

2. Ideas of Death From Prehistory to the Earliest History

— As Humans Became Human —

As far as we know so far, no organized thing in the universe is as complex as ourselves. There are objects much, much bigger and heavier, of course, and objects which, as heavy as they are, move much, much faster. But with perhaps a hundred billion or so cells in our nervous system, and perhaps a hundred trillion cells in the whole human body (some estimates are as low as ten trillion, but still there are quite a lot), all organized in a vastly complex set of systems that we are nowhere past the very initial stage of understanding, we can probably give anything else in all there is a run for its money in complexity.

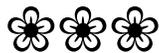
One thing we do know pretty certainly (unless you prefer to be an evolution denier) is that this tremendous organization gradually developed by what biologists call the process of evolution.¹ But we don't know just when the first humans appeared. In fact, it doesn't really make sense to ask that question, because all the properties of humanity that distinguish us from our non-human or pre-human friends appeared at different times, in different places, at different rates.

At any rate, there is one new property of humanity that we *think* appeared sometime or other in the process of evolution and that distinguishes us from other animals: the knowledge of our own inevitable death. Other animals don't seem to anticipate their deaths consciously and

¹ One subject which still bothers many people in the area of human evolution, and which is relevant to my argument, is how the human mind, or soul if one prefers, got into the story. I will have something to say about this controversy later.

brood over the subject, although they instinctively try to avoid it, of course, and quite a few – elephants, whales, dolphins, and especially primates, for instance – are apparently able to recognize when others of their species die and grieve over them.

Whether or not the foreknowledge of death distinguishes us from other animals (and it is perhaps *the* most essential difference), it is certain sufficiently important to our conception of life to justify calling the issues of life and death by the name “the Great Matter,” as Buddhists, and especially Zen Buddhists, do. When Japanese people say goodbye and want to express the idea we express with the words, “take care!” they often say *o-daiji ni!* (“[take care of] your Great (*dai*) Matter (*ji*)!”)



GUESSES ABOUT PREHISTORIC IDEAS OF DEATH

My first assumption, then, is that as long as we humans have been human in any full sense, including the kind of awareness of ourselves that we consider consciousness, we have been conscious of the inevitability of death.

Another assumption I will be making, although tentatively and subject to limitation and qualification at the drop of a hat, is that we have always considered this fact very distasteful – in fact, extremely painful and anguishing. Therefore, there have been constant efforts to eliminate this pain. Some of them that have appeared in human history after the invention of writing will be examined in later chapters. But in order to understand them fully, I think we need to do at least some speculation about how we dealt with this problem before history, i.e., before writing was invented.

One reason for this is that it is quite unlikely that the worldviews we find in the first written records of each culture (at least the first ones after the inventors of this new art get beyond simply using it to keep records of how many sea shells were traded for bead necklaces this month, or how many barrels of beer of which quality were delivered to the royal palace in the last

week) were made up just at that time. They read as though they were thought up and elaborated for many generations, handed down orally.

If we had even a little knowledge of what preliterate peoples thought about the world, it would presumably help us to interpret better what early texts such as the Gilgamesh Epic, which we will encounter in the next chapter, actually meant to their creators. The same is true, for example, of the Hebrew Bible. It begins by announcing that God “created” the world. But what exactly does “create” mean in this context? We read that he “said: Let there be light, and there was light.” But how should we understand what “saying” means here?

Of course, it is evident from the many archeological digs modern scientists have performed that preliterate people had no problem expressing many beliefs, and in fact they apparently felt compelled to. The problem, for us, is that they expressed them in pictorial, sculptural, and architectural ways, in two- and three-dimensional images, which they rendered very skillfully but which we have no keys for interpreting in language. I will be discussing the role that language plays in this whole subject later, but suffice it to say at this point that language has definite limits as a mode of expression. So perhaps we might feel that simply appreciating these images in their own right is enough.

