

THANATOLOGY AS MORAL PHILOSOPHY

An Essay Review of

DEATH, SOCIETY AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE, 7th edition

ROBERT J. KASTENBAUM

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Robert J. Kastenbaum is

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*I have known and admired Bob Kastenbaum for almost 20 years. Since the editors of **Contemporary Gerontology** have generously given me license to write an essay about both the author and the book under review, I begin with a thought experiment:*

Who is Robert Kastenbaum?

Assume that you've never had the pleasure of knowing this eminent and enigmatic man. Hoping to meet him, you walk into a crowded Gerontological Society meeting room. People are sitting in neatly arranged rows of chairs, waiting for the next session to begin. "Does anyone here know Robert Kastenbaum?" you ask. (Bob has missed so many GSA meetings recently that no one answers.) You persist. "If Robert Kastenbaum is in this room, will he please stand up?" you ask loudly. You scan the room.

A portly fellow, sitting alone in the back row, stands up. His silvery hair is frizzy; he wears a kindly, shy smile and a salt-and-pepper goatee. You walk down the center aisle to introduce yourself. But when you get to the back of the room, you are met by an entire row of portly, frizzy-haired, smiling, goateed men who all extend their hands to greet you. Scratching your head, you ask: "Will the real Robert Kastenbaum *please* stand up?"

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Perhaps biographers will someday try to wrestle the “real” Robert Kastenbaum to the ground. I do not envy them. Excluding the seven editions of the book under review, this is a man (just to mention a few high points): 1) who founded, then edited two journals (*International Journal of Aging and Human Development* and *Omega*) for nearly thirty years; 2) who wrote (with Ruth Aisenberg) the first book on the psychology of death (first published in 1972, now in its third edition and translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese); 3) who not only edited *The Encyclopedia of Adult Development* (1993) but wrote many of the entries himself; 4) who originally conceived the *Handbook of Humanities and Aging* and co-edited (with myself, David Van Tassel, and Ruth Ray) both editions (1992, 1999); 5) who has edited and written important work on the philosophical aspects of death and dying; 6) who wrote a book (with Vincent Mor and David Greer) on *The Hospice Experiment* (1988); 7) who is a leading contributor to the literature of creativity and aging; and 8) who now spends much of his time writing dramatic plays (eight of which are collected in *Defining Acts: Aging as Drama* [1994]);

screenplays, and librettos for operas which have been performed in the U.S. and abroad.

It may be helpful to think of Robert Kastenbaum as the Denis Diderot of contemporary thanatology and gerontology. Diderot was the 18th-century *philosophe* who organized and edited the most significant work of the French Enlightenment – a twenty-eight volume treatise on human affairs known as the *Encyclopedie*. While also writing essays, novels, and plays, Diderot infused the *Encyclopedie* with two revolutionary ideas: first, that a universal dictionary of the arts and sciences ought to include practical information about the working world; and second, that anyone -- not just the clergy, aristocracy, and monarchy -- could have access to rational truth.

Talking with him on the phone to prepare for this review, I realized that in many ways Robert Kastenbaum is a descendant of this father of the French Enlightenment. Like Diderot, he is a polymath; like Diderot, he is inspired by the search for rational and practical knowledge to improve human life in this world. And like Diderot, he is impatient with any religious or political doctrine which closes off inquiry in the name of authoritative truth. Unlike Diderot however, he has never done any jail time (yet) for his unorthodox

views. And if Diderot were around today, I suspect he could not match Robert Kastenbaum's sense of humor.

Bob grew up in a Jewish household, in a Bronx tenement on Bonner Street just off Morris Avenue. His father was a vaudeville musician who worked as a milkman to make a living. Having little use for religion, the elder Kastenbaum was caught off guard one day by his inquisitive four-year old son.

"What is God?" little Robert asked his father.

"God is a great bean," his father answered. After years of pondering this answer, he realized that his father had actually said "God is a great being." The pondering didn't end there.

"Every once in a while, something strayed into my tenement street life that seemed to come from a different world," he remembers. "I would I look up at the stars and wonder. I knew that there was something out there much larger than everyday experience that I needed to know about. I had the feeling that somehow I could figure it all out."

