Dead people, like vegetables, can be pickled or preserved. You can also abandon them to the beasts of the field, burn them like rubbish or bury them like treasure. From embalming to cremation, all sorts of techniques are used to do something with the corpse. But the point is, something must be done. This is a constant and has been so for a long time. Early modern humans from the Paleolithic era onward—our direct ancestors—buried their dead. Even our Neanderthal cousins may have buried their dead. Early modern humans buried or laid out the bodies with flowers, tools or other artifacts. Some archaeologists have pointed out that burying the dead may have been a measure of protection against scavengers attracted by decaying bodies. However, one must remember that early humans were nomadic foragers, which would make it easy for them to avoid such invasion. Be that as it may, the fact that early humans did decorate corpses, lay out the bodies in particular postures or bury people with flowers, aligned horns or tools would support the notion that some ritualization of death is a very ancient human activity.

Ancient findings are often reported as evidence for the claim that early modern humans or even Neanderthals “had religion.” Whether valid or not—I will return to that question in a later chapter—the inference shows how confused our common ideas about religion can be. We assume that burying the dead in a ritual way is evidence for supernatural concepts—ancestors, spirits, gods—because we find a connection between these two phenomena in most human societies. But what is that connection?

All religions, or so it seems, have something to say about death. People die but their shadows stay around. Or they die and wait for the Last Judgement. Or they come back in another form. The connection between notions of supernatural agents and representations about death may take different forms in different human groups, but there is always some connection. Why is that so? One straightforward answer is that our concepts and emotions about death are quite simply the origin of religious concepts. Mortality; it would seem, naturally produces questions that religion answers and emotions that it helps alleviate.

We know that human minds are narrative or literary minds. That is, minds strive to represent events in their environment, however trivial, in terms of causal stories, sequences where each event is the result of some other event and paves the way for what is to follow. People everywhere make up stories, avidly listen to them, are good judges of whether they make sense. But the narrative drive goes deeper. It is embedded in our mental representation of whatever happens around us. Also, humans are born planners, our mental life is replete with considerations of what may happen, what will result if we do this rather than that. Having such decoupled thoughts may well be an adaptive trait, allowing a much better calculation of long-term risks than is available to other species, but it also implies that we represent vastly more life-threatening situations than we actually experience, and that the prospect of death is a very frequent item in our mental life.

The notion of religion emerging from a primordial and universal fear of mortality is one of the most popular scenarios for the origin of religion. But it makes sense to ask some difficult questions that the common scenario glosses over. Do humans really fear mortality in general? Are religious representations really about what happens after death? How does a human mind represent a dead person? How does the mind differentiate between the dead and the living? What do concepts of supernatural agents add to our notions of death and dying?
**DISPLACED TERROR AND COLD COMFORT**

The most natural and the most common explanation of religion is this: religious concepts are comforting, they provide some way of coping or coming to terms with the awful prospect of mortality by suggesting something more palatable than the bleak “ashes to ashes.” Human beings do not just fear life-threatening circumstances and strive to avoid them as much as possible—this much is true of all animals, providing a measure of how sophisticated they are at perceiving real and potential danger. Humans are also aware of the generality of death and of its inevitability.

Indeed, social psychologists observed that the very thought of general and inevitable mortality induces dramatic cognitive effects, often very remote from the topic of death itself. In experimental studies, subjects are asked to read a story or magazine article that highlights the inevitability of death. They are then asked a set of apparently unrelated questions—for instance, what would be the appropriate sentence for a particular theft, whether a minor offense should be punished, whether a description of some people’s behavior is consistent with their ethnic background. Their reactions are compared to those of subjects who had read an innocuous piece of prose with no mention of mortality. The difference between these two groups is always striking. Those who have read “mortality-salient” stories tend to be much harsher in their reactions to socially deviant behavior. They are less tolerant of even minor misdemeanors and would demand longer sentences and higher bail. They react more strongly to offensive use of common cultural symbols such as the American flag or a crucifix. They also become more defensive toward members of other groups and more prone to stereotype them, to find an illusory correlation between being a member of another social group and being a criminal. They also evidence stronger antipathy toward members of their own group who do not share their views. Awareness of mortality seems to trigger a socially protective attitude, according to which anyone who is even slightly different from us and any behavior that does not conform to our cultural norms induces strong emotions. Why is that so? 

Some social psychologists speculate that our attachment to social identity, to the feeling that we are members of a group with shared norms, may in fact be a consequence of the terror induced by mortality. In this “terror-management” account the principal source of motivation for human beings as for other animals is the evolutionary imperative to survive. Many cultural institutions—shared symbols, shared values, a sense of group membership—are seen as buffers against this natural anxiety. According to terror-management theorists, cultural institutions are a (somewhat illusory) remedy to such feelings because they provide safety and protection. Now criminals, outsiders and dissenters are all perceived as enemies of these institutions and therefore threats to our sense of safety, which would explain the experimental results. Also, proponents of this explanation suggest that many cultural institutions, above all religious institutions, promise some kind of escape from death that is conditional on good behavior, that is, on adherence to the local norms. Terror-management seems to provide a sophisticated and experimentally tested version of our common intuition that religion does provide a shield against mortality anxiety. After all, what religions seem to say about death is invariably that it is but a passage.

However, the explanation is not really plausible. The connection between emotions, cultural institutions and our evolution is real. But to understand it we must consider more seriously the way evolution by natural selection fashions individuals and their dispositions, including their representations of death and mortality. The “survival imperative” is not quite as self-evident as it seems. True, humans and most species avoid life-threatening circumstances, but is that really because there is an evolved drive to survive at all costs? Evolutionary biology suggests that the explanation for many behaviors and capacities lies not in the organism’s drive to survive but in a
drive to pass on its genes. Some environments frequently present an organism with a choice between surviving but failing to pass on its genes or preserving the genes without surviving. In such situations self-sacrifice genes spread, as explained in the previous chapter.

