

Conference

Grief and Conflict

Dr. Mark Alfano, TU Delft

Ethics and Political Philosophy
Tuesday 29th November 2016
17h15-19h, Miséricorde, Room MIS04 4128

The fallen soldier is a traditional rallying cry for both hawks and doves. Walzer argues in *Just and Unjust Wars*, it is “important to say of those who died in war that they did not die in vain,” which he glosses in terms of there being “purposes that are worth dying for,” such as “political independence, communal liberty, human life” (1977, pp. 109-10). Hawks praise the deceased as a hero, celebrating his (or, in less common cases, her) virtues, such as courage, patriotism, and loyalty. Doves lament an unnecessary loss, reflecting on what might have been achieved by men or women of such mettle. But pacifists too can argue that soldiers have not died in vain if their deaths shock us into terminating a pointless war. For example, in well-known mourning texts from ancient Greece, Pericles (in a public eulogy) and Plato (in the *Menexenus*) compete to structure the meaning and value of Athenian citizenship by telling the story of recently-deceased soldiers in a way that emphasizes either their courage (in the case of Pericles) or their dedication to justice (in the case of Plato). Both understand that how we choose to remember the deceased expressively constitutes both individual and collective values, sentiments, and relationships. Pericles uses the occasion of patriotic grief to call for public recommitment to war and conflict with Sparta and her allies. Plato uses the same occasion to reorient Athens to justice, with militarism and empire side-lighted as instrumental to that higher value. In this paper, I launch from this historical basis to a contemporary discussion of the grief, virtue, and conflict. In so doing, I draw from and visualize an extensive archive of obituaries for fighters killed in action, including both foot soldiers of the Islamic State and American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.