Bob remembers the first time he had strong personal feelings about aging and death. His parents had always been especially nice to Mr. and Mrs. Davis, an elderly couple in their neighborhood. Bob

was in high school when Mr. Davis died. He still remembers the impersonal and mechanistic funeral service, held in the local franchise of the Utter McKinley funeral home chain. “I was still a shy kid, but I had the impulse to jump up and say: *Hold it! Mr. Davis just died. Aren't we going to remember **him**?*”

The Kastenbaum family moved to Los Angeles, where Bob enrolled in East Los Angeles College as a journalism major in 1950. He transferred to Long Beach State College (now University) and majored in both psychology and philosophy. The philosophy faculty at the University of Southern California snatched up this diamond-in-the-rough and lured him into graduate school with a fellowship. But Bob found philosophy too disconnected from the world and switched to psychology, where he figured “all the important stuff in life was – love, creativity, death, world views.” Much to his dismay, psychologists had no more interest in these topics than philosophers. Undeterred, Bob began to see the ancient question of moral philosophy -- “how should we live our lives?” -- as the central concern of life span developmental psychology. His primary research focused on “time perspective”, he says, “as a way to put it all together.”

In 1959, the newly minted Dr. Robert Kastenbaum went off to Clark University in Worcester Massachusetts, to pursue an NIMH postdoctoral fellowship on time perspective. On the top floor of Hall Hall (named after Clark's founding president G. Stanley Hall), he worked in a little cell which he now claims was a converted urinal used by Sigmund Freud during Freud's visit to America in 1909.

In 1961, Kastenbaum started a psychology department at Cushing Hospital, then a geriatric facility in Framingham, Massachusetts, a few miles west of Boston. "I began working with older people," he remembers, "trying to help them deal with depression, with death and dying." After some initial studies of drug efficacy, he developed a series of clinical services and studies centering on pre-terminal geriatric care. "My first office was an old broom closet right next to the morgue."

In a culture still dominated by the denial of death, Kastenbaum found little to guide him, even in the scientific and professional literatures. No one had yet heard of Kubler Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969), Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1963), the right-to-die movement, or the hospice movement. The few existing theories of death and dying were not much help. "Anyway,

the mortality rate of those theories was very high,” he quips. Rather than try to build an overarching theory, Kastenbaum developed a new clinical and research tool known as the “psychological autopsy,” built around the central questions: “How did this person live? And how did she die?”

Reviewing the data in these psychological autopsies, Kastenbaum and his colleagues realized that “a lot more communication was taking place than professionals were picking up on.” In almost every case, important aspects of a person’s life remained unspoken or unheard during the dying process – “things that we learned after the person died and that would have helped us care for them.”

For over forty years, Robert Kastenbaum has devoted himself to research, clinical practice, and education as a pioneer in the virgin field of thanatology. In 1966, he taught the first American college course in the psychology of death at Wayne State University. In 1972, Springer Publishing printed the first edition of his book *The Psychology of Death*, written with Ruth Aisenberg.

The book under review -- *Death, Society, and Human Experience* -- was originally published in 1977; it was the first

multidisciplinary college textbook in the United States to address issues of death, dying, and bereavement. In the opening chapter of the seventh edition, Kastenbaum remembers those days when death was an unspeakable topic: “We have tried not thinking about death,” he writes. “Millions of us completed our school days without being exposed to substantial readings and discussions about dying, death, grief, and suicide. . . . Not thinking about death proved to be an ineffective maneuver. People continued to die . . . Survivors continued to grieve . . . Suicide rates doubled, then tripled among the young, and remained exceptionally high among older adults. . . . Who were we kidding? Neither an individual nor a society could face its challenges wisely without coming to terms with mortality.” (3)

Death, Society, and Human Experience is addressed to students enrolled in educational settings ranging from undergraduate liberal arts courses to training in the ministry, health professions, and the funeral home industry. Although the book is encyclopedic in scope, it aims to provoke exploration as well as to provide information. Students are encouraged to complete many self-inventories of their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and feelings about death. They are also invited to complete various

exercises, e.g. “Imagining your deathbed scene,” “Should I become a hospice volunteer?” “My Living Will,” and “Exploring your experience with death in childhood”. While the original edition focused primarily on individual death and survival, each subsequent edition of *Death, Society, and Human Experience* has devoted more space to violent death (murder, terrorism, disaster, accidents) and to policy concerns surrounding the end of life.

While this latest edition introduces new knowledge, theory, and cultural or religious beliefs, Kastenbaum never lapses into a false knowingness. He does not bow to the God of Science who promises that an accumulation of scientific knowledge and technological intervention will some day put an end to all suffering and mystery. New research findings and theories are deftly introduced but the writing is not “researchified.” Rather, Kastenbaum writes in the voice of a wise and compassionate uncle who understands the limits of human knowledge and control yet continually searches for ways to know and improve human living (and dying).

