

# TO DUST YOU WILL RETURN

*(et in pulverem reverteris)*

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## ASHES TO ASHES

We will all return to dust. That's a given.

For all our aspirations, our hopes, ambitions, dreams of glory, great achievements, beliefs about ourselves and status in society, we will return to dust. Unless of course you somehow manage to achieve the sort of wealth, enormous fame or extreme notoriety which will result in you being cryogenically frozen, mummified, or perhaps even pickled in some sort of specimen jar for a considerable time. Even then, however, at some point you'll probably still get 'dusted' – even if you have to wait for the earth to be consumed by the sun.

The lingering spectre of human mortality has haunted us and our ancestors since time immemorial, and it has inspired a whole host of imaginative responses. "How..." humans have wondered, "can we deal with the problem of death?" Because lets face it, death is a problem. It's hard to deal with, hard to face the prospect of losing those we care about, and hard to cope with the idea of ceasing to 'exist' in the only way we have ever known. The loss of self, on a voyage in to the unknown is a challenging prospect.

The practise of deliberate burial has been around for a long time, the small brained pre human species *Homo naledi* are thought to have practised interment of their dead in caves, and Neanderthals, who were still pre-human(ish... they seem to have existed alongside early humans)

but considerably more like us, have been shown to have buried their dead in shallow graves. The question of ‘why’ these pre-human species would have bothered going to such great lengths to deal with their dead has given rise to speculation about whether we humans are not the first to be able to think symbolically – even if we are the first species to invent television. This idea of thinking symbolically is important, because it means being able to consider things beyond the ‘here and now’ – squirrels, for instance, don’t think symbolically, very literal thinkers squirrels, good with their teeth, but not great at coming up with abstract concepts. Same with sheep... the list is long, I’m not going to continue. That doesn’t mean to say, however, that death only affects humans, a number of animals also observe ritual-type behaviour with their dead, visiting or protecting their bodies for instance. Chimpanzees, one of the most human like of all the animal species, have been observed to carry their dead young around, grooming them to prevent the encroachment of decay. Humans are, however, the only species to bury or otherwise dispose of their dead in highly ritualised ways. Even though we’re far from the only species to be able to dig, or to bury things. More significant than our practise of burial, for all of its ritualised qualities, is the practise of burial with significant objects. Whether it’s tools, or articles of clothing, coins, weapons, or even slaves, servants or guards, we’ve long made a habit of sending our dead off with things to take with them.

## FUNK TO FUNKY

In 1933 or 1934, the archaeologist René Neuville began the excavation of a cave in Qafzeh near Nazareth in Galilee. What was found there changed the way that people thought about the development of humanity. Neuville had been alerted to the potential that historical remains might be found in the site, by priests who lived and worked nearby, and who had discovered worked (knapped) flints in the area. His excavations led to the discovery of what looked like modern human skeletons, in geological layers that dated them back to somewhere between 90,000 and 100,000 years ago. The skeletons turned out to be an early hominid, closely related to modern humans (being our sort of shape meant that they were probably able to communicate verbally, as the ability to do this is heavily reliant on our physiology). The ability to communicate verbally beyond ‘grunts’ is probably what meant we became able to come up with and communicate abstract concepts.

Further excavations led to further discoveries, including a number of burials, including one in which the skeleton was found to be lying on its back with legs bent to the side and its hands on either side of its neck. Placed in the hands were a large set of red deer antlers, so

situated that they would have rested on the chest. Other finds at Qazfeh showed different bodies buried with items such as tools (Smithsonian Institute, 2016). This was not simply interment of a corpse for some sort of sentimental reason, this was a ceremonial burial with ritualistic significance. The significance of the dating of these burials is key – it's widely felt that ceremonial burials began around 35,000 years ago, when humans developed sophisticated language, such that they were able to think abstractly. Once our language skills had developed the pace of social and technological change increased at an extraordinary level, at the same time we began to decorate things artistically. All these things developed along with the ability to communicate. But language itself didn't just appear, it evolved, probably over a period of around a million years. So the hominids whose skeletons were found at Qafzeh may have been among the earliest examples of sophisticated communicators, paving the way for generations to come. (Leakey, 1995)

Prior to the invention of written language, prior to the emergence of any known world religion, even prior to the fully fledged big brained sophisticated communicator we call Homo Sapien, humans and their ancestors have been burying their dead with a mind to some sort of 'life beyond life'. Whether they believed in some form of re-birth, or life in another 'realm', or what, is of course unknown, but that they saw death as some sort of step between one thing and another – is highly likely. The problem we have in working out what, if any, 'religious' or 'spiritual' beliefs they held is that most of the markers for such things left no record. Myth telling, chanting, body painting, burned sacrifices, none of these things leave a discernible physical mark beyond a certain point. The earliest 'recorded' ideas about life after death are restricted of course to human civilisations. (Terrible ones for not writing stuff down, those wretched pre-historical ancestors of ours.)

## **STRUNG OUT IN HEAVEN**

More recent North African and European human civilisations are, however, recorded to have believed in gods and spirits of various sorts, and in planes of existence where people dwell after death. Whether it's the Summerlands, the great banqueting hall, or some sort of Eden-like garden festooned with pleasures and delights, a belief in some sort of post-life paradise is common to a variety of traditions. An alternative idea is that the dead go to neither a place of pleasure nor a place of punishment, but to a neutral place 'the grave', either forever, or as a staging post before their ultimate destination. In general the route in to these places is the same: via the grave.