So if human emotions are explained by the history of the species, we should expect a more complex set of fears and anxieties, as there are many different kinds of threats to genetic transmission. The potential loss of offspring would be one major component of this panoply, but so would a failure to attract one’s parents’ attention and investment, the absence of a sufficiently high level of trust in one’s social network, the fact that one is not considered attractive, or the fact that one is clearly at the bottom of the social ladder. All these present a clear threat to genetic transmission and are clearly connected to anxiety, but these situations are all specific and require specific strategies. Complex organisms do not survive by having “death-avoidance behavior” programmed into their minds, because different life-threatening situations require different responses.

Although terror-management is too primitive an explanation, it helps us frame the question in a way that will prove fruitful. There are emotional programs and mental representations associated with death. The representations are complicated and not entirely consistent, because different mental systems are activated by death-related thoughts. It is only against this background that we can understand how religious representations of death become salient.

Considering this mental background should help us solve several mysteries in the religious treatment of the topic. Anthropologists are generally unimpressed by the idea that religion provides comfort, and for good reason. First, they know that in many human cultures the religious outlook on death is anything but reassuring. We need not search out exotic examples to prove the point. A serious Christian with a serious belief in predestination does not really illustrate the idea that religion provides a buffer against anxiety. In fact many religious rituals and religious myths provide little comfort against an anxiety that they seem to emphasize and enhance rather than dampen. Second, most religions simply do not promise a premium in the form of salvation or eternal bliss to well-behaved citizens. In many human groups, dead people become ancestors or spirits. This is represented as the normal outcome of human life, not as a special prize awarded for high morality. Finally and most importantly, what religions say about death is very often not centered on mortality in general but on very specific facts about dying and dead people. Which is why we should embark on a short anthropological tour of the evidence.

DEATH RITUALS: SOMETHING MUST BE DONE

In every single group in which anthropologists have conducted fieldwork, they have been able to elicit some description of what happens after death (often from baffled people wondering why anyone would ask such questions) and what is to be done when people die (a much more sensible question). As I said several times, few people in the world indulge in speculative theology. Their representations of death are activated when particular people die and because of that event, not as a form of contemplative reflection on existence. Also, people’s explicit notions only convey a part of their mental processes. What goes without saying generally goes unsaid. This is why anthropologists do not content themselves with asking various people about their conceptions of life and death but also observe how the death of a group member triggers particular behaviors. In any human group, there are prescribed rules and common, implicit norms about what is to be done upon such an occasion. There is also a wide spectrum of variation among groups, from those where such prescriptions are minimal and the representations associated extremely spare, to places where baroque death rituals are associated with precise and complicated descriptions of what death is.5
Hunter-gatherers, whose economy depends entirely on wild plants and game, generally have fairly simple death rituals for the simple reason that they have few resources to invest in complex ceremonies. Their peasant neighbors, who generally despise and fear them, say that they just abandon corpses to wild beasts. (This is what my Fang interlocutors often said about the pygmies.) This, however, is a gross distortion. Consider for instance the funerary ceremonies of the Batek, a loose federation of hunting-gathering groups of Malaysia. The corpse is wrapped in the finest sarong available, bedecked with flowers and leaves, then placed on a comfortable sleeping mat. The mourners then carry the body on a stretcher to a distant place in the forest, preferably away from familiar paths. The men build a platform and cover it with sweet-smelling herbs, on which they lay out the corpse. The family members generally put a number of artifacts on the platform, such as a smoking-pipe, some tobacco, a blowpipe and darts, etc. They blow tobacco smoke onto the head of the deceased. After the stretcher has been lifted on top of the platform, people plant sticks around the tree and recite spells over them, to deter tigers from shaking the tree. The family members then come back periodically to check the corpse and observe the process of decomposition, as long as there are any remnants of the body. On such visits they generally burn incense next to the platform. This lasts until even the bones have disappeared, probably taken away by scavengers. Note how even seemingly simple practices of this kind are in fact ritualized. You do not just take a corpse to the forest. You must do it as a group; people sing and recite particular spells; one must place particular objects next to the body.

One frequent characteristic of more complex death rituals is the practice of double funerals. The first set of rituals is organized immediately after death. It is concerned with the fact that the dead body is dangerous, and in practice it generally concludes with a first burial. The second part, which may occur months or years later, is supposed to turn the deceased body into a more stable, proper, less dangerous entity. In many places this is the point at which people disinter the dead, wipe the bones clear of any remaining flesh and put them in their final resting place. The Berawan in the Philippines have such double rituals, as described by anthropologist Peter Metcalf. After death, the corpse is exposed on a specially constructed seat in front of the house, so that all close and distant kin can come over and inspect it or touch it. During this period the rest of the community is supposed to gather every night, sing and dance and generally make as much noise as possible. People frequently talk to the corpse, asking why he or she “chose” to leave, offering the corpse a cigarette or some food. This is concluded by the burial proper. In some cases the corpse is placed in a coffin and buried in a graveyard. In other cases relatives put the body in a jar to accelerate the decomposition. A pipe is inserted in the bottom of the jar to collect fluids. As Metcalf notes, this procedure is also used for making rice-wine, except that in the case at hand the object of interest is the solid sediment, not the fluids. After a period of weeks or months, decomposition has gone far enough that the remains can be taken out of the jar or coffin and the bones separated from whatever flesh is left. This marks the beginning of a new ten-day ritual and much chanting. The songs call for the deceased to wash, put on nice clothes and journey up a river toward the land of the dead. The bones are finally either buried or conserved in a wooden mausoleum.

