Why are we concerned about what will happen to our bodies after death?

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Abstract This article explores why people care about what happens to human bodies after death. This paper argues that this concern stems from people's fear of losing autonomy, subjectivity, and identity after death. The paper examines this concern from three perspectives: care for one's own body, care for the bodies of others, and society-wide care for human corpses. As a medium that embodies life experiences, the body cannot be viewed as a purely material entity; when subjectivity is lost after death, people cannot understand or control where their bodies go. This fear is equally present when dealing with the bodies of others. At the same time, laws, social norms, and cultural customs collectively serve to reduce the uncertainty brought about by death and the resulting anxiety. They cannot fundamentally resolve the contradiction between life's finitude and human beings' ongoing awareness of death.

Keywords death anxiety; human corpse; subjectivity; identity; post-mortem care

Introduction

Ethical dilemmas of mortality involving private biological relics fall into two related types. Primarily, there is anxiety about one's own death and the death of others. These two groups can be separated into a small one that grieves privately for the communal corpse and a larger one at the level of societal supervision; the latter involves an authority's responsibility to manage the physical remains of all citizens, regardless of social status. In the above system, apprehension refers to particular stress that people feel about how they will be treated after death. Based on psychological frameworks related to the three essential groups, this study proposes that the underlying reason for the desire of all parts of the country to preserve the dead is the fear of losing one's own identity after death.

While some, through the lens of evolutionary biology, may argue that the root of care for human bodies necessarily entails concerns for public health and disease reduction, these are to a great extent extensions of the attempt to mitigate the fear of death; that is, disease and poor health reflecting imminent mortality (Curtis & Biran, 2001). Meanwhile, others may argue that cultural practices shape individual and organized care for cadavers, but these too are largely extensions of rituals and spiritual beliefs surrounding the afterlife (Lobar et al., 2006). Some might also approach this problem from a sociological framework: that is, to maintain social order, society intentionally constructs norms around the disposal of corpses, internalizes them into public consciousness, and creates the fear individuals hold (Baudrillard, 2016, p.151; Freud, 2015, p.123). However, such studies may address a fundamental thought pattern, not the meaning placed in care, which is how this essay interprets "why" and, indeed, the core question worth considering.

Care for the Self After Death

The first difference between *Homo sapiens* and other genera is a certain cognitive ability, particularly inventiveness; we are not bound by the restrictions of time, space, and nature when creating abstract, theoretical, or imaginary scenes. As this intangible trait helps people face the ups and downs of life better, it also promotes a sense of urgency; relatively early in life, one is aware that death is inevitable and thus feels anxiety.

Beecher (1968) believed that from a scholarly perspective, death is the finality of a person's life. With the end of cerebral activity, the physical body is no longer alive and can feel nothing. Nevertheless, people are still concerned about how to preserve the bodies of the deceased after death or how to conduct suitable conservation.

Idealists and materialists appear to share the view that, as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) memorably claimed, "The body is [human's] general medium for having a world" (pp.148-153). As the individual lives longer in the world, this moment-by-moment experience of the body's and soul's coexistence builds a pre-reflective emotional bond between them. Hence, this tight emotional bond with the body may partially explain why one cannot simply imagine one's post-mortem corpse as a meaningless pile of matter, but instead may fear the body's being maltreated and physically damaged.

Moreover, once a person dies, their subjectivity is com-

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pletely lost in an instant, and this loss of subjectivity triggers a series of irresistible fears. The subjectivity argued in this essay draws on Sartre's definition of the "for-itself": that is, the individual's capacity to act freely and make choices, thereby constructing their own essence (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp.123-145). The disappearance of this essence of human beings manifests in the real world as many forms of "inability": the individual cannot observe the surrounding world through their own perspective; cannot make autonomous judgments and decisions; cannot interact with the outside world; cannot resist externally imposed orders; and cannot alter their own image under the gaze of others. Self-determination theory outlines three fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan, 2024, pp. 65-85). When individuals confront death, they lose autonomy completely, while relatedness formed through interaction with others is also stripped away.

This loss of competence plunges the individual into a fear of complete uncertainty regarding the postmortem state, which manifests most prominently in anxieties surrounding how one's own corpse will be disposed of. The corpse is the only remains one leaves behind in this world and embodies one's existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp.123-145). However, it is also a pure object inaccessible to oneself, leaving the individual fully deprived of both the ability to learn about the corpse's condition and to protect it from harm. Hence, such fear will be materialized in how others will deal with the corpse: whether it will undergo invasive dissection or its organs will be illegally removed, for example. This reasoning aligns with findings from a research study called the Mortality Salience experiment. The result suggests that participants who were asked to write about what would happen to their own bodies after death expressed significantly higher anxiety compared to the group that was asked to describe what would happen after other people's deaths (Greenberg et al., 1986).

Caring for Others After Death

Because the anxiety of individuals about how to take care of the body of the deceased stems from a profound fear of losing one's own power, this concern will naturally extend to encompass how people perceive and regulate the physical remains of their loved ones.

While one may rationalize an individual's care for another's corpse based on the obvious emotional bond with the deceased, the fundamental reason why individuals care about how strangers' corpses are treated, or are even infuriated when the latter are maltreated, appears to be, I argue, the fear they themselves experience in facing the loss of subjectivity. People attempt, through the act of actively participating in caring for the corpses and funerals of others, to relieve their own fear and uncertainty about being completely objectified. Adam Smith argues that empathy makes us suffer when we see others' suffering, claiming "That [humans] often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it" (Smith, 1759/2010, p. 1). Furthermore, Cialdini shows through experiments that altruism is essentially hedonistic, suggesting that the logic behind individuals' desire to help others escape suffering is, to a large extent, an attempt to relieve the fear they feel when imagining they might face the same suffering. This might explain, to some extent, why humans have a motive to reduce others' pain or to avoid being exposed to others' pain (Cialdini et al., 1973). Since everyone faces death eventually, the awareness of others' death, especially if the body is maltreated, may trigger death anxiety in the observer. Therefore, by actively protecting others' corpses from harm, individuals can ease their own existential fear.

In addition, one's fear and disgust at the mistreatment of another person's deceased remains can also be seen as an objection to the destruction of the meaning of life. Kant (1785/1998) once proposed that the dignity of humanity continues after death, meaning a person's body should still be accorded the same high status as when they were alive. From this Kantian perspective, polluting a corpse can be seen as a fundamental denial of individual identity, and such remnants may thus be regarded as an example of private merit and the essence of life. Conversely, if a person is unresponsive to the desecration of another's tomb, it can be considered tacit acceptance that human life has no value and that decaying flesh can be reduced to nothing but commodities.

Society-oriented Care for Human Corpses

The above concern is widely expressed across all sections of society. However, the main terror in society today spreads collective anxiety about self-preservation; it is not directly caused by a lack of meaning in life.

To utilize the distress caused by widespread worry and maintain social order, people developed many ways to reduce fear. In the beginning, strict regulations were established for dead bodies to give people some peace of mind about how to protect their remains after death. According to Rule 113 of the Geneva Conventions, issued by the International Committee of the Red Cross, both acts of pillaging and insult to the dead are prohibited (Henckaerts, 2005). By issuing laws and regulations, society signals to all parties that, even in death, a person's inherent dignity as a human being should be strictly protected; thus, official security can ease people's anxiety about what happens after death.

Conversely, culture can reduce people's fear of death by offering many ways to face it; there are many such cases, such as the Day of the Dead in Mexico, where vibrant life after death is pursued; Obon in Japan also has a joyful atmosphere with beautiful lanterns and shimmering torii gates for ancestral souls. Communities have developed their own traditions and rituals of eternal life and the next

world to alleviate people's fear of death.

Based on the above pillars, culture has set an ethereal boundary for death through institutional punishment and ritual prohibition to disconnect life from its end and thus address people's basic fear of what happens after death.

Beyond that, this common fear can also be regarded, to some extent, as a deep reason for society to maintain its unity. As Durkheim (2018) pointed out, no matter what form society takes, a shared morality and common values are needed as the link of social cohesion. Moreover, all human beings' shared adherence to the bottom line of maintaining corpse dignity has strengthened society's solidarity to a certain extent (Plato, 2008, p. 136).

Conclusion

This article argues that people's concerns about what happens to their bodies after death are inextricably linked to their fear of losing their autonomy and subjectivity, as well as losing bodily control. Humans perceive the world, participate in life, and form connections with their surroundings through their bodies as a medium. Death, however, transforms the living body into a physical entity—mere flesh—depriving people of their ability to perceive and protect themselves. Therefore, people's concerns about the potential mistreatment of their remains after death actually stem from a deeper fear: the sense of powerlessness that comes from losing control over one's own body after death.

These concerns extend beyond the individual. Emotional bonds with loved ones explain why people care for their remains. When the remains of strangers are mistreated, it can trigger fears of death and the loss of subjectivity. As discussed above, people alleviate the uncertainty and existential fear associated with death by actively protecting the remains of others.

However, people can express these concerns through forms of collective will such as laws, rituals, and social norms. Legislation ensures that the deceased are protected from mistreatment, while cultural customs provide people with acceptable ways to cope with death. However, these practices can only alleviate people's sense of uncertainty to a certain extent. No matter how the ways of dealing with death may change, the fear in people's hearts can never be completely eradicated: it is an eternal theme rooted in the finite nature of life and the constant awareness of death.

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