

## Introduction

**Abstract** The introduction summarises a chapter outline and discusses some of the main concepts used.

**Keywords** Biological and social death · Posthumous harm  
Punishment and redemption

Part I of this book—the conceptual groundworks—is philosophically orientated in character. It consists of two themes: a reflection on what and when is death (Chap. 2), followed by a discussion on the possibility of posthumous harm, punishment and redemption (Chap. 3).

Chapter 2 theorises death as a form of change. Biologically speaking, death is a complex change where it is already present as part of the dying process. Death as a process (dying) can be contrasted with death as a state: dead *or* alive. This work broadens out what we mean by death and its timing. In doing so, it is worth distinguishing social death from biological death.

Social death is understood as a series of narrative changes to the identity of a person that happen as a consequence of real changes to their biology. In absolute terms, social death involves the extinction of someone's biographical narrative. For example, narrative death in an absolute sense is not only no longer being remembered, but also being extinguished from memory and the historical record altogether.

Social death is also intelligible as a processual change, where significant narrative changes configure and refigure personal identity before

and after biological death has taken place. As such, social death is not necessarily co-terminus with death as a biological event. For example, the social death of a person may happen as a result of brain injury, so that while an individual may physically survive a major brain injury, they may no longer be the same person. Indeed, certain brain injuries may lead to the ‘autobiographical’ death of a person, as in the case of those who are left in a permanent vegetative state.

Chapter 3 attempts to understand the harm, punishment and redemption of death. If the ontological and epistemological puzzle of what and when death is becomes the subject of Chap. 2, its normative sense is explored in Chap. 3. When death is has a normative as well as ontological/epistemological dimension. As well as asking the question what and when is death, we can ask the question: what constitutes the harm of death?

Chapter 3 argues that while it is impossible to physically harm or save the dead, it is possible to harm or redeem how we remember them. Looking deeply into the notion of harm, it is possible to distinguish intrinsic from symbolic harm in order to clarify what is meant by this. We can only intrinsically harm human beings that are still living. In this sense it is impossible to harm a corpse. This said, it is possible to symbolically or narratively harm the dead. We can harm:

- the narrative and fidelity of memory;
- the biography of a person that once existed;
- the memory of a person that once existed even though they are still physically alive;
- the memory of a person that no longer exists;
- the symbolic unity of the corpse, whereby dismembering the corpse affects being able to remember the person as they were.

Harming the dead in this way is understood as disremembering the dead, whereas faithfully remembering the dead, as they really were in life, implies redemption. It is this play of words that flags up the significance of the title of this volume. Furthermore, it is possible to conceptually distinguish types of posthumous harm and redemption, which is explored more deeply in Part II.

Part II of this book involves historical case studies—where the conceptual groundworks in Part I cross-pollinate and fertilise in a critical examination of carefully selected case studies where ideas of posthumous

punishment, harm and pardoning (redemption) are examined in their historical context.

Posthumous punishment involves retribution, by which the narrative of those that once existed is intentionally and deliberately harmed by institution or state. In its most virulent form, posthumous punishment involves a double form of retributive justice in the eighteenth century: hanging criminals (capital punishment) and dismembering the criminal corpse after hanging either by dissection or gibbeting (posthumous punishment). In its less virulent form, posthumous punishment in the twentieth century involves dishonouring the dead without dismemberment. For example, those deliberately executed by firing squad for a variety of military offences in the First World War were intentionally dishonoured as an example to others.

Chapter 4 opens with an examination of capital punishment through the lens of the British Army's 'shot-at-dawn' policy during the First World War. This leads into a historical discussion of the character of retributive justice and posthumous dishonour of those executed by firing squad, and whether or not posthumously pardoning those shot at dawn is at all appropriate today.

If it is possible to symbolically harm the dead, it is also possible to symbolically redeem their memory. This is intelligible in terms of posthumously pardoning those that were punished and dishonoured.

Some historians argue that posthumous pardoning is either unintelligible and or inappropriate because it is an attempt to re-write history. Such historians have not given enough thought as to what a posthumous pardon is good for. Indeed, it is argued that it is perfectly possible, as well as morally appropriate, to re-evaluate the past in the present for good reason; for example, by rehabilitating the identity of those that have been historically dishonoured in the memory of those still living today.

The chapter ends with a long view of the history of capital punishment, posthumous punishment and redemption, examining how these notions have repeated with a difference over time.

Chapter 5 looks into the idea of posthumous harm in the context of the improper removal and retention of children's organs and tissues at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in the 1990s. Posthumous harm in this historical context is understood as a failure of institutional trust, where moral blindness to inappropriate post-mortem practices thrived in the late twentieth century. While the *effect* may be very similar to

posthumous punishment in earlier times, the intention and context are not comparable. The supposed intention behind the inappropriate removal and retention of tissues and organs from dead children at Alder Hey was ostensibly motivated to save lives through medical research, even though in reality the institution colluded in perpetrating harm.

The Alder Hey scandal concerns a failure in a system of trust, where clinicians and their managers were wilfully blind to parental anger and grief brought about by inappropriate removal and retention of their dead children's organs. By outlining two different contexts of understanding Alder Hey and posthumous harm, there is an attempt to provide conceptual clarity as to why posthumous harm mattered at both an institutional level of trust and at a personal level of grief.

To end, there is an attempt at a historical long-view, where 'organ-snatching' at Alder Hey is a practice that has certain similarities with, as well as important differences to, 'body-snatching' in the Georgian period.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

