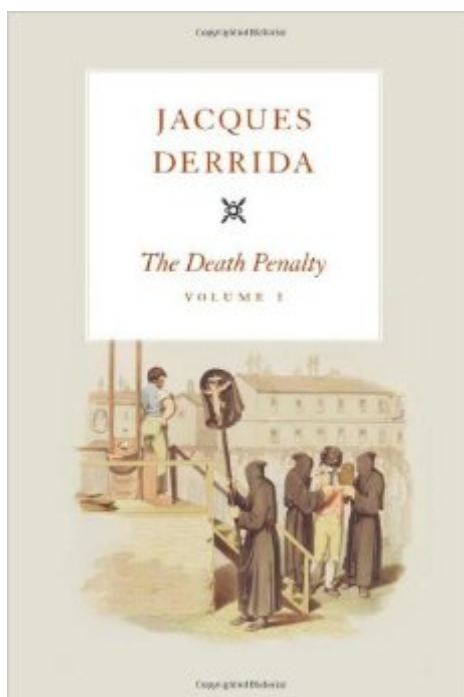


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The Death Penalty, Volume I (The Seminars Of Jacques Derrida)



Synopsis

In this newest installment in Chicago's series of Jacques Derrida's seminars, the renowned philosopher attempts one of his most ambitious goals: the first truly philosophical argument against the death penalty. While much has been written against the death penalty, Derrida contends that Western philosophy is massively, if not always overtly, complicit with a logic in which a sovereign state has the right to take a life. Haunted by this notion, he turns to the key places where such logic has been established—and to the place it has been most effectively challenged: literature. With his signature genius and patient yet dazzling readings of an impressive breadth of texts, Derrida examines everything from the Bible to Plato to Camus to Jean Genet, with special attention to Kant and post-World War II juridical texts, to draw the landscape of death penalty discourses. Keeping clearly in view the death rows and execution chambers of the United States, he shows how arguments surrounding cruel and unusual punishment depend on what he calls an "anesthetical logic," which has also driven the development of death penalty technology from the French guillotine to lethal injection. Confronting a demand for philosophical rigor, he pursues provocative analyses of the shortcomings of abolitionist discourse. Above all, he argues that the death penalty and its attendant technologies are products of a desire to put an end to one of the most fundamental qualities of our finite existence: the radical uncertainty of when we will die. Arriving at a critical juncture in history—especially in the United States, one of the last Christian-inspired democracies to resist abolition—"The Death Penalty is both a timely response to an important ethical debate and a timeless addition to Derrida's esteemed body of work."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is worth getting for the first session of the seminar alone. Derrida challenges his readers, who likely are against the death penalty (I certainly am), by showing that the argument against the death penalty always turns on its application (cruel and inhuman) not on the principle of the death penalty. He "begins before beginning" by giving a highly original and illuminating close reading of several passages from Exodus and addresses the contradictions between the commandment though shalt not kill and the death penalty for several offenses that follow in the judgments that supplement the decalogue. His larger argument (p. 32-33) is that the question "What is the death penalty?" or the question "what is the essence of the death penalty?" must be addressed historically and indirectly. Aligning Socrates, Jesus, a ninth century Islamic philosopher, and Joan of Arc, Derrida shows that in each case, the person put to death transgressed a religious offense, heard another voice (of the gods or of God) considered to be foreign and threatening. The death penalty plays out not only in a theater, a spectacle with witnesses, as Michel Foucault argues in Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison, but in a religious and political context. The problem with arguments in favor of abolishing the death penalty (and Derrida deeply wants to see the death penalty abolished), the problem is that arguments in against the death penalty and for it are governed by the same structure. There is no anti-theologico-politico structure, no atheologico-politico structure.

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