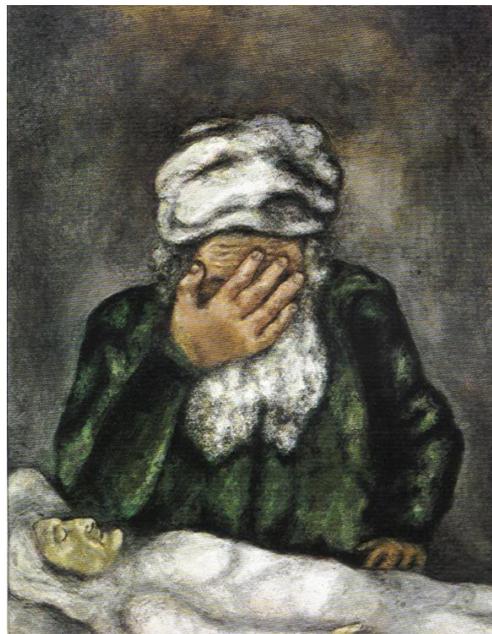


I don't believe any one of you would like to live in a room with a murdered man in the cupboard, however well preserved chemically - even with a sunflower growing out of the top of his head. - John Ruskin

Recently, Dan Sperber alerted us to anecdotal observations of grieving in non-human animals (see blog [here](#) - by the way, "anecdotal" is not derogatory here - our observations of grieving in humans are anecdotal too). Are the dead chimp's companions as baffled and shaken by their friend and relative's death as we would be?

We do not know.

In any case, bereavement in humans is difficult enough to describe and explain. This is an important topic for cognition and culture for many reasons - because it is of obvious interest to all human beings, because it is universal, because it is seemingly framed in such different ways in different places, and because the psychology is not well understood so far.



Abraham crying Sara - Chagall

This used to be a topos for cultural anthropologists, who charted the many similarities in beliefs about death, and even more strikingly, the similarities in people's ritualization of behaviour around death.

The tradition of considering the relevant psychological and social dynamics runs from Robert Hertz ([A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death](#)), to a collection edited by Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry ([Death and the regeneration of life](#)). As with other important topics to do with cognition and recurrent features of human cultures, this was then more or less abandoned by mainstream cultural anthropologists.

There is no general human response to death, or mortality, as such. Indeed, our reactions vary from great pleasure (at an enemy's demise in battle, at a prey's final throes) to polite indifference (when reading most obituaries in the papers) to excruciating psychic pain (at the loss of a loved one).

Evolutionary considerations would concur that there is no reason we should react to all mortality in the same way, since not all instances of death affect our fitness in the same way. We and other predators should derive positive rewards from our prey's death, but we and other social animals should experience an ally's death as a personal loss, which is indeed what we call it.

All this is fine, but probably not sufficient to explain the specific processes engaged in bereavement. To cultural anthropologists, the main question is, Why do people tend to engage in ritualized behavior following the death of a group member? People do all sorts of amazing things with corpses, and generally do them in a socially acquired, normative manner. For early sociologists like Hertz, this was because the loss affected "the group" and therefore had to be handled through "collective representations". Burials were a rite of passage to turn corpses into ancestors. But we do not believe in group intentionality or collective representations anymore, and the rite of passage is no explanation, since it itself is what we should try to explain. By the same token, let's don't say that these ritualized sequences provide solace or closure - these are question-begging labels, not proper explanations. What makes prescriptions of ritualized behavior attention-grabbing and compelling in these particular circumstances?

There is no straightforward answer to this, which is not too surprising as we have only a very rudimentary understanding of ritualized behavior in general (see [this](#) for a general survey and reasons why most anthropological "theories of ritual" are unsatisfactory). Moreover, we know surprisingly little about the cognitive processes triggered by the death of a friend or relative or acquaintance. [Elsewhere](#) I speculated that such events may throw a spanner in the works of our evolved cognitive systems. The main idea was this. The animacy components of death are early developed and result, as Clark Barrett [demonstrated](#), from our understanding of predator-prey interaction. Most preschoolers find death unproblematic, if framed as the result of predation. In this sense our animacy systems have no trouble inferring that the corpse has no thoughts or sensations, does not move by itself, does not require food, and that these are permanent states. However, it is also clear that our social interaction systems (however many and different they are) are not hindered by physical constraints. We have rich and complex social interaction with imaginary friends, absent lovers, fictional characters or historical heroes, and some people add imagined agents like spirits and gods to the list. Part of the oddity and fascination of corpses - note that ritualized behaviors are overwhelmingly about what to do with the corpse - may stem from this strange situation in which different mental systems produce incompatible assumptions about the same object. In this sense a corpse would seem to constitute a rare case of a genuinely counter-intuitive physical object, about which different systems undermine each other's assumptions. But this is just speculation.

Another possibility, of course, is that we are disposed to entertain some notion of the afterlife, as Jesse Bering has [suggested](#). I have nothing against this suggestion (or rather, I have too many arguments against it to fit in the margins of this discussion), but it seems more focused on what we would call ancestors than on corpses. The difference is that ancestors are what you typically get, in many human societies, after a second burial, once the meat-like substance of the corpse has been disposed of. What compels ritualized behavior is not ancestors but the corpse itself, or rather, our mental representations of the corpse - that is where the sting is.