Why such complicated rites? Anthropologist Robert Hertz noted that double funerals make death rituals very similar to rites of passage such as marriage or initiation. In initiation for instance, a first ceremony usually marks the opening of the transformation process that turns, for instance, boys into men. There is then a period of seclusion, during which all sorts of prohibitions are imposed on the young candidates along with various ordeals. Then a formal
Chapter Six: Why Is Religion About Death?

reentry ceremony marks their accession to a new status. They have become full-fledged adults. Double funerals seem to work according to the same logic. A living person is, obviously, a member of a social group. So is a dead ancestor, since the dead provide the connection between various living people, as well as authority (“We must behave the way the ancestors wanted”) and power (misfortune is often a result of offending the ancestors). Now the passage between these two stages is what the rituals emphasize and organize. The transition is made conceptually clearer by emphasizing the departure and arrival points.8

After this stage, representations about the dead are markedly different. In some groups the dead are no longer construed as participants in social relations. Their social role lasts no longer than people’s memories of the persons. As anthropologist Edoardo Viveiros de Castro put it, describing representations of the souls of the dead in the Amazon: “The participation of the dead in the discourse of the group lasts only as long as the experiential memory of the living. A deceased soul only remembers those who remember him and only reveals himself to those who saw him alive.” In other places the dead remain as ancestors, but most features of their personal histories are lost. The dead as ancestors often become generic. As anthropologist Meyer Fortes put it: “What must be particularly stressed is that ancestors behave in exactly the same ways, in the ways expected of them and permitted to them in the ancestral cult, quite irrespective of what their lifetime characters might have been. The ancestor who was a devoted father... is divined to be the source of illness, misfortune and disturbance in his descendants’ lives in exactly the same way as is an ancestor who was a scoundrel and spendthrift.” What remains is their genealogical identity, which serves as a reference point to the social group—knowledge of who the dead were supports our inferences about relations with close or distant kin. This is why, as anthropologist Jack Goody noted, ancestor cults are particularly important where people inherit material property from the ancestors, especially so in groups where they must manage that inheritance as a collective.9

THE BODY AS THE ISSUE

Whatever their variety, behaviors that accompany death highlight several general traits of human thinking in this domain:

People have only vague notions about death and the dead in general. Although people in many places are in constant interaction with the dead, their conceptions of what the dead are like are often extremely vague. To return to the Kwaio ancestors, Roger Keesing noted how very few people bothered to think about the exact process whereby people who died became ancestors. The ones who did think about such things had personal intuitions, often less than coherent; but most did not see the point of such questions. Note that these are people who talk to the ancestors every day and interpret most events of their lives in terms of what the ancestors want and do. As D. F. Pocock puts it, “The villagers of Sundarana [in Gujarat, North India], like the majority of peoples known to social anthropologists, were very vague about the afterlife.”10

People have more detailed representations of the recently dead, of what they can do to the living, etc., than about death as a permanent state. The presence of the recently dead is far more likely to be dangerous than reassuring. For one thing, people give many accounts of how the dead are not quite dead; in some form or other their presence is still felt, but this is not, as the comfort theory implies, a welcome presence—far from it. As for the really dead, as it were, the people who have gone beyond that stage, the theories are often very vague. This is true even in places with literate specialists and theologians. For instance, the famous Tibetan book of the dead is called Bar-Do, which means “between-two” and is, precisely, about the transition between this world and another one, not so much about the details of that other one. Most representations about death and the dead are concerned with the transitional period between the event of death
and some further state. The dead are “sent off on a journey,” they are “prepared for the voyage,” and so on. The metaphors change but their essential point is similar. The rituals are about a transitional period.

**Rituals are about the consequences for the living.** This is important because it does not quite fit the notion that our conceptions of death are all about the anxiety surrounding mortality. People have feelings about their own eventual death, and they have rituals about death, but the rituals are about other people’s death. In case you find that self-evident, compare this situation with that in fertility rituals. People are worried about their crops and they have rituals that are supposed to help them grow. But in the case of death we find a very different situation. If mortality anxiety really was the point of all this, we would expect the rituals to be about how to avert death or delay the inevitable. But that is not the case at all. The rituals are about what may happen to the living if they do not handle the corpses as prescribed.

**The rituals are all about corpses.** What we call funerary rituals are overwhelmingly about what to do with the body. In these rituals, it seems that what creates anguish or other such emotional states is very much the presence of dead bodies. Again, this may seem self-evident but it is not clear how all this would fit the “anxiety” account. Why does it matter so much that the dead should be thoroughly broiled or carefully pickled? There are of course local explanations for each particular prescription. But since we find *some* prescription in all human groups there must be some more general reason.

What makes anthropology worthwhile is that it forces us to question what would seem self-evident. We know that people the world over follow special ritualized recipes to handle dead bodies. We do not usually look for the causes of that behavior, because we think the rituals in question express some definite, explicit beliefs about death and mortality. But then it seems that in many places beliefs about death are in fact quite vague; only beliefs about dead bodies seem definite. So instead of adding our own vague hypotheses to people’s vague concepts, we should perhaps consider the facts that are right under our nose. The reason why people feel the need to handle corpses, the reason why they have done that for hundreds of thousands of years may well be something to do with the corpses themselves. Or rather, something to do with the way a human mind functions when faced with that very particular kind of object.

Obviously, the body of a close relative is the object of intense and complex feelings; the body of an unknown person may trigger different kinds of emotions, but it is unlikely to leave us indifferent. Because these reactions are intense and emotional, we may think that they have nothing much to do with computations and with the way the brain represents information. But that would be wrong. Emotions are complex programs in the mind. They are activated when other systems in the mind produce particular results. So it might be of help to consider the different systems involved in representing a dead person. I say “different systems” because, as we saw in previous chapters, any situation (however trivial) is treated by different inference systems that handle its different aspects. What shapes the emotional reaction is a combination of different mental processes. A dead body is a biological thing. We have special systems in the mind that handle some biological properties of living things and they are probably active and describing that object too. Also, it is a biological thing in a very special state, and some mental systems may be activated by what corpses look like. Finally, a corpse is a person. The mental systems that describe persons will be active too. All these special representations produced in the basement may better explain what is so special about dealing with a corpse.

**POLLUTION AND ITS CAUSES**

As John Ruskin once put it, perhaps under the influence of a strong stimulant, “I don’t believe any one of you would like to live in a room with a murdered man in the cupboard, however well
preserved chemically—even with a sunflower growing out of the top of his head.” Quite. But our task here is to explain, perhaps with less flamboyance and more scientific precision, this aversion—not just to murdered men but to corpses in general.

Although modern ways of life somehow shield us from the ghastly facts, dead bodies are biological objects in a process of decomposition; hence the widespread notion that corpses are intrinsically impure or polluting. As an ancient Zoroastrian text stipulates, anyone who touches a corpse is polluted “to the end of his nails, and unclean for ever and ever.” This notion of being “polluted” by contact with corpses is of course variable in its intensity, but it is fairly general. Corpses are even said to contaminate the air around them. Among Cantonese Chinese, “white affairs” specialists (a euphemism for undertakers) are said to be so polluted by their work that most other people will not even talk to them, for fear of receiving some of that pollution back. A dead body contaminates the environment by releasing “killing air.” When there is a death in the village people promptly take home their young children and even their domestic animals, thought to be particularly sensitive to such pollution. This is of course not confined to China. Describing the death rituals of the Merina in Madagascar, Maurice Bloch notes that “as long as the corpse is still wet and decomposition is therefore still taking place it is supremely polluting and any contact however indirect requires ritual cleansing.

In some places the disgust and danger of dead bodies is seen in a way that requires the intervention of specialists, who are supposed to wallow into the pollution and absorb it. In the old kingdom of Nepal, upon the death of the king a priest would be summoned whose duty it was to sleep in the king’s bed, smoke his cigarettes and use his possessions. He could also order his way around the royal household, order any food he liked and expect his orders to be obeyed. However, the royal cooks would contaminate all his food with a paste made from the bones of the deceased king’s head. The point of all this was that the priest would (quite literally in this case) incorporate the corpse and absorb all the pollution. Only a high-caste Brahman was considered pure enough to collect that much pollution. After this period of bizarre intimacy with the king’s Body Natural, the Brahman was promptly expelled from the kingdom, indeed frog-marched to its borders and often beaten up, probably to make sure he would not stop on his way or consider coming back.

The pollution of the dead is also the reason why, in so many places in the world, grave-digging and the handling of corpses are carried out by a specialized, ritually avoided and generally despised caste. This is the case in West Africa, where these specialists are generally considered unclean, must marry within the caste and avoid direct contact with regular folk. These specialists also forge iron and make pots (both are considered undignified occupations) but the contact with corpses really is what makes them impure and dangerous. In central Africa where blacksmiths were not in charge of burials, they were high-status craftsmen with no pollution. There is evidence for similar norms in the Mediterranean. For instance Artemidorus of Daldis wrote that dreaming that you are a tanner is a bad omen because tanners are also undertakers. In many places in the world undertakers are confined in special neighborhoods outside the walls of the city lest they pollute the rest of the community.

People find all these concepts, however vague, intuitively adequate because they already have the intuition that there is something to avoid in a decomposing corpse. Notions of pollution seem a direct expression of intuitions delivered by the contagion system described a few chapters back. That system is mainly concerned with the fear of contact with unseen contaminants. It obeys special principles that are not found in other mental systems. It specifies that the source of danger is there even if it cannot be detected; that all types of contact with the source may
transmit the contaminant; that the “dose” of contaminant is irrelevant. Now these are very much the implicit inferences people use when dealing with corpses. What makes undertakers impure or revolting is that they handle corpses. It does not matter that no one has a precise idea why corpses would be polluting. In the same way, it does not really matter whether these specialists touch the corpses or breathe fumes from the decaying bodies, or have any other kind of contact with the corpses. It does not really matter either how much actual contact takes place or how often. All these assumptions are completely self-evident to most human minds, and I think this may be explained simply by the fact that contact with the body is immediately perceived as similar to contact with any obvious source of pathogens.

This is why it may be misguided to see too much symbolism or magical thinking in the quasi-universal avoidance of corpses. People’s mental system for contagion is not activated because the dead are polluting for some metaphysical reason but more directly because they actually are a dangerous source of pathogens. What makes the avoidance sound symbolic or mystical are the explicit notions (“bad air,” “impurity”) people invoke to explain intuitions they had to start with.

The concepts are notoriously vague and that is not too surprising, because we often have very vague explicit concepts in situations where our mental basement systems produce very precise intuitions. For evolutionary reasons humans may be rather good at detecting definite sources of contamination yet remain very vague in their explicit reasons for avoiding them.

Activation of the contagion system may well be one major reason why we find these special attitudes toward dead bodies the world over, why special handling of corpses is present from the earliest stages of modern human cultures, and why it takes on this overtone of urgency and great though undefined danger. But this is not the whole explanation. People do not perform elaborate rituals to dispose of all sources of biological pollution. Another, obviously important component of people’s emotional reaction is that a corpse is not just a mass of polluting agents but also a living thing that is not alive any longer, a conspecific, and very often a previously known person.