But clearly it was not enough for those people, since in several places over the world they developed images into methods of writing: Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Chinese characters, and Phoenician and ultimately Greek alphabets. Examining the preliterate archeological remains, we may feel great regret that they were not yet quite able to express their ideas in a form that would be clearer to us, who are used to studying written texts about matters such as life and death.

Another note on the nature of these Neolithic graphic expressions of ideas about the world: many modern people have clearly felt licensed to let their imaginations run away with them in interpreting these ancient cultures, despite the difficulty of getting precise data. For example, there is the widespread view that people at that stage of human development practiced a religion based on a mother goddess. The authors of *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization*, an excellent

book on one of the most thoroughly studied Neolithic sites – the one at Çatalhöyük, Turkey – written by archeologists who have done much work at the site, point out that much of the evidence claimed for this mother goddess cult was derived from small figurines found in the initial excavation of Çatalhöyük by James Mellaart, himself a professional archeologist. But further study, these authors write, has uncovered many statuettes similar to the ones apparently representing pregnant women but showing all sorts of other images – various combinations of men, women, and animals, whole or in parts, for example.² Therefore, it would seem that the religious notions of the people who lived in such communities (if these images did in fact have religious meanings of some sort, which is not at all certain, since “religions” is a concept we apply to historical peoples) were much more complex than a simple worship of an “Earth goddess.”

The authors of *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization* emphasize the elaborate treatment of human remains, perhaps by “specialists,” at Çatalhöyük and the connection between wild beasts, birds of prey, and death, though the authors are very cautious about interpreting the significance of what they observe. These remains are often buried together with the claws, jaws, and other parts of beasts and birds associated with violence; some are bodies from which the heads were detached (apparently after death!) and the faces plastered over and painted to restore some of the appearance of the live faces. Many of the burials, beneath houses, were concentrated in specific houses, and as the structures were demolished and built over, the remains were carefully moved to the new houses. The authors suggest possible interpretations of all of these phenomena, but emphasize that there can be no certain conclusions about them.

One particular finding is very intriguing.

As another example, in Building 42 we found a burial in which a woman held the head of a man ... The man's head had been plastered to create the features of his face and had been painted red; indeed, it had been replastered several times, suggesting that the plastered skull had been

² Ian Hodder, ed.: *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization* (Cambridge U. Press, Kindle edition), pp. 15, 23, 34, 42, 66, 189, 193, 220, 233, 264, 268, 302. For more information about this archeological site, see <http://www.catalhoyuk.com>.

retained for some time before burial with the woman. This was a highly charged event, as suggested by the fact that this is the only example of a plastered skull found at the site, and indeed there is only one other example from anywhere in Turkey. The burial was in fact a foundation burial: it had not been dug through the floors of the house, but the floors of the house had been built up above the burial. So this highly charged event had a social significance – the founding of a new house. The event had both practical and religious significance. The religious significance was heightened by the placing in the grave of another remarkable object – the claw of a leopard. I have written elsewhere ... of the complex mythic associations of the leopard for the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük. For the moment, it is clear that this burial is a marking event, and it can be called religious not because it is separate from everyday life, but because it focuses attention, arouses, refers to broader imaginings and deals with the relationship between self and community.³

Our imagination is certainly fascinated with the question of what relationship this man and woman had to each other and to their community. But unfortunately we shall never know.



TWO PRINCIPLES IN UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT MATTER: IN- AND OUT-GROUP SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND “CARGO CULTS” VS. SCIENCE

Another reason for trying to look back before the invention of writing is that at least two guiding principles shaping the ways we have grappled with the Great Matter in history seem to have been firmly in place long before written evidence of people’s thinking about the subject began to appear, and we need to reflect on them a bit before looking at the historical evidence we will be reviewing.

³ *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization*, p. 17

In other words, at least two very deep-seated human tendencies – ones which seem to go back long before history – have generally limited the angles from which the subject of life and death have been approached, among the ones which one could imagine as possible avenues of approach.

The first of these is the fact that human beings are obviously intensely social animals; belonging to groups is extremely important to our sense of our own identities, and group membership, the distinguishing between people within a group from everyone outside it, is very deeply involved with both language and non-linguistic symbols.