For other cultures of course, life is understood as far more circular than linear, instead of moving up or down in to a different plane, we, and all other forms of life, move in circles of existence, reflecting the interconnectedness of all things, both material and immaterial. (The common misunderstanding of Hinduism, that it's some kind of polytheistic religion seems to contradict this, but that's until you realise that at a fundamental level it is a misunderstanding.) In some ways this circular rather than linear view of life and death is a better reflection of the physical reality of existence, the atoms or the sub atomic particles which go to make up our bodies (and the creatures that live inside our bodies) will, upon our death (and even before) become part of the greater physical reality around us, becoming absorbed into the soil, from there in to the plants that grow in it or the creatures that burrow within it, and from there into the animals which feed on the plants or the birds which feed on the insects, and etc. You could say we've been consuming our ancestors for the whole of our lives.

All of this thinking, theorising, and practising the rituals of honouring the dead, is illustrative of the way that we have tried, as a species, to deal with the problem of death. It's not all we've done, of course, we've made the idea of taking the life of another human taboo, we've developed elaborate ways of memorialising those who have died – we have statues and graveyards, caskets and benches, we have wayside shrines, and specially planted trees. We've got the Taj Mahal for goodness sake. Increasingly though the shift has been away from simply memorialising the dead, to trying to prevent their death altogether. Medical science hasn't simply focussed on the reduction of suffering or alleviation of symptoms, but it has been employed to make sure we all live longer. It is too obvious to need saying that this poses us some problems.

## HITTING AN ALL-TIME LOW

The other direction in which mortality has been challenged is in the digital world, holograms of famous people now perform and entertain, and experiences and memories live on beyond our death via our online personas. In the late 1990s press reports suggested that another step was about to be taken, with claims that the innovation lab at British Telecom were working on a chip that would within thirty years, allow the electrical impulses that travel into the human brain to be recorded. This would create, pundits claimed, a 'cyber soul' – allowing all our experiences and thoughts to be uploaded into some vast cyber network of disembodied people, living on beyond their physical deaths. (Brown, 1996) We were optimistic in those days, when the internet was still young, and before we realised that actually we were going to get self-checkouts rather than cyber souls. Because it turned out that BT weren't really working on such

a project, they'd merely theorised that by 2025 a chip would have been developed that would be big enough to allow for this and then the rumour mill got going. The excitement surrounding the initial idea soon dissipated. But even if the BT brainiacs had managed to pull the thing off – would this have been genuine immortality in any meaningful sense? The debate isn't new, but it's still going, and the ultimate question is resolutely philosophical, rather than technological.

The ongoing fascination with the digital afterlife is symptomatic of the fact that after tens, possibly hundreds of thousands of years, hominids are still interested in understanding what happens when we die. The continuing research to find ways to keep people alive confirms the self-evident – that we continue to see death as a problem. One way of dealing with this has been to cement an idea of a 'good place' into our belief systems, reflecting our instinctive sense that this consciousness we have, enabled as it is by a sophisticated ability to speak and share ideas, can surely not be limited by the frailties of human existence. That surely it doesn't all just come down to electrical signals which can be stored on a chip and transferred in to a laptop. For Christians and interested observers of the Christian tradition, the difficult question is to consider whether this was really a part of the belief system from its earliest days, or not. The evidence for that would best be described as 'mixed' – many (most?) early Christians were much more interested in earthly goings on than in a post-death paradise, but as time separated them from the earthly existence of Jesus, attention began to focus upon the idea of a promised afterlife, which is inferred rather than promised from the teachings of Jesus. By the second century CE theologians had come up with sophisticated ideas of what the kingdom of heaven might mean, for those who were dead.

Today a swathe of opinions about life after death are current, even in Christianity alone. For some Christians the afterlife is a mystical union with the divine, for others it seems to resemble a large and never ending church service (does that sound like paradise to you?), while for others heaven is on hold until the 'final judgement', although it's not clear whether the dead remain bound by time in the way that the living are. Yet others still see the idea of Heaven through the lens of the 'three tier universe' which was once thought to separate the earth from the 'heavens', but which was rather dispensed with by most after the likes of Copernicus and Galileo had come along with some inconvenient science.

## I'M HAPPY, HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY TOO

Ultimately then, only one thing remains really certain: that we will return to dust. Perhaps this is just as well, as the promise of a post-death paradise has unfortunately and

ironically been shown to inspire some deeply dangerous and destructive acts among hard-core believers in such doctrines. The idea that “I know where I’m going” certainly hasn’t always been a driver to make the world a vastly better place. Moreover, any teacher will tell you that what is needed to inspire people to give of their best is actually ‘intrinsic’ rather than ‘extrinsic’ motivation. The promise of reward is only marginally effective when it comes to getting people to do good things, much more effective is when people come to realise that actually things are worth doing regardless of the promise of reward or threat of punishment. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will get an extra big mansion in heaven, with a pool and everything.” As Jesus didn’t say.

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