DEATH, PREDATION AND INTUITION

The connection between representations of death and representations of supernatural agents is often considered a question of metaphysics, of how people consider their existence in general. But notions of death are also based on a mental representation of biological processes. A good way to evaluate our intuitive understanding of such processes is to study how it develops in young children. Psychologists used to think that death was virtually incomprehensible to young children. It is true that questions such as “What happens at death?” or “Where do dead people go?” will leave most young children baffled. On the basis of this kind of reaction, Jean Piaget and other developmental psychologists concluded that the whole domain was beyond the grasp of children.

However, this is completely unfair to the children, for several reasons. One is that you cannot really test a cognitive system by asking explicit questions. Children may have intuitions about death without being able to explicate them. Second, many of the questions Piaget and his colleagues asked children were of a kind that no adult could really answer in a precise and satisfactory manner. Even if you have a very definite theological answer, the question “Where do dead people go?” really is a difficult one. There was another complicating factor in these tests. Psychologists were wondering whether children had the concept of death as a biological phenomenon. But they asked questions about people. Now children’s concepts about living things often imply a sharp distinction between people and other animals. In some cases, the psychologists tried to make the questions more natural or easier by asking the child to think about dead people they had known, which would in fact confuse matters even further, for reasons
I will explain below. In other words, the results seemed plausible but the methodology may have been flawed.

Indeed, children produce much more precise intuitions when they are tested indirectly—for instance, if they are asked to predict the outcome of a particular chain of events or determine which of the characters in a story (some of whom have been killed) are still able to move, will continue growing up or will be able to talk, etc. For “dying” is a complex concept that combines the end of biological processes such as growing up with the impossibility of animate motion, the absence of goal-directed behavior, the absence of mental representations. As we know, these different aspects are handled by different mental systems; so understanding what is special about a corpse may also require different types of inferences.

A direct effect of this combination of various systems is that children tend to produce intuitions on scenarios of human death (where all the systems mentioned above are activated at the same time) that are different from those they produce on animal death (where animacy is the main focus). Developmental psychologist Clark Barrett pursued this difference and tried to evaluate the extent to which children’s intuitions are particularly focused on contexts of predation. Reasoning from an evolutionary standpoint, Barrett thought that it would be very strange indeed if a young mind were really unable to produce inferences on such a crucial problem. Humans and their hominid ancestors have been both predators and prey for a very long time. They probably have mental dispositions for understanding what happens in such contexts.

Indeed, Barrett found that children’s intuitions about predation stories revealed a much more sophisticated understanding of death than had previously been attributed to children. Even four-year-olds seemed to understand that what happens as a result of successful predation is that (1) the prey cannot move anymore, (2) it will not grow anymore, (3) it is not conscious anymore, (4) this is irreversible. In other words, in this limited context, children seemed to activate the precise expectations that constitute the adult understanding of death.

If children have such intuitions from the age of three or four, why are they so confused when they are asked about the death of people? In particular, about their relatives? And why is it that even adults find theoretical questions about death so confusing? Barrett’s results confirm that death is handled by different cognitive systems, so that you can elicit clear intuitions from children only by getting them to focus on one particular aspect. This is true for adults too. To get a better picture of all this, we must move on to another crucial aspect of the dying process, the connections with our implicit conception of what a person is.

**WHAT IS A PERSON?**

For a long time, anthropologists have been intrigued by cultural differences in how people define what a person is, what makes him or her different from inanimate objects, from animals, from other persons. As happens frequently in anthropology, what seems a simple enough question reveals very complex thoughts, not all of which are easily expressed. I could say that I have life, which a rock does not have, that I have sentience, which a worm does not seem to have, that I am a particular person, which sets me apart from other human beings, that I have a body that is also different from other bodies. To be a person, then, one needs to have these different components: life, sentience, personal identity. Losing life would make me a corpse, losing sentience would make me a zombie, and losing my body would make me a ghost.

Now the way these components are described differs a lot from one place to another. For instance, Keesing reports that the Kwaio see a person as composed of a body, a “breath-that-talks” and a “shadow.” It is the “breath-that-talks” that goes away with death and then resides with the ancestors. Among the Batek of Malaysia there are slightly different concepts. A person
is made up of lih (the body), źawa (life) and bayang (shadow). Only humans and other breathing animals have źawa. The bayang is not just the shadow, for plants do not have it. It is “a soft, transparent entity which inhabits the entire body” as K. Endicott reports, which leaves the body upon death and defines personal identity.¹⁶

People generally use conventional metaphors to describe the various components, which is no surprise as it is quite difficult to express what defines identity. Different individuals may have slightly different takes on how the metaphors should be understood. For instance, some people assume that breath is quite literally what makes living things live, while others think that breathing is just an effect of being alive. Also, when people make statements about such matters there is a lot that for them just goes without saying and that therefore is not said at all. For instance, the Batek do not say that each person has an individual shadow, although this can be inferred from what they say.

There is one major reason, in my view, why such concepts are often vague and their interpretation idiosyncratic. They are about domains of reality for which we have very specific intuitions that are not delivered by conscious, deliberate processes. So our explicit notions of person-components may be a feeble attempt to describe explicitly some processes that happen intuitively (in the same way as our common notion of “momentum” is a feeble attempt to explain our very precise physical intuitions).

The first inference system involved in our intuitions about persons is the intuitive psychology system. When we interact with people, it is on the basis of what this system tells us of their representations. That is, the system creates automatically a particular description of what a situation is like as seen by the people we interact with. It also produces inferences on what inferences they are likely to draw from what happens and what we say, and so forth.

