

# On the non-finality of physical death in classical Confucianism

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**Abstract.** There is probably no idea more difficult to contemplate clearly than death and dying, especially one's own. How we think about death, however, will surely be influenced by what we think about life and living in general, and more specifically how we define ourselves as human beings. The early Confucians viewed persons very differently than contemporary Western thinkers and developed a ritual orientation grounded in the family that had both ethical and religious (but not transcendental) dimensions, in which the death of the body was not seen as abrupt and final, but rather as a stage that began before our embodiment, and will continue long after its dissolution.

There is very probably no idea more difficult to think about clearly than death, especially one's own, and this holds true for philosophers no less than for anyone else. Herbert Fingarette, for example, has written:

One literally cannot imagine what it will be like to be dead—there's nothing to imagine. What one does imagine is the nearest analogy—being separated from loved ones. Trying to imagine death, one unwittingly imagines something else instead, something that critically misrepresents the matter.

This misrepresentation may reflect not only confusion but also a certain unconscious yet purposeful self-deception. To imagine myself separated from others is tacitly to deny my total non-existence.<sup>1</sup>

One thing that does seem clear, however, is that how we think about death and dying will be strongly influenced by our conceptions of life and living as a human being, in general, and more particularly, how we define and describe our unique selves within these general concepts. If this be so, it should prove philosophically fruitful to examine how other cultures have conceived human beings, how the persons in those cultures consequently defined and described themselves, and how those definitions and descriptions were reflected in attitudes and rituals associated with both the living and the dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Fingarette 1996, 3.