing Kagan's positions. Kagan is well aware that this is far from the last word on the subject. And this when he as a philosopher does make arguments for a position on Death which certainly is out of keeping with, and far less consoling than traditional religious positions.

Something defined as bad is defined by either one of three means. (Intrinsically, Instrumentally, Comparatively) Intrinsic: Shelly tells us that some things are intrinsically bad. That is, some things, such as pain for example are bad in and of itself. Instrumentally: If something that leads to things that are bad, that is considered instrumentally bad. He cites losing a job which may not be bad in and of itself but can lead to poverty. Comparatively: Something can be comparatively bad by virtue of the fact that on what we have missed out on. It is in this sense that death is bad since the "opportunity costs" of living far outweigh non-existence. In a sense reminds me of the verse in the bible that says "a living dog is better than a dead lion". Shelly writes in a very conversational tone while philosophizing on the nature of death, considering words and arguments in the light of what we currently know. Arguments in favor of the immortality of the soul are laid out, examined, and shown to not have any real merit. What Shelly advances, seems to be common sense about death. And understanding death can perhaps take the sting out of it when we face it. When I was going through my cancer treatment years ago, I would have been less anxious than I was if I had read this book over having read "The Death of Ivan Illich", which is extremely depressing. We all have to face the end someday, and thinking about it as Shelly lays it out can make this life, our ONLY life meaningful. When you realize how short our years are, and the fact that no immortality awaits us, this to me underscores our responsibility to be nicer to each other, appreciate life on higher levels, love a little more, be ethical in all that we do. Shelly is a great philosopher and I highly recommend this work and all his other works: 1. Normative Ethics 2. The Limits of Morality

Death (The Open Yale Course Series) by Shelly Kagan "Death" is the very interesting book based on a course on death that Professor Kagan has taught at Yale University. This accessible book

covers philosophical questions about the nature of death. The first half of the book covers questions about the existence of souls and the nature of death while the second half deals with value questions. This is a very engaging and thought-provocative book that has well a lecture feel. This instructive 392-page book includes the following sixteen chapters: 1. Thinking about Death, 2. Dualism versus Physicalism, 3. Arguments for the Existence of the Soul, 4. Descartes' Argument, 5. Plato on the Immortality of the Soul, 6. Personal Identity, 7. Choosing between the Theories, 8. The Nature of Death, 9. Two Surprising Claims about Death, 10. The Badness of Death, 11. Immortality, 12. The Value of Life, 13. Other Aspects of Death, 14. Living in the Face of Death, 15. Suicide, and 16. Conclusion: An Invitation.

Positives:

1. Well written, engaging prose. Professor Kagan maintains a respectful, conversational, dare I say professorial tone throughout.
2. Fascinating yet difficult topic handled with care and expertise. This is as you would expect, a thought-provoking book.
3. Accessible philosophical book. Professor Kagan goes out of his way to make this book reachable to the masses. He explains every new term clearly and provides a number of examples that enhances the educational experience.
4. Great approach! The professor tells the reader which views he accepts and then he proceeds to defend his positions. I prefer that approach. "I'm going to try to convince you that there is no soul. I'm going to try to convince you that immortality would not be a good thing. That fear of death isn't actually an appropriate response to death. That death isn't especially mysterious. That suicide, under certain circumstances, might be both rationally and morally justified." That quote captures the essence of this fine book.
5. Professor Kagan in my view, never bites more than he can chew. That is, he never espouses more than we can possibly know. His conclusions are reasonable and sound and are seemingly based on the best of our current knowledge. "As far as I can see, nobody has a good explanation of how consciousness works. It's a mystery for both sides."
6. Clearly defines the differences between the dualist and physicalism views.
7. One of the most fascinating topics in all of philosophy and discussed with glee, the soul. Do we have a soul? Professor Kagan discusses this topic from many interesting angles. Spoiler alert, I must share this but skip if to next positive point if you must. "Do I, as a physicalist who does not believe in the existence of souls--immaterial entities above and beyond the body--do I need to disprove the existence of souls? ("Well, there's no soul here, no soul there.") No. What I need to do is to look at the arguments that get offered for the existence of a soul and rebut them--explain why those arguments are not compelling. I don't need to prove that souls are impossible. I just need to undermine the case for souls. If there's no good reason to believe in souls, that actually constitutes a reason to believe that there are no souls." Excellent!
8. The fascinating and controversial topic of free will. Compatibilism.
9. Understanding the basic interpretation of quantum mechanics. "According

to the standard interpretation of quantum mechanics, the fundamental laws of physics are probabilistic. Determinism is not true at the level of fundamental physics."10. Thought-provoking quotes that resonate. "But not yet seeing how to explain something in physicalist terms is not the same thing as seeing that it can't be explained in physicalist terms." Agreed!11. The issue of personal identity. What's the key to personal identity? The different views. Excellent topic.12. The nature of death...what it entails philosophically speaking. "The crucial question is, what do you want out of survival? And one of the things I want out of survival is to be alive." The different views. Great stuff!13. Surprising claims about death. A thorough discussion on the different claims.14. The second half of the book covers the ethical and evaluative questions regarding death. Interesting stuff!15. A fundamental concept, the deprivation account of why death is bad. "According to the deprivation account, the badness of death consists in the fact that when you're dead, you are deprived of the goods of life. So when is death bad for you? Presumably, during the time when you are being deprived of the goods of life."16. An interesting look at immortality...is immortality truly a wonderful thing? Great conversation. "Is there a kind of life that you would want to have forever?"17. The value of life. "You've got to ask yourself, "What things are worth having for their own sake? What's worth having in and of itself?" Hedonism in perspective.18. Deep philosophical thoughts regarding death..."Perhaps, then, the very fact that life is precious, that it won't endure, actually increases its value."19. The fear of death...a great discussion. "What are the appropriateness conditions for fear?"20. Suicide under the scope. "Under what circumstances, if any, does suicide make sense?"21. Further reading material suggested.

Negatives:1. The book is verbose. Professor Kagan takes his oath to educate seriously and in doing so tends to be repetitive and provides a number of detailed examples that may tire those readers/students who already understood the terms he introduces.2. Makes very limited use of other sciences. I was hoping for a bit of neuroscience and so forth but the professor succeeded in keeping it within his area of comfort.

In summary, I really enjoyed this book. Professor Kagan has taken a fascinating, complex philosophical topic such as death and has made it accessible for the masses in a respectful, engaging manner. My only real complaint is that the book is verbose and is repetitive with a purpose. I debated whether to give the book four or five stars but decided on five because after going back and reviewing my highlights; I concluded that this is such a wonderful reference on death and it was deserving of the five stars . If you are looking for an accessible philosophical book on death, it doesn't get much better than this. I highly recommend it!

Further suggestions:

"Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization" by Stephen Cave, "The Problem Of The Soul: Two Visions Of Mind And How To Reconcile Them" by Owen Flanagan, "The

Myth of Free Will, Revised & Expanded Edition" by Cris Evatt, "Free Will" by Sam Harris, "Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?" by Michael J. Sandel, "Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story" Jim Holt, "Sense and Goodness Without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism" by Richard Carrier, "The World Is Not as We Think It Is" by Dennis Littrell, "God: The Failed Hypothesis. How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist" by Victor J. Stenger, "Paranormality" by Richard Wiseman, "Scientific Paranormal Investigation" by Benjamin Radford, "The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self" by Thomas Metzinger, "The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths" by Michael Shermer, and "Braintrust" Patricia S. Churchland.

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