Another important system is the animacy system. This is quite different from the intuitive psychology system, because it does not require the same input and does not produce inferences about the same aspects of the person. The animacy system is activated by the sight of any object that moves in a purposeful manner. It produces expectations and inferences about animals and persons. For instance, as Clark Barrett’s experiments suggest, the animacy system would produce very different expectations for an animal that has been the object of successful predation and one that escaped. The former is not expected to react to what’s around it, to act in pursuance of any goal, to grow, to move of its own accord, etc. The one that escaped is intuitively expected to move about, have goals, etc.

Another crucial dimension of any interaction with people is, obviously, who the person is whom we are dealing with. This is so completely obvious to all human minds that it is difficult to realize that this is to a large extent a consequence of the kind of animals we are. The main system that helps us understand whom we are dealing with constitutes what we could call a person-file system, a kind of mental Rolodex or Who’s Who of the person’s social environment. This system keeps “files” on every single person we interact with, with memories of past interaction episodes. The system also files people’s general dispositions, facts about their histories, etc. It keeps records of different people as different entries in a vast biographical encyclopedia. Keeping a file is of no use unless you can retrieve it at short notice, and retrieve the right one.

Several other systems provide information that help the person-file system identify the person we are dealing with: there is a face-recognition system that can store thousands of different faces and associate the relevant file with the relevant face-appearance. (Note what a great effort it requires to remember the names of all the people we meet socially, yet what an easy task it is to associate the faces with what they said, what they did, how we liked them and so on.) Other
information can be used: we also identify people’s voices quite distinctively, as well as their gait and other such cues.

Another symptom of this dissociation between inference systems may be the feeling of guilt that so often surrounds funerals. Why feel guilty when we bury relatives? No good explanation springs to mind. Perhaps this familiar experience makes more sense in terms of cognitive dissociation. Disposing of the corpse is mandated by some mental systems for which this makes sense because the body is represented as an inanimate object (animacy system) and as a signal of danger (contagion system, predation system). But disposing of the corpse also involves handling a person who is not yet absent, as far as our person-file system is concerned.

**When Different Systems Are Not in Harmony**

Specialized systems produce inferences from different cues and produce expectations about different aspects of a person or animal, but they all exchange information. This exchange requires that the information be coherent. For instance, if the face-recognition system delivers information that a person is familiar, the person-file system should try and retrieve a file for the person. If the animacy system states that the person is moving in a goal-directed manner, the intuitive psychology system should produce inferences about what the goals are, based on what information is accessible to the person. In general, information from one system also helps correct or fine-tune information from another one. If your person-file says that so-and-so is an avid eater, the fact that they charge right across the room to the kitchen is immediately translated in terms of goals (getting to the refrigerator) and mental representations (a hope that some delicacies will be found in there).

This picture of the mind as orchestrating different sources of evidence and different inference-systems would predict that incoherent output from any system, or a lack of collaboration between these systems, will wreak havoc with ordinarily smooth operation. This is indeed what happens in a variety of forms of brain impairment caused by infection or stroke or head injury.

Prosopagnosia is one such pathology. Patients cannot recall who people are by looking at their faces. It is not that their visual abilities are generally impaired. Indeed, in all other visual tasks they can discriminate between different shapes and images, and they can recall associations between images. It is only faces that pose a special problem. Note that this deficit is generally limited to human faces. One patient who became a sheep-farmer learned to identify the individual “faces” of his own sheep. The impairment is not extended to all aspects of persons, as voices and other contextual information are still identified correctly. A spectacular demonstration of this limited impairment is that patients are sometimes better than nonpatients at particular tasks. For instance, faces seen upside-down are particularly difficult for most people to identify. (To test that, open a newspaper upside-down and look at the photographs of various politicians or film stars. Chances are, you will not be able to recognize them till you turn the paper right side up.) When those suffering from prosopagnosia are presented with several faces the right side up and asked to match them to various upside-down images, they are sometimes better than normal subjects at performing this task. Why is that? In normal subjects, face information is not handled by the same systems as other complex visual shapes. It is sent to special brain areas. Now these require a particular configuration of features (eyes above nose, etc.) and are just confused by stimuli that do not conform to these requirements. In contrast, in those with prosopagnosia the face information is sent to brain areas that deal with complex visual shapes in general. These brain areas are quite good at handling rotation, inversion, etc., which would explain the patients’ good performance with inverted stimuli. In prosopagnosia, the face-recognition system either does not deliver any output anymore because it is turned off, or it delivers output that the person-
file system for some reason cannot handle. We do not know exactly how the brain injury translates into this strange impairment, but it clearly affects a separate system for human face recognition.  

People with a rarer form of impairment known as Capgras syndrome do recognize the face (they identify the person), and the person-file system retrieves the relevant information, yet something goes wrong. People with this syndrome have a strong intuition that the person they are dealing with cannot be the real one. This intuition is often so strong that they come to suspect that the “real” person has been abducted by aliens, is possessed by spirits, has sent a clone or look-alike or twin to take her part, etc. They recognize from indicators such as facial appearance (as well as other consistent cues, such as voice) that the person should be identified as XYZ, but the person-file system still does not deliver a clear answer to the question of who the person is. This kind of problem may be caused by the fact that two distinct systems are activated in person-file: One system simply keeps track of the facts about the person we are dealing with; the other system associates emotional responses with particular files. The pathology in that case would stem from the fact that if the emotions are absent, then the person-file system does not accept the identification delivered by the face-recognition system. (Incidentally, Capgras syndrome patients sometimes have these delusions about a pet, showing that the person-file and its connections to emotional response are not exclusively geared to actual persons but to living things treated by the brain as persons.) In a dramatic form of such delusions, some patients find their whole environment strangely unreal, which leads them to think they may be actually dead.  