Even a superficial view of the behavior of our surviving primate relatives shows that they are constantly aware of being part of a group and non-members of other groups, and that this difference between their own in-group and all out-groups must be constantly kept in awareness. It is pure speculation at this point to assume that this was true of our earliest human ancestors, since we cannot have any direct evidence that it was so, but it seems a fairly safe assumption, and it is certainly consistent with all the evidence we have throughout history, and right up to the present, about our behavior.

Perhaps this concern for the in-group/out-group gap goes as far back as the earliest appearance of separate groups of humans who had very sporadic encounters with each other. One can imagine a small group of people suddenly coming upon another one in the forest or savannah. We don't know whether there was a single original language of the human species, which later split into many languages, but that seems unlikely. More probably, the ability to speak a language was shared, but isolated groups would have developed different languages. They would also have developed many different habits of behavior.

So two such groups confronting each other would most likely have been very suspicious of each other. Not being able to speak to each other, and behaving in foreign ways nearly constantly, how would a member of one group be able to predict the behavior of members of the other one? Of course, this wariness would probably not have led to outright violent conflict immediately, or the human species would likely have killed itself off right at the start. So ways of learning to

cooperate and even develop friendship and solidarity might not have been very difficult to develop. But we are certainly aware that even today, so many hundreds of thousands of years later, we often find it hard to be fully comfortable with people with different skin colors and other physical characteristics, different customs, and different languages. It seems to be a very deep-seated characteristic of humans which we find difficult to cast aside.

We shall see a little later how this very ancient characteristic relates to the Great Matter of life and death: most obviously, the beliefs about this subject, the burial practices, and even the general basic world views of the various groups would most likely be different, just as many other aspects of their cultures would be. But first I want to introduce the second limiting principle I referred to just now, the second very pervasive human characteristic that limits and shapes how we handle the Great Matter.

This is an interesting feature of how we develop our views of the world which the great, well-known, and well-loved twentieth-century American physicist and bongo player Richard Feynman called “Cargo Cult Science.” He explained what he meant by this term in a commencement address he gave to graduates of the California Institute of Technology in 1974.⁴

To explain to the Caltech graduates the kind of science he wanted them to do and the kind they should be careful not to stray into, Feynman used the “cargo cults” of certain South Pacific islanders as a metaphor. In an attempt to bring back the fabulous aircraft with their marvelous cargo that had visited them during World War II, some of these folks built airstrips resembling the real ones and put together imitations of the control towers, headphones, and other equipment they had observed, thinking that these replicas would bring back the real planes.

Feynman compared enterprises such as parapsychology research and certain educational theories and psychotherapeutic methods to these cults, in that they carefully imitate many of the apparent characteristics of genuine scientific research, but end up missing the essence of that research that enables it to get genuine knowledge.

⁴This address may be found in his book *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* (Cambridge, Perseus Publishing 1999), among other places.

For Feynman, that essential feature is “utter honesty.”

For example, if you’re doing an experiment, you should report everything that you think might make it invalid – not only what you think is right about it: other causes that could possibly explain your results; and things you thought of that you’ve eliminated by some other experiment, and how they worked – to make sure the other fellow can tell they have been eliminated.

Details that could throw doubt on your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can – if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong – to explain it. ... There is also a more subtle problem. When you have put a lot of ideas together to make an elaborate theory, you want to make sure, when explaining what it fits, that those things it fits are not just the things that gave you the idea for the theory; but that the finished theory makes something else come out right, in addition.

In summary, the idea is to try to give all of the information to help others to judge the value of your contribution; not just the information that leads to judgment in one particular direction or another.⁵

He goes on to contrast this way of doing research with advertising. For example, a particular brand of cooking and salad oil is advertised as not soaking through food, or at least not very much. Although it may be true that that oil has that property, it is also true that any competing brand also does, as long as the cooking is done at the right temperature, and that all oils will soak into the food being cooked if it is cooked at another temperature. Thus, the people writing such an advertisement are seeking to fool others by refraining from giving all the information needed to evaluate the product, and quite possibly they are fooling themselves as well.