“I realize that there are some things we’re simply not going to know by psychosocial research methods,” he says. “Traditional scientific standards of empirical proof are not up to the task of

understanding, for example, what happens at the moment of a life altering experience.” What is needed to understand such elusive issues of human subjectivity? “Readers should not allow themselves to be limited by what can be proved and demonstrated. I want to help them cultivate an aptitude for interpreting human situations.”

Such cultivation requires that Science learn from its siblings -- Humanities and the Arts. This is precisely what Robert Kastenbaum has done throughout his career, and it helps explain why *Death, Society, and Human Experience* is such a treasure-trove. I can think of no other gerontologist or thanatologist who upholds the standards of scientific integrity and is so finely attuned to the myriad ways that society, culture, history, and religion shape the basic human experiences of aging and dying.

The 7th edition contains a number of substantive additions which exemplify the extraordinary range and breadth of Kastenbaum’s knowledge. Some examples:

--sudden and unexpected deaths (e.g. school shootings, the deaths of Princess Diana and of John Kennedy Jr. and his family) continue “to violate society’s sense of security and

order, requiring us to think again about how we respond to ‘special’ deaths as a society” (xvi);

- knowledge of funeral and memorialization practices is enhanced by considering the Vietnam Memorial wall, mummification in ancient Egypt and the early Soviet Union, the history of American cemeteries and funeral ceremonies;
- new theories and information which expand our understanding of suicide risk;
- new perspectives (the Native American Ghost Dance), on ghosts as possible proof of survival and consideration of near-death experiences both as private experience and as possible gravity force phenomena;
- careful examination of current concepts such as “the good death” and “virtual death”.

By engaging ideas about “the good death” and “virtual death,” Kastenbaum wants to help readers think broadly about ideals of dying; without preaching, he gently warns about the dangers of forgetting that the “virtual reality” of the digital age only lives within the old-fashioned reality of flesh-and-blood human beings who must live

and die within specific social arrangements that cannot be wished away by pushing the “delete” button.

Death, Society, and Human Experience is very considerate of readers and teachers. The book’s layout artfully breaks up long blocks of text with photographs, art work, tables, exercises, and inventories. An invaluable appendix contains selected learning resources categorized by national organization; scholarly and professional journals; selected videos; and internet resources.

Each chapter concludes with a summary, references, and a glossary – making it self-contained enough to be extracted and taught in conjunction with a multitude of other materials. Yet the order of chapters also creates a coherent whole. Chapters 1 & 2 orient readers to thinking about and defining death. Chapter 3 introduces and exemplifies the concept of “the death system” – “The interpersonal, sociophysical, and symbolic network through which society mediates an individual’s relationship to mortality.” Chapters 4, 5, & 6 discuss the process of dying, the hospice approach to terminal care, and end-of-life issues and decisions. Chapters 7,8, & 9 cover varieties of intentional death – suicide, violent death, and medically chosen death. Chapter 10 explores “Death in the World of

Childhood.” Chapters 11 & 12 deal with the world of those who survive: bereavement, grief, mourning, and the funeral process. The last three chapters address three essential questions: “Do We Survive Death?” “How Can We Help? *The promise of death education and counseling*”, and “Good Life, Good Death? *Trying to make sense of it all.*”

The last chapter contains a brief personal statement (“From Good Life to Good Death,” pp. 467-468). Here we see that Robert Kastenbaum has never stopped asking the question: how should we live our lives? In this modest, brief, and deceptively simple personal statement, Bob exemplifies a rarely articulated truth: Thanatology and gerontology require moral philosophy – not only the formal, disciplined knowledge of experts but also the self-conscious wrestling, weighing, judging, and choosing that inhere in a good life.

Bob Kastenbaum’s personal “credo” involves affirming life and acknowledging limits, balancing awareness of risk and danger against living a free and open-minded life. He is attracted to the Buddhist and Hindu perceptions of life and death as a “coexisting flow.” Having lost his own daughter Cynthia (to whom the book is dedicated) one week before her high school graduation, Bob

emphasizes the compassion that flows from knowing that none of us is exempt from grief and loss. His lifelong interest in death has been accompanied by an “ever fresh appreciation for life.” (468)

In his own unique way, Kastenbaum also echoes the God of his Biblical ancestors: “I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil . . . therefore choose life.” The deeper message is more subtle than it seems: we mortals are free to choose. But the choice we face is not a simple *Either/Or*: life or death. We are free to choose to live a good life, which includes the freedom to confront and shape our relationship to death -- which brings us back to the question of how to live our lives.

--Thomas R. Cole