In Chapter 3, I described a third kind of person-interaction pathology: the inability of the intuitive psychological system to provide adequate descriptions of other people’s mental states. This impairment is typically found in autistic subjects, and it too stems from a very specific malfunction. Autistic children seem able to recognize goal-directed action. But they have great difficulty in representing other agents’ beliefs or objects of attention. This may be caused by the fact that one of the systems (of intuitive psychology) is not operating, is not delivering inferences in a format that other systems can handle, or does not have access to the representations created by the other systems. Again, it is difficult to judge, in the present state of neuropsychological knowledge, which of these is the case. However, we do know that the impairment is limited and that it affects only particular types of inferences in social interaction. People who are mentally retarded are not autistic: they may have difficulties computing complex social situations, but they are attuned to the social nature of such situations, they know that other people see the world from different perspectives, and so on.

To sum up, interaction with other people requires delicate interconnection and calibration between different systems that focus on different aspects of a person. I have described various pathological conditions in which this breaks down. But there are also objects commonly encountered in the world that can put us in such dissociative states, that is, objects that can trigger incompatible intuitions and inferences in the different systems.

CORPSES INDUCE DISSOCIATION

Dead bodies are to some extent like metamorphoses; they are counterintuitive, yet real. The difference is that biological metamorphoses are an amusing but not too consequential part of our natural environment. Dead bodies, in contrast, are a vastly more important part of our social environment. They are represented in ways that both warrant some common inferences about social interaction and at the same time contradict these inferences. So they create the kind of dissociation that in other contexts we see in people with brain damage or other forms of cognitive impairment.
Being faced with a dead person triggers a complex set of inferences from various systems, and these do not seem to match. The sight of a dead person certainly activates particular inferences from the animacy system. When we see dead animals, we have similar intuitions. We intuitively assume that there is a time at which the animal will cease to move for good, and that it does not have goals or objects of attention after that. For persons, the situation is a bit different because the animacy system and the intuitive psychology system typically exchange lots of information with the person-file system.

Now something happens with the death of known people that is both familiar as an experience and rather strange once described in terms of these systems. On the one hand, the animacy system is quite clear in its output concerning such persons. They are ex-persons, they have no goals, etc. On the other hand, it seems that the person-file system just cannot “shut off.” It keeps producing inferences about the particular person on the basis of information about past interaction with that person, as if the person were still around. A symptom of this incoherence is the hackneyed phrase we have all heard or used at funerals: “He would have liked it this way.” That is, he would have approved of the way we have conducted his funeral. Now, as many people have felt as they uttered this, there is something compelling and yet absurd about such an idea. Judging whether ritual arrangements are appropriate is a typical action of live beings; the only way you can have your own funeral is by becoming a dead body, and dead bodies do not pass judgement on things, indeed do not do anything. Still, the thought occurs and seems somehow natural because our person-file system is still active and because its inferences are produced without using the information provided by the animacy system. It is when we confront the two sources of information that the sentence becomes absurd.

We all run person-file based inferences on dead people. We are angry at dead people, we approve of what they did, scold them for having done this or that and very often resent them for dying in the first place. Now note that all these feelings are about beings for whom the animacy system would undercut such inferences immediately. In other words, being faced with a dead person whom we knew is very much like being affected by one of the dissociative pathologies I described above. That is, one of the inference systems is busy producing inferences while another delivers output that excludes such inferences.

Another symptom of this dissociation between inference systems may be the feeling of guilt that so often surrounds funerals. Why feel guilty when we bury relatives? No good explanation springs to mind. Perhaps this familiar experience makes more sense in terms of cognitive dissociation. Disposing of the corpse is mandated by some mental systems for which this makes sense because the body is represented as an inanimate object (animacy system) and as a signal of danger (contagion system, predation system). But disposing of the corpse also involves handling a person who is not yet absent, as far as our person-file system is concerned.

Philosophers and anthropologists often assume that death poses a special conceptual problem to humans mainly because humans are incorrigible dualists. That is, we all intuitively feel that body and mind are things of a different nature. This would make it difficult to understand how a mind can disappear as a result of the body’s destruction. But the cognitive puzzle created by corpses is in fact much more specific than that. It does not result from abstract conceptions of the body and the mind but from our intuitions and from the particular way in which some of our inference systems work. You could very well be a dualist and accept that minds are extinguished when bodies cease breathing. What creates a special problem is not the notion that the person goes on but the conflicting intuitions delivered by two systems, both of which are focused on persons, one dealing with animacy and the other with person identification.
We can now better understand why there are so many death rituals and why, although they take so many different forms, they generally center on prescriptions for what is to be done with the dead body. This is indeed the central question. People’s representations are focused on the dead body’s passage to another state of being rather than on detailed descriptions of the afterlife. Also, this account makes better sense of the two stages of death-passage often noted in such rites. These two stages may correspond to two different periods in terms of psychological activity: a first period during which people are still in the discrepant state described here, followed by a second stage where they simply have memories of the people, but these are gradually fading and no longer create person-file inferences.

**FOCUSED GRIEF AND FEAR VERSUS GENERAL TERROR**

Grief is the aspect we usually mention first when thinking about representations of death, yet it makes sense to consider it last. Grief is a very special emotion because it is about the kind of dissociative object I described here: a person about whom several mental systems give inconsistent intuitions. This does not explain grief but only its special tenor where dead people are concerned.