Thus he arrives at what he considers a basic principle of science:

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool. So you have to be very careful about that. After you’ve not fooled yourself, it’s easy not to fool other scientists. You just have to be honest in a conventional way after that.⁶

⁵ Ibid., pp. 209f.

⁶ Ibid., p. 212

Many volumes have been written on how science should be done, most of them in the category of “philosophy of science,” but Feynman captured a great deal of what makes the scientific approach to understanding different from others in this short lecture. Although it may seem disrespectful and overly harsh to say so, he is right: nonscientific views of reality, such as religions and “cargo-cult” imitations of science, as Feynman calls them, run the risk of losing connection with reality altogether by being basically dishonest. They fasten on some particular idea – one which makes us feel comfortable (or uncomfortable, if we prefer to feel that way), or which someone long ago who was deemed an authority laid down as the truth and everyone since has taken for granted – and rest content with it, without looking for alternative ideas which might explain the facts better or which might prove one’s favorite idea wrong. So one ends up by simply fooling oneself.⁷

Since the expression “fooling oneself” may sound a little impolite and accusatory to many people, although Feynman was quite content with it, perhaps we might replace it with another one, such as “making an error by mistake.” The important thing is that, unless we are very rigorous in checking and rechecking our claims to knowledge, all sorts of errors will creep in, whether we intend them to (as perhaps many advertisers do!) or not.



THE PREHISTORIC VIEW OF WORLD: A “HOME FOR HUMANS”

How does this principle of not making “errors by mistake” relate to how we might imagine the earliest humans handling the subject of life and death? Of course, I emphasize that we have no way of reading their minds to know exactly what they thought or believed about this or any other subject, but I would like to toss out the following guess about how they saw the world and their place in it.

Using the capacities for invention that we know other primates show today, and that we can assume the first humans inherited from their ancestors, they began to shape the world around

⁷ See also the American philosopher C. S. Peirce’s essay “The Fixation of Belief” for another characterization of science along these lines. <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html>

them to meet their needs in more advanced ways than those ancestors could. They learned how to use fire for many purposes, including cooking to broaden the range of foods they could eat, how to fashion weapons such as spear points and axe blades to extend the range of animals they could eat and defend themselves against, and plant and animal breeding to develop even more sources of nutrition.

With these and other inventions, some of which we can find evidence of which in archeological sites and others which they no doubt developed but of which no traces remain today, they gradually made themselves more and more at home in the environment they lived in. By inventing various kinds of dwelling, clothing, and other protections from the elements, they steadily increased the environments they could inhabit. I will therefore assume that, as they did so, they came to be aware of the world as a whole as a home which they could live more or less comfortably in. I will call this world view “a home for humans.” That is, I suggest that they must have regarded the world, not as a random, meaningless assortment of various sorts of things through which they moved in their daily lives, but as a livable environment, with foodstuffs, materials for constructing useful articles, and so on, ready for their use, just as today we build ourselves homes in which we put furniture, kitchens stocked with foods, and so on.

Whether they saw themselves as building the world as a home in this way, or saw the world as having been built for them by some “Intelligent Designer,” or something or someone of that sort, I have no idea; probably it took a very long time for them to even become able of thinking about such a philosophical question. But as they went about improving the world to suit their purposes, they inevitably ran into obstacles.

That is, not every problem they ran into in their daily lives yielded to a new invention. For example, they probably tried ingesting every plant they came across in each environment they moved into; some of them turned out to be poisonous and therefore were to be strictly avoided (or smeared on their spear points when they went out hunting animals or enemy tribes – people), some of them delicious and nutritious foods, and still others seemed to make them feel better when they were sick or wounded. Thus, what we now call “folk medicine” appeared, and in fact was efficacious in many cases of illness.

However, not all illnesses and traumas could be successfully dealt with by their medical knowledge. Similarly, other natural phenomena remained dangers that could not be defended against: fierce storms, floods, earthquakes, volcanoes, and many other catastrophes. Some animals

they hunted for food or needed to defend themselves against certainly proved more than a match for them. And last but not least: when they fell into fights with their fellow humans of other tribes, they could not always be assured of coming out victorious.

In other words, their “homes” were not perfect refuges from all sources of suffering – just as our homes today are only imperfect “castles.” While we today are able to improve them to a certain extent by installing better roofs and insulation, acquiring new appliances, or eventually simply moving into better ones, the earliest humans could not improve or trade in their “home” world.

Their inventions, seen from our vantage point many thousands of years later, were certainly extremely limited. The main reason for this was their scientific ignorance. If they could have invented antibiotics (beyond using the natural antibacterial substances they happened to run into in their exploration of the world around them), they could have cured many illnesses that sickened and killed them. But of course the scientific knowledge that would have been required was very far in the future, separated from them by millennia of revolutions in ways of thinking about the world. Thus, they ran into a kind of brick wall, or at least a very viscous fluid, which impeded their attempts to improve life for many centuries. I will get into the subject of how science came into the world in a later chapter, because it is very relevant to our basic question of how humans have understood life and death, the Great Matter, but for now we only need to remind ourselves that nothing like our present-day methods of scientific research could have been available that long ago.

And of course there were also ways in which their “home” left them defenseless that we are still unable to find solutions to today. Chief among them, certainly, was, and is, death.

However, yet another thing it is impossible to know in great detail about prehistoric humans is exactly how they saw the relationship between life and death. Very old burial sites have been found in which the limbs of the deceased were arranged in specific ways, and pollen from various kind of flowers were found scattered around the bodies, indicating that the deceased were buried with flowers.⁸

⁸ Whether these flower remains and grains of pollen were put there by people or dragged in by animals is uncertain, however: <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2013/07/saying-it-flowers-14000-years-ago>, and <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/archaeologists-find-evidence-of-flowers-buried-in-a-12000-year-old-cemetery-4280031/>.

But while this indicates that there was certainly some sort of meaning attributed to death, and even, probably, concern of some sort about the dead persons, we have no way of knowing whether there was any belief in any kind of survival after death at that time.

But I want to make one more assumption, perhaps a hasty one, here: in the face of these intractable problems, they were at least able to imagine solutions for them from sources outside their everyday experience.

The accumulation of empirically tested skills they had acquired by using their normal senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell was insufficient to eliminate all their suffering, but they also had other experiences of very different kinds: dreams, altered states of consciousness induced by certain plants they had encountered in their explorations or by prolonged fasts (whether voluntary or involuntary, due to running out of food supplies), sleep deprivation, etc.⁹ Since these altered states of consciousness are known to us from many historical records as well as a great deal of modern experience, we can assume that their nature was probably about the same in prehistory, also. Therefore, I assume that the belief about them held by prehistoric people was about the same as what many people around the world have thought in historic times and still do: that these states open an awareness of an aspect of reality not provided to us by ordinary everyday experience. In other words, if we call the world of everyday experience “nature,” this other aspect of reality may be called “supernatural,” since it is commonly thought to be “above” or “superior to” nature in some sense.

Once again: we have no sure way of knowing how prehistoric people understood the relationship between the “natural” and “supernatural” worlds, but I suggest that this was at least the seed of an idea we are very familiar with from all of history: that problems which cannot be solved by the resources of nature may be taken care of by supernatural powers, which they believed they had knowledge of through these “altered states of consciousness,” and which they trusted they had access to – at least, through specialists with the needed skills, such as shamans.

Once this idea occurred to our ancestors, whenever that happened (and it was probably a

⁹ All of these and more are discussed very usefully in *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, ed. Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn, and Stanley Krippner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2000). Although I will be discussing the general subject of these states of consciousness later, as it relates to our ideas of death, one rather obvious point I can make now is that we have not yet obtained anything close to a full scientific understanding of “non-anomalous” or “unaltered” experience – in other words, ordinary everyday experience – which fits in with the rest of our present scientific world picture, so it may be a little premature to try to discuss the relationship between everyday and “altered” experience as though we knew exactly what we were talking about.

long, gradual process), it was a very short step to full-fledged religious beliefs about gods and goddesses, spirits, demons, and the rest.

In the Introduction,¹⁰ I noted that “death is especially unique among future events in that it is both inevitable and at the same time it is an absolutely impenetrable barrier to knowledge.” Raymond Tallis, in his eloquent meditation¹¹ on the age-old advice of *memento mori*, gives death a vivid name: “The Black Mirror.” At least, it is completely black to our usual physical senses, but the idea that these “altered states of consciousness” (altered, that is, from our usual waking consciousness) give us a window to see through this mirror to “another world” seems to be a belief that all humans over the world have shared since time immemorial.

To put it in terms of our metaphor of “the world as home for humans,” it was firmly believed that this home was stratified into at least two layers: the earthly world in which humans live and die and a “heavenly” world of great powers unknown in this one, powers which could be appealed to for help when no other recourse was available – or powers the horrific effects of which could be felt in storms, epidemics, sudden inexplicable disasters, and especially death.

It is not difficult at all to understand why, once the concept of “super-nature” was formed, people would look to super-nature for the causes of, and solutions to, everyday problems such as incurable illnesses, severe weather, defeat in war, “fateful” sudden changes in the course of one’s life, and even death itself, which were so dramatic and urgent that they could not be solved with the skills which were successful in the usual course of experience.

Also, we must keep in mind that now and then it seemed that recourse to the supernatural realm in fact *did* lead to solutions: the illnesses remitted, people came out of comas (which certainly appeared in that era to be actual death), storms and floods abated, rain came at last in a period of drought, victories were in fact sometimes won, and death... Well, *real* death of course was never “healed,” but one could at least imagine that there was continued life in some other world after death.

Thus, there was room for the firm conviction that supernatural solutions did exist, and this conviction soon settled, we can suppose, into an unquestioned belief firmly embedded in the culture. Or as Dr. Feynman would say, they fooled themselves – as many people still do today.

¹⁰ p. 7

¹¹ *The Black Mirror: Looking at Life Through Death* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015)

Humans at this stage of their development needed to believe that the universe was a “home” for them, a place largely shaped to sustain their lives, at least for a certain span of years. But exactly *how* it was formed, how it came into being and how it actually operates, they had no way of knowing for many more centuries, until scientific methods for controlling our imaginations were found. Without such methods, these beliefs were governed primarily by the in-group/out-group principle: what *we* take to be true must be so, and the peculiar ideas *they* clutter their brains up with must be dangerous falsehoods.

At this point, we have arrived at the dawn of history, the point at which people developed the skill of writing down their thoughts, examples of which we will explore in the next chapter on the Epic of Gilgamesh. But first I want to summarize what we have covered so far.



WHERE WE STAND AT THIS POINT

We have started our examination of various ways human beings have encountered the Great Matter of life and death by taking a risky, but necessary, step of conjecturing what the earliest humans may have thought about the world they lived in. I have assumed the following:

- 1) They formed groups with differing ways of life and languages and therefore had the problem of how to relate to people who were quite foreign in many aspects of life. The in-group/out-group relationship governed many parts of their lives.
- 2) They used their human intelligence to find solutions to a myriad of problems, and therefore came to experience the world as a home fit for them to live in.
- 3) However, their lack of what we would today call science prevented them from going very far in solving their problems. Therefore they naturally drew on their experiences of what today we call “altered states of consciousness” to practice “Cargo Cult science,” firmly believing in supernatural powers, both benign and malicious, from which they could receive aid in extreme circumstances, but from which they also feared that these

circumstances, including death, fell upon them. As a result, they formed concepts of the overall structure of the universe which they shared with their fellow in-groups.

Now we shall look at a specific example of one of the earliest pieces of literature in which this kind of worldview was recorded: the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh.