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Introduction

Not all of me will perish.

—HORACE, *ODES* 3.30.6

STUDIES PROVE that everybody dies eventually. I am therefore hoping that this tour of death and the afterlife, informed by the wisdom, insights, and practices of the ancients, will appeal to a fairly large readership. A lot of people postpone thinking about what to expect when they die until it's too late. But I think it proves helpful to take the proverbial bull by the horns. Forewarned, as the saying goes, is forearmed, especially if you happen to be in your seventies, as I am, or even in your eighties, nineties, or beyond. It's also worth noting that life expectancy in the United States has been declining for two years in a row, in part due to COVID, both in 2020 (by 1.8 year) and in 2021 (by 0.9 year)—i.e., from 77.0 to 76.1. It now stands at its lowest level since 1996.

Memento mori, in other words. Just sayin'.

"In the midst of life, we are in death," Christians read in the Book of Common Prayer. Although we know that fact intellectually, we ignore it most of the time. It will be my contention

that the ancients have much to tell us about death and dying, and about facing up to the challenges that they both pose. Jessica Mitford, who was a pioneer in the study of funerary ritual, observed in *The American Way of Death Revisited* that Americans sublimate death, whereas the British ignore death. Americans create the fiction that their dead are in a “home” when the truth is that they’re being handled (literally) by professionals, whereas the British have nothing to do with the body until the funeral, when it turns up concealed in a gleaming casket. Both societies fail to confront the existential phenomenon of death head-on, in other words.

By contrast, ancient peoples had no choice but to look death squarely in the eye. There were many reasons for this. To begin with, life expectancy, at birth especially, was much lower, due to malnutrition, disease, and poverty, let alone famine, accident, and warfare, though there would have been significant variation according to social class, geography, climate, and terrain. Among the big killers were tuberculosis, bronchitis, gastroenteritis, typhus, cholera, malaria, and syphilis.¹ Distressingly frequent were the deaths of infants and young children, and of mothers in childbirth, which affected everyone irrespective of socioeconomic status.² It is also the case that death was a seasonal visitor, more prevalent from late summer to early autumn in urban areas, and more frequent in winter in the countryside.³ As a result, the loss of a close family member, including parent and sibling, was the common lot of all who survived to early adolescence. Moreover, in the absence of hospitals, morgues, and funeral homes, death was a familiar presence in every home. And as if it wasn’t already sufficiently visible, steps were taken to elevate its profile further. The Greek historian Herodotus reports that the Egyptians carried a painted corpse made of wood inside a coffin into their drinking parties. The host then displayed the corpse to each of the guests in turn, saying, “Look at this as you drink and enjoy

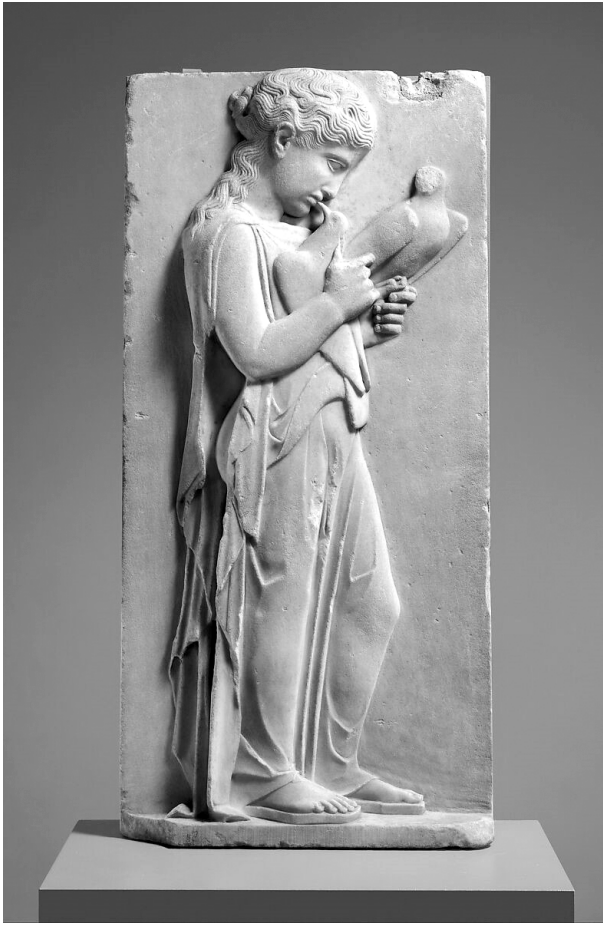


FIGURE 0.1. Attic funerary stele of a little girl, 450–440 BC. Image provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Thomas J. Watson Library. Fletcher Fund 1927.

yourself. You'll be like that when you die."⁴ Mosaics depicting skeletons appear on the floors of Roman dining rooms. You can't get more in-your-face than that.

What I offer here is a comparative study of the practices and speculations that a variety of cultures and religions have produced

over time in an effort to come to terms with the greatest mystery of all. Archaeological, literary, epigraphical, and iconographical data all have much to contribute. Overall, we know rather more about eschatology, viz beliefs about the afterlife, than we do about mortuary practices, which show up only rarely in our sources and whose origins are unfathomable. Wherever it seems justifiable to assume continuity across the millennia, therefore, I've taken the liberty of citing a contemporary custom. I acknowledge that there is controversy regarding the word "belief" on the grounds that some scholars see it as intrinsically Christianizing, given the priority of ritual observance that characterized pre-Christian societies, but that does not preclude the fact that polytheists did what they did informed by what can only be called a belief system.

In general, beliefs about death and the dead, and the rituals they evoke, being embedded in conservatism, are remarkably constant. When change does occur, it is often consequent upon an upheaval in the political and social structure. Philippe Ariès in *Western Attitudes to Death* (1974) argued that, from the Middle Ages until modern times, Western Europe in its predominant mentality toward death went through three distinct phases: (1) accepting death, (2) fearing death, and (3) concealing death. Such a daring synthesis of eschatological evolution is, in my view, unwarranted in the case of antiquity, given the limited evidence available. For instance, though a belief in a dualistic afterlife begins to gain ground in Greek thinking from the late sixth century BC onward, it is unjustifiable to conclude that a majority of the population now embraced a new doctrine of death, so to speak.⁵ Indeed, if one fact is incontestable, until the rise of Christianity, there was considerable diversity within every religious system.

Although my starting point was the Greeks, the other belief systems investigated here—Mesolithic, Neolithic, Mesopota-

mian, Egyptian, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Etruscan, Roman, Jewish, Early Christian, Muslim, and so on—are hardly less fascinating. I’ve omitted Oceanic, Baha’i, Polynesian, Tibetan, Shinto, Daoist, Confucian, Jain, Sikh, Aboriginal Australian, Native American, Buddhist, Aztec, Mayan, and African folk religions, and so on—the list is almost endless—except occasionally to illustrate an analogous practice or belief.

Here, then, is a brief introduction to the cultures and belief systems we will be considering, roughly ordered according to their earliest emergence on the world stage:

Mesopotamian. Mesopotamia is a Greek word that means literally the “Land between Two Rivers,” the rivers in question being the Tigris and the Euphrates. Today, the land that goes under this name comprises Iraq and Kuwait, part of southeast Turkey, and northeast Syria. Mesopotamian civilization was arguably the first civilization in world history. It began ca. 3000 BC, the approximate date when writing was invented. The region was never unified under a single system of government. By the second millennium BC, if not before, it consisted of a number of vying city-states. It follows that what goes under the name “Mesopotamia” incorporated several ancient cultures, including Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian, each with its own linguistic system. In ca. 1800 BC, Hammurabi of Babylon established an empire in the south, though from the fourteenth century onward this was kept in check by the rising power of Assyria in the north, which came to control the largest empire the world had seen thus far, extending from the River Nile to the Caucasus Mountains. Mesopotamia’s independence ended in 539 BC, when the Persian king Cyrus captured Babylon. Yet despite the several different cultures and languages, there was remarkable homogeneity throughout this period, not least in light of the fact that the Mesopotamians worshipped the same gods (albeit by different names

in some cases) and shared the same literary tradition. That tradition is preserved in the cuneiform (i.e., wedge-shaped) script inscribed on clay tablets that have been found throughout the region. Chief among the literary works is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which grapples with the meaning of mortality and death. Supplementing this tradition is an abundant archaeological record.

Egyptian. The resources that the Egyptians expended on the care of their dead, including the immense labor that went into the attempt to preserve the corpse through mummification, has no parallel. Nor does the expenditure they lavished on tombs, *in primis* the pyramids. Whereas the houses of the living, including palaces, were mostly made of mud-brick, tombs were often made of stone or carved into the rock. It seems likely that as early as ca. 4000 BC, soon after they established themselves in the Nile Valley, the Egyptians were already expecting to enjoy an afterlife, because they were placing offerings of food and drink beside their dead, presumably for purposes of consumption in the afterlife. It is not until the Early Dynastic Period, however, that we have incontrovertible literary and archaeological evidence for a belief in the afterlife, though in this era the privilege of immortality was reserved for the pharaoh, as we learn from the so-called *Pyramid Texts*, which were inscribed on the walls of the pyramids at Saqqara from ca. 2400 BC onward. All the effort that went into constructing monumental tombs and performing elaborate mortuary rituals makes sense only if this was required to guarantee the pharaoh's exclusive well-being in the hereafter. The entitlement to immortality thus became contingent upon the rise of a centralized authority, even though in the preceding Predynastic Period, the afterlife may well have been available to everyone.

Before long, however, this same entitlement came to be extended to members of the pharaoh's immediate circle, no doubt

as a reward for their faithful devotion. Then, from 2100 BC onward, the afterlife became increasingly “democratized,” in line with the breakup of the Old Kingdom and the increased affluence of the bureaucratic class, as we see from the appearance of the *Coffin Texts*, which granted a far larger but still exclusive group access to the afterlife.⁶ A further change took place at the beginning of the New Kingdom (ca. 1539 BC), when the dead were provided with a papyrus copy of the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day*, more commonly though inaccurately known as the *Book of the Dead*, which informed them how to face a post-mortem trial before Osiris, the Underworld judge. Subsequently, Egyptian eschatology remained remarkably uniform, as we see from the fact that this compilation of spells was in continuous use until ca. 50 BC. It is often suggested that the attention that the Egyptians gave to their dead is indicative of a morbid fascination with death. The truth is that they wanted life—this life or something very much like it—to go on and on forever.⁷

Hindu. Hinduism, the oldest surviving religion in the world, does not adhere to a uniform set of beliefs about death and the afterlife, nor for that matter, about any other aspect of belief, and it has no single authoritative text. The oldest writings, the four Vedas, date from ca. 1500 to ca. 1200 BC in the form in which they have come down to us. The Vedic tradition established cremation as the exclusive method of bodily disposal by returning the remains to smoke and ashes and enabling the dead to travel to the world of the fathers. Many of the rituals that Hindus still perform on behalf of their dead originated at least three thousand years ago. The welfare of the deceased, according to the Vedas, depends largely on ritual observance. The Upanishads, whose main texts were composed in the centuries leading up to ca. 1200 BC, maintained that the goal of life was to escape the endless cycle of rebirth called *samsara* by realizing the potential of one’s

true self or *atman*. This ideal, known as *moksa*, could be attained partly as the result of education and intellect, which meant it was confined to the elite. Vedic ritual was not rejected, however, and in fact the Vedas were incorporated into the Upanishads. A third, more popular view of the afterlife was promulgated in the Bhagavad Gita or “Song of the Lord,” composed in the first or second century AD, which features in an epic poem known as the Mahabharata and which teaches that release from the cycle of rebirth is available to those who seek salvation through union with the divine. After all, who wants to go on being reborn time and again? This approach did not invalidate those of its two predecessors, however, so all three co-existed and continue to co-exist. Even so, the core beliefs of Hinduism are only loosely defined. There are hundreds of different sects, as we would call them, distinguished by caste, language, economics, and geography.

Jewish. “Jewish” for the purposes of this inquiry signifies primarily the evidence that is provided by the Hebrew Bible, aka the Old Testament, aka the Tanakh, a canonized body of work that was established in its current form around the beginning of the second century AD. Its origins as a literary work perhaps date back to ca. 1200 BC, whereas the period of history it describes began about half a millennium earlier. Though the Hebrew Bible promotes the vision of a people who are committed to Yahweistic monotheism, it does not hide the fact that at times of crisis the Israelites reverted to pagan practices, including idol worship, necromancy, and human sacrifice. It is therefore important to attend to passages that reveal vestiges of earlier beliefs and practices that were condemned by Yahweistic theology. When the hope of an afterlife first appears, it is conditioned largely by historical circumstances, notably the Babylonian Captivity (587/6–538 BC) and the Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BC), since these events prompted Jews to speculate about the

hope of a national resurrection. Also valuable is an apocalyptic work known as I Enoch, possibly influenced by the Essene community of Jews living at Qumran, which describes the fate of the soul after death.

Zoroastrian. Zoroastrianism is an Iranian religion whose alleged founder, Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek), may have lived sometime between the seventeenth to fifteenth centuries BC, or even as late as the sixth century BC, since there is no proof of its existence before this period. Zoroastrianism promotes a dualistic vision of the universe, in which the forces of good are locked in battle with the forces of evil, though it is essentially monotheistic. It ultimately developed an elaborate eschatology, which was once thought to have influenced other belief systems, including Judaism, though this is now disputed.⁸ Zoroastrians were diametrically opposed to the Egyptians in that they judged the dead to be an extremely strong source of pollution. The most important source is the Avesta or “Pure Instruction,” which purports to have been composed by Zoroaster himself, though it does not appear in written form until the fourth or fifth century AD. Rules regarding the treatment of the dead are laid down in the sacred writings known as the Avesta, specifically in a section known as the Vendidad, aka Videvat, or “Law Rejecting the Demons”—demons being regarded as a source of pollution. The current version of the Avesta was assembled from fragments in the third to seventh centuries AD, the original having allegedly been destroyed when Persepolis was sacked by Alexander the Great.

Etruscan. The Etruscans settled in modern-day central Italy, as far north as the Po valley and as far south as Campania, and on the island of Corsica. Herodotus alleged that they arrived on the peninsula from some far-off place, but recent DNA evidence suggests that they were indigenous. The peculiar distinctiveness

of their culture is perhaps due to their extensive contacts with other Mediterranean societies during the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The Etruscans fought a series of unsuccessful wars against the Romans, which ended with their absorption into the Roman state around the middle of the third century BC. They were second only to the Egyptians in the labor and expense that they expended on their dead. Rock-cut tombs surmounted with tumuli are popular in the early period, whereas from the end of the fourth to the second century BC barrel-vaulted tombs, whose shape seems to have derived from Macedon, became common. Etruscan eschatology is unfathomable. The lively scenes that adorn the walls of Etruscan tombs may depict the dead enjoying themselves in the next world, though it is also possible that they are intended to evoke images of everyday life. Gruesome depictions of infernal deities occasionally appear, sometimes beside banquet scenes. About 13,000 inscriptions have come to light, many of which accompany objects intended for use by the dead, but the Etruscans have left us no literature. Like the Egyptians, they have been accused of having a morbid fascination with death, but like the Egyptians it is entirely possible that they too conceived of the afterlife as a joyous extension of this life.

Greek. When we talk of Greek practices and beliefs, “Greek” is often a misnomer. “Greek-speaking” would be more accurate, since the Greeks established settlements throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and far beyond. With the exception of Homer, arguably our principal literary source, most of the evidence relating to death and the afterlife derives from Athens. This includes vase paintings, funerary inscriptions, the works of the Athenian tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—and Aristophanes’s comic masterpiece *Frogs*, which is largely set in Hades. Plato, too, was fascinated by the afterlife

and repeatedly modified his view of what to expect in his dialogues—notably *Apology*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. Yet Athens was just one small city-state among a thousand-plus such city-states. Even so, though each city-state cherished its autonomy, it is probable that many of these mortuary practices and beliefs for which Athens is our sole source would have been widely shared. We have virtually no literary or artistic evidence, nor indeed any burials, from Athens's rival Sparta. In general, the Greeks seem to have believed in an undifferentiated afterlife based on the principle of equal misery for all, apart from a handful of felons, though the so-called mystery cults, whose origins may date as far back as the second millennium BC, may have offered to those who underwent initiation a more inviting prospect, albeit one whose precise character was not revealed.

Roman. The Roman world eventually extended across the entire Mediterranean and beyond, including the entire coast of North Africa, the Levant, most of Europe, much of Turkey, and Britain as far north as Hadrian's Wall. Estimates of the population when the empire was at its height in AD 117 range from 45 to 120 million. It goes without saying that there must have been substantial regional and cultural variation throughout this vast multi-ethnic world, approximately 1.9 million square miles in extent. In Egypt, for instance, mummification continued unabated under Roman rule, while the Jews, too, retained their own distinctive burial practices.

"Roman" for our purposes means the Latin-speaking population residing primarily on the Italian peninsula. The Romans were profoundly influenced by the Greeks, not least in matters to do with religion. Where their mortuary practices and beliefs duplicate those of the Greeks, they are therefore best described as "Greco-Roman." A distinctive feature of Roman eschatology, however, is the intimate connection that the living had with

their ancestors, who were incorporated into the everyday life of the household. It used to be thought that the ancestors comprised an undifferentiated group, but recent research has suggested the opposite. A particularly rich source of information is the hundreds of thousands of funerary inscriptions dating from the late first century BC to the early third century AD.

Early Christian. Christianity began as a sect within apocalyptic Judaism. Only in the second half of the first century AD did it begin to outgrow its Jewish roots and become a predominantly gentile—that is, non-Jewish—religion. Our major sources for Early Christian eschatology are statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, the writings of St. Paul, the Book of Revelation, and the noncanonical Apocalypse of Peter and Apocalypse of Paul. Though St. Paul argued forcefully for belief in the resurrection of the body, the doctrine proved intellectually challenging and was met with ridicule in certain quarters. Early Christian art relating to death and the afterlife did not become markedly distinct from its Roman pagan counterpart until the late second or early third century. Christian bishops took little or no interest in regulating cemeteries or moderating funerary behavior until the reign of Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, in the early fourth century. Even then, there was no effective mechanism to enforce anything approaching an orthodoxy. Only gradually, in other words, did those who came to be called Christians forge a distinctive identity in terms of rituals and observances. The concept of Hell as a place of punishment and torture largely gained control of the Christian imagination in the centuries that lie beyond the scope of this inquiry, the initial emphasis being on the Kingdom of God, aka Heaven.

Islamic. Islam is an outlier in terms of this survey since it takes us into Late Antiquity—Muhammad, its founder, having died in 632. However, many of its beliefs grew out of contact with

Judaism and Christianity. Most pre-Islamic Arabs were polytheists, though a minority were adherents of various branches of Judaism and Christianity, including Samaritanism and Manichaeism. Its dualistic afterlife, markedly influenced by Christian theology, was one of the ways in which Islam differentiated itself most sharply from polytheism. Though the Quran gives us some indication of what to expect in the hereafter, hardly less important are the *hadiths*, the oral testimonies that were written down in the eighth and ninth centuries. Since Muslims maintain that the *hadiths* accurately reflect the Prophet's teaching and have his tacit approval, it is inappropriate in their eyes to question how representative they are of his teachings. The rules for Islamic funerary ritual are laid out in *fiqh* literature, the corpus of Islamic law. This is a composite work, the earliest parts of which date to the eighth century AD. Relatively few Muslim graves that date to the early centuries of Islam have come to light.

Whereas Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, and Jewish eschatology evolved over hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years, Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices had a much shorter gestation period. The belief systems we shall be interrogating are not represented equally richly. The literary sources for the Greco-Roman world far outstrip any other in scope and variety, whereas the material remains from Egypt are unparalleled in quality and quantity. In general, polytheistic systems insouciantly exhibit a range of ideas about the afterlife, whereas monotheisms strive, not always successfully, to impose uniformity.

Death's heavy footprint was (and still is) conditioned by wealth and prestige. We might call Death the Great Leveler, but the poor and the downtrodden ended up immeasurably lower down in his pecking order than the rich and the powerful, whose resting places and furnishings reflect their lavish lifestyle. Most

of our evidence was produced by the elite, which raises the question as to what extent it reflects popular belief. How representative of their age are literary giants? And what did the vast slave population that supported every ancient society think would be its fate in the world to come?⁹ Archaeological evidence is also skewed heavily in favor of men, which leads us to suppose that in death as in life women's status was generally inferior.¹⁰

I have organized my inquiry around questions we might ask of someone who has personally experienced the afterlife—what choices we need to make before our departure, how we should prepare for our last moments, what we'll encounter on the other side of life, and finally what to expect, so to speak, if there's nothing to expect. My tour extends from ca. 100,000 BC to around the third and fourth centuries AD, with the exception of Islam, which takes us into the ninth century. I largely omit: (1) grief and grieving, since these pertain more to the living; (2) differing methods of interment (cist graves, shaft graves, and so on), other than when they reveal a specific belief or intention; (3) funerary architecture, except very briefly in chapter 8; and (4) tomb markers, again unless they illustrate a belief about the afterlife. I have not shied away from asking questions to which the dead have given no answers. I take it as a given that changes in belief are related to changes in social, political, and economic structures, and that these often serve to legitimize the status of a particular social group, but it is impossible in this brief survey to explore these connections in any detail.¹¹ Besides, my thematic, as opposed to diachronic, approach is hardly conducive to an inquiry conducted along these lines. Scholars have used burial practices and the commemoration of the dead to shed light on family relationships, but this important topic, too, lies beyond the scope of this inquiry.¹²

The belief that the corpse is unclean, that the dead must undertake a journey to the next world, that they need assistance from the living to reach that world, that they will undergo a postmortem judgment, that they need to be fed, that there exists a special place for the elect and an infernal region for the damned—these are ideas that transcend religious as well as ethnic boundaries and demonstrate remarkable constancy, if not universality. They are also expressive of the limitations of the human imagination when contemplating what happens after death. Equally widespread are the ceremonies performed on behalf of the dead. These include closing the eyes and mouth, washing the corpse, clothing it in a special garment that leaves only the face exposed, laying it out formally in a place where it can be viewed by relatives and friends, sharing a meal with the mourners after the burial, and so on. Is this the result of borrowing or are these universal markers of human identity? Enough to say that the Israelites borrowed from the Mesopotamians, the Romans borrowed from the Greeks, the Muslims borrowed from the Christians, and just about everybody ultimately borrowed from the Egyptians.¹³

Rather than proceeding somewhat mechanically chapter by chapter from one culture to another (i.e., “The Mesopotamian View of Death and the Afterlife,” “The Egyptian View of Death and the Afterlife,” “The Etruscan View of the Afterlife,” and so on), I have adopted an integrative approach by interlacing each chapter with a discussion of the approaches and thinking of the principal cultures that this book takes on board in the belief that this strategy enables insights to emerge that would otherwise be less apparent. Admittedly this approach largely ignores the socio-historical context, but as in life so in death one can’t have everything, and there is, I suggest, substantial benefit to be gained from pointing out similarities, while remaining alert to differences.

Though there is a burgeoning scholarly interest in the psychology and handling of death and dying, there is a paucity of comparative studies that explore ancient belief systems as broadly as I have attempted here. Comparative thanatology exists as a subdiscipline in anthropology, but it is mainly confined to contemporary cultures or to comparisons between the animal and human kingdoms. Back in 1994, it was estimated that there were over 200,000 courses on death and dying being taught annually in the United States, housed in a variety of departments including education, psychology, sociology, and health and human development, and the number is surely larger today.¹⁴ The most voluminous exploration of the afterlife is Dante Alighieri's three-part *The Divine Comedy*, completed shortly before his death in 1321 and first printed in Florence in 1472, which became for Christians the authoritative statement on what to expect when you die. However, a work of 14,233 verses hardly constitutes a tour, which is what my book purports to be. Nor does Dante offer any advice about how to prepare for death, except by implicitly urging the reader to avoid lust, gluttony, greed, rage, heresy, violence, fraud, and treachery. I have done my best to improve on that.

On a personal note, I should point out that my occasional levity is not intended to be disrespectful to the dead, whom I'll no doubt be joining soon enough. The fact of the matter is that none of us has the faintest idea what "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns," as Hamlet calls it in Shakespeare's play of that name, actually *is*, and anyone who claims to have expert knowledge of the subject, as many do, is painfully deluded. What we imagine it to be is always a product of our time. Turn to a website called Happy Science and you'll discover that all the dead will be shepherded to the Mirror of Truth, where their lives from beginning to end will be projected

onto a screen. Once the screening is over, they will be sent “to the most suitable place for learning in the Spirit World.”¹⁵ On another personal note, I do not believe in the life everlasting. As a born skeptic, however, I am prepared to be pleasantly, or more likely in my case, unpleasantly surprised.

I am fully aware that a short book cannot capture the complex sets of practices and competing beliefs that existed in antiquity and even—no doubt in many cases—within the same household. Regarding the afterlife, the philosopher and philologist André-Jean Festugière remarked, “The sentiments of the ancients admitted of infinite variation.”¹⁶ I further acknowledge unabashedly that my investigation is rooted in cultural assumptions that reflect my own thinking about death.

My goal throughout has been to advance beyond the merely descriptive and comparative by questioning the purpose behind any given mortuary practice and the implications of any given belief. Thinking about what lies ahead for each of us in the fullness of time in a morbidly curious frame of mind through the sober lens of the ancients has, I believe, the ability to deepen our appreciation of and zest for life, and though we can’t escape death, we can at least escape the *fear* of death, as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (fl. early second century AD)—a freed slave incidentally—aptly observed.¹⁷

My hope, simply put, is to enliven the dead and enlighten the living.

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