Why we feel grief at all is not really very well understood. However, we can make sense of some aspects of the feeling if we take into account our evolutionary history. The loss of a child, of caring parents or of grandparents who care for your offspring is an obvious genetic catastrophe. In seemingly coldhearted genetic calculations, losing a young child is a real disaster, but losing an infant is less damaging (because a lesser investment is wasted); losing a teenager is the worst possible situation (all investment is lost and a source of genetic transmission is gone); and losing an aged parent should be less traumatic. There is some evidence that the relative intensity of grief (always a difficult thing to measure, but large-scale comparisons allow some statistical inferences) does correspond to these predictions. But these are not the only people we lose. Because we are an intensely social species, and because we have lived in small groups for so long, the loss of any member of a group is a huge loss in terms of valuable information and potential cooperation.

All these evolutionary considerations may illuminate why we grieve for some people rather than others, but they still do not explain why we should experience such intensely negative feelings in the first place. Biologists speculate that many negative emotions probably evolved to calibrate subsequent choices. For instance, that we bitterly regret having mistreated someone may provide the emotional urge better to accommodate other people in the future. But this should be irrelevant when we are faced by another’s death, since the dead can no longer be partners in any actual social interaction. However, this last point may be precisely what is not entirely obvious to human minds. As I suggested, in the presence of a dead body some mental systems still function as if the person were still around. So we have no general explanation for grief, but we may better understand it if we realize that death is represented as a termination only by some parts of our mental systems.

Grieving is not the only process whereby dead bodies create strong emotional effects. As Clark Barrett’s experiments showed, our understanding of death is mostly based on intuitions of animacy developed in the context of predation. Although modern-day children have little if any familiarity with predation, this is the context in which their intuitions are most readily elicited and most definite, providing us a different angle from which to understand the emotions involved. Proponents of “terror-management” theory claimed that mortality in general is a source of terror. The actual study of inference systems would suggest that being preyed upon is a much inure salient source of intuitions and emotions. In actual fact, dead prey are only a subset
of dead bodies. But our intuitive systems may actually interpret things the other way around, with prey being a well-understood object and other dead bodies being represented in terms of an analogy with prey. So inasmuch as the sight of a corpse triggers associations with anguishing realities, this may be because a dead person is, to some extent, represented as the victim of a successful predation.

**Dead Bodies and Supernatural Agents**

In the first chapter I suggested that many religious phenomena are around because of a conspiracy of relevance. That is, once a particular theme or object triggers rich inferences in a variety of different mental systems, it is more likely to be the object of great cultural attention and elaboration. This certainly seems to be the case for dead bodies. Their presence activates different systems for different reasons. They are thought to be polluting because this is a relevant conceptual interpretation of the intuitions delivered by our contagion system; they are fascinating because different mental systems deliver inconsistent intuitions about them; they are emotionally salient because of our personal relations to them; they are scary because they activate mental schemas for predator-avoidance.

Consider again the catalogue of supernatural templates. One of the categories was that of an inanimate object, generally an artifact but also a part of the environment, that is said to have intentional properties—for instance, a statue to which people pray. In Carlo Seven’s examples, a Cuna shaman talks to a row of statuettes supposed to understand what he says in their special language. In many places, people will consider that a special rock or a tree has the capacity to understand various situations and how people behave. All of these beliefs require special effort because their counterintuitive qualities are, to a large extent, largely unpersuasive. To think that a Madonna can cure the sick or that statuettes will fight against spirits requires that many people combine many counterintuitive stories in such a way that the object becomes indeed attention-grabbing. This is hard work, as it were.

But dead bodies are special because they are not created by people, it requires no special effort to encounter them, and they inevitably create salient cognitive effects. Dead bodies are salient whatever we want to think about them. They create special cognitive effects by the very fact that our person-file system and animacy system create incompatible representations of the persons involved, with the added intensity of grief combined with the fear of predation.

We do not need to imagine any special “metaphysical” reasons in people’s minds that would lead them to fear the recently deceased and to find any contact with them awe-inspiring or polluting. These intuitions and emotions are delivered by evolved systems that would be there whether or not we had any special religious conception of the dead. In the same way, we do not need religious ideologies in order to have a confused notion that those who recently died are both indubitably present and remote. This confused impression stems from two systems in our minds that deliver incompatible intuitions about dead persons. None of this really depends on religious concepts. Dead persons are special objects because of a combination of different intuitions. While one system in the mind represents them as dangerous sources of unseen and barely describable danger, another system is producing inferences about interaction with them; yet another is assuming that they cannot have any goals or interaction; and finally the circumstances of their death may in themselves inspire fear.

We should not be surprised that the souls of the dead or their “shadows” or “presence” are the most widespread kind of supernatural agent the world over. This equation (the dead as seen by our inference systems = supernatural agents) is the simplest and therefore most successful way in which concepts of supernatural agency are transmitted. In many places, obviously, this simple
equation is combined with more complex representations of other agents, such as gods or spirits that are not ex-persons. But it seldom happens that such complications actually replace the direct equation.

In some cases, representations of the dead are associated with supernatural concepts in a special way, as in the doctrines of “salvation” that seem so natural to Christians, Jews and Muslims and that to some extent correspond with Hindu or Buddhist notions. This is by no means a general feature of religious representations about death but rather a specific ideology that combines a particular notion of a “soul” with personal characteristics, a special “destiny” attached to that soul, a system whereby moral worth affects that destiny, and a complicated description of what may happen to the soul as a result of past actions. All this is found in some places in the world, mainly as an effect of particular literate theologies, a point I will discuss in another chapter. But it is just that: one ideology among the many types that get high cognitive salience by recruiting emotions and representations we naturally have in the presence of dead people.

The properties of corpses provide material that makes some supernatural concepts relevant for reasons that are quite different from our need for comfort. So religion may well be much less about death than about dead bodies. The dead are by no means the only available source of intuitions about powerful agents with strategic information and counterintuitive physical presence. But they are a rich source of such intuitions, given the organization of our minds and the tragically lavish supply of these real and counterintuitive objects.

Notes: