

Care of the Dead: Ancestors, Traditions & the Life of Cultures

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Humans stand apart from other animals in our care for children and elders. We are most distinctive, however, in our care for the dead. Such care is fraught in a modern episteme marked by disenchantment. Beginning with an analysis of exemplary individual relationships with the dead, we develop a theory of the complex links that bind present to past. Through the traces they leave, the traditions they transmit, and the institutions they build, the dead participate in countless chains of causally linked neural and material representations. These should be viewed as living things sustained by attention, memory, and action. Contemporary politics and cultural economies have disrupted our relations with the dead, seeking to control the past for present ends. We call instead for the relationship cultivated with the dead in the humanities, one that emphasizes our shared limitations, our shared fate, and our shared responsibility to make the world from the possible.

Imagine a cellist who is preparing a concert of eighteenth-century music. She lives a fairly ordinary life in one of the great cities of the North Atlantic: riding in subway cars where everyone is on their phones (including her), getting takeout at a Lebanese diner around the corner, coming home to hit up Instagram or watch a Korean reality show on Netflix. She is a citizen of the modern and, like most of us, she daily experiences a ceaseless flow of ever-shifting and evanescent cultural inputs. Within this flow, every element relativizes every other, and no style of music can claim unquestioned cultural dominance, least of all eighteenth-century cello music. Like any citizen of the modern, she must ride the waves of constant cultural innovation. What commands her attention is the New, and the temporal expression of the New is the Now. One cultural object succeeds another in an endless series, and each new object in its turn falls away like a spent rocket booster as the next one zooms off ahead. The continuous turbulent unfolding of the New holds her attention and fastens it to the leading edge of the present moment. In everyday life, the past makes fewer and fewer claims on her attention. Death is a lurid spectacle in this cultural regime, but the dead are seldom remembered.

For all that, our cellist takes her instrument out of its case every night and practices sonatas by Luigi Boccherini. When she does this, she enters a different tem-

porality, slower and deeper. So doing, she might feel something akin to what Niccolò Machiavelli describes in a famous letter to politician Francesco Vettori:

When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me.¹

Like Machiavelli and innumerable other writers, scholars, and artists, our cellist has a living relationship with the dead. When the cellist picks up her instrument, it settles against her body in a way that recalls other bodies that have sculpted such instruments to their own measure. When she studies the musical score, she finds patterns intended for her, or someone much like her, realized in notation. Like most utterances we find directed to us, these need interpretation. Why does this passage feel so awkward? What fingering should I use so it will fit my hand? Why does this phrase end as it does? How can I help my listeners make sense of it? You might think that these questions, directed to someone dead for more than two centuries, would elicit no response. Yet somehow they do. As she practices, she finds a ghostly subjectivity shimmering into manifestation – Boccherini's. She knows what feels good in his hands, she knows something of his sense of humor, she knows what he finds moving, charming, sad, terrifying. After studying his music for many years, she feels like she knows him. She cares for him and feels cared for in return.

Musicologist Elisabeth Le Guin writes that, in artistic practice, the dead are vividly present in our very bodies. When a cellist plays a Boccherini sonata, the shapes and gestures of long-dead hands are revived in her own:

As living performer of Boccherini's sonata, a work which he wrote for himself to play, I am aware of acting the connection between parts of someone who cannot be here in the flesh. I have become, not just his hands, but his binding agent, the continuity, the consciousness; it is only a step over from the work of maintaining my own person as some kind of unitary thing, the necessary daily fiction of establishing and keeping a hold on identity: different perhaps in urgency and accuracy, but not, I think, in kind. As this composer's agent in performance, I do in this wise become him, in much the same manner as I become myself. My experience of becoming him is grounded in and expressed through the medium of the tactile.²

Le Guin insists that the performer's relationship with a dead composer is reciprocal, just as our relationships with living persons are. It is not only that the performer stands in for Boccherini; Boccherini must also stand in for the per-

former. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that, to interpret music well, performers must understand “that which is supposed in the voice of the executant.”³ Le Guin adds, “What can this mean but the composer’s reliance on knowledge of, or assumptions about, the performer? – who can only make the acquaintance of this ghostly version of themselves ‘supposed’ in the work through a careful evaluation of what it is like to execute it.”⁴ In this way, the dialogue between performer and composer becomes reciprocal: Boccherini fashions a subject in his music, and in interpreting it, the performer becomes that subject. He intends things for her, and she intends things for him; he tells her things, and she, the one he has supposed, tells him things in turn.

Anthropologist Sarah Hrdy has reflected on the ways cultural objects from the deep past address us in the present day. While discussing an early draft of this essay, Hrdy held a reproduction of a six-thousand-year-old Cucutini figurine up to the Zoom window and spoke of the connection she feels with its unknown maker. “The statuette fits so comfortably in my hand . . . I can hold her face-to-face as if asking some long-lost ancestress about a child who is ill: ‘What should I do? Will she get well? Oh please help her to get well.’ That’s the kind of conversation I imagined having with that statuette.”⁵ In the same session, historian Abby Rumsey remarked that many of her friends are dead and have been for centuries. Any of her fellow historians will know exactly what she means. Our relationships with the dead are just that: relationships, living and nonmetaphorical. We care for the dead just as we do for our friends and family.

Such relationships of care exist in unresolved tension with the cultural condition of the modern. The life we have imagined for our cellist is divided between her care for the dead and a sustained present of continuous transformation and novelty. The dichotomy between these two temporalities, the fleeting present and the unmoving past, has been a central concern for the theorization of modernity since Charles Baudelaire first applied the term to art. Modernity, he writes, is “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable.”⁶ Countless books and articles have teased out the implications of this sentence, not only for art but for all society. Since the 1960s, theorists of modernity have increasingly worried that the tension between the two temporalities would go slack: that the acceleration of the present away from the past might at last reach escape velocity and collapse paradoxically into a “schizophrenic” eternal present.⁷

And perhaps this is in fact happening; it certainly is in the current version of what Theodor Adorno called the culture industry.⁸ In this domain, the works of the past have come to be seen not so much as dull and unfashionable (hardly a new complaint) as simply nonexistent. When noticed, they are judged only in present-day terms, by which they are found wanting. The views of dead artists are deemed “problematic,” and their works thereby disqualified from consideration. In any event, they are considered irrelevant to current social and political issues.

Something similar is happening in the academic humanities: university classics departments are closing while arts and humanities departments retool their faculties and curricula to emphasize the living at the expense of the dead.⁹ Even to complain about this is to court suspicions of a retrograde or simply weird agenda: who makes friends with the dead?

Weird: into that word are loaded all the metaphysical assumptions by which “care of the dead” becomes hard for moderns to conceive in a more-than-metaphorical way. It is not only the double temporality of the modern that strains our relationships with the dead; it is also the boundary between what we can and cannot easily think within the construal of reality given by secular modernity’s default naturalism. As cultural theorist Mark Fisher writes, what is weird is what is *wrong*; something from outside the boundary – “that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience” – imposes itself on inside-the-boundary reason.¹⁰ At stake here is what Max Weber called disenchantment, the process by which spiritual agencies have come to be excluded from our picture of the world and from intellectually respectable discourse.¹¹ For the eminent philosopher Charles Taylor, as for Weber, disenchantment is one of the basic “conditions of belief” by which a naturalist episteme has come to appear as something beyond belief – not a historical and contingent set of notions concerning reality but reality itself, unarguable and unanswerable. And what underwrites disenchantment are several metaphysical assumptions concerning mind:

Let me start with the enchanted world, the world of spirits, demons, moral forces which our predecessors acknowledged. The process of disenchantment is the disappearance of this world, and the substitution of what we live today: a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual *élan* is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans ... and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings etc. are situated “within” them.¹²

It doesn’t seem especially weird for Hrdy to say that she can hold a Cucutini figurine “as if asking some long-lost ancestress about a child who is ill,” because that “as if” renders the thought metaphoric. She is not “really” asking the figurine for wisdom, and we would be surprised if she did, as we likely do not believe that a piece of clay can be the “locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual *élan*,” much less the dead artist who made it. Le Guin’s notion of music performance as a reciprocal relationship with a dead man might seem a bit weird insofar as it suggests communication between a living and embodied mind and a dead one unbounded by a corporeal human form. An orthodox naturalist might want to ask: Where would such a mind reside? What would be its material medium? How could it make itself understood? We tame the implicit weirdness of the idea by assuming that here, too, we are speaking metaphorically.

But what if we're not? What if "care of the dead" doesn't just mean caring for the artistic products left behind by a human life, but in some way caring for that (after)life? What if we hold ourselves in common with that life? One of us (Phil Ford) is a Buddhist and, like many Buddhists, keeps an altar in his home. It includes framed photos of deceased family members he wishes to remember and who stand in for all the generations that precede them. He has long made a habit of lighting a stick of incense at his altar whenever his family settles into an evening of games, movies, conversation, or whatnot. He makes such offerings to his ancestors because he wants them to be included in the fun. This is one way to hold oneself in common with the life of the dead. Doing so means setting aside the questions that secular moderns are inclined to ask: Do you really think the dead would feel included in your family time? Or feel anything at all? With such a practice, as with spiritual practices generally, you don't wait around for it to make sense before undertaking it; you undertake it so that it makes sense. Whatever else may be said about it, this practice is one way to maintain a hermeneutic relationship with the dead – to keep them alive in your mind as an active question. And while it is perhaps more conspicuously weird than the hermeneutic relationship that Le Guin proposes, it is not really different in its aims and outcomes.

In undertaking such practices, we moderns find ourselves on the far side of the line between what we can easily accept from our world and what we cannot. But at the same time, we find ourselves in company with almost all cultures and societies that have ever existed. Modernity is the late and eccentric product of a human imagination that likes to think it has freed itself of the errors and superstitions that have plagued humanity up to now. The subtitle of Marshall Sahlins's last book, "An Anthropology of Most of Humanity," tartly makes this point. Sahlins's *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe* concerns those "metapersons" that, for most of humanity, form polities with living human beings. Metapersons could be animals, deities, or the dead: "although generally called 'spirits,' these beings have the essential attributes of persons, a core of the same mental, temperamental, and volitional capacities."¹³ Most of humanity has always sought to find the best ways of living with them, just as living human beings try to get along with one another as well as they can.¹⁴

Disenchantment is the process by which this becomes harder to think. But it is never unthinkable.¹⁵ If our culture is afflicted by presentism, people like our cellist can still choose to "step inside the venerable courts of the ancients." Likewise, disenchantment is not compulsory. Indeed, philosopher Jason Josephson-Storm has suggested that modernity has always been both the site of disenchantment and the site of its undoing.¹⁶ The social, cognitive, and complexity sciences, which are generally cast as thoroughly disenchanted domains of thought, might lend some support to the notion that we remain in intimate relations with the dead, particularly through the imaginative works they have left us.

Consider this, then, as a live possibility: Perhaps Phil is right to care for his familial dead, and Le Guin is right to treat Boccherini as a friend, and most of humanity was and is right to treat the dead as vital and care-worthy members of their society. They are right because the dead are, in some real sense, still alive. The dead demand our care because their thoughts – insofar as they become words and deeds – are living things. Those living things form much of the ecology of our minds. With care, that collective ecology is a garden. Without care, it is a blinding desert of the always new or a choking jungle of the ever old.

Believing that the dead live on does not require us to step too far beyond modernity's scientific comfort zone; it simply requires that we don't blink when philosophical naturalism or materialism drives us to weird conclusions (in Mark Fisher's sense). This perspective is a consequence of the metaphysical extravagances implied by a rigorous account of culture and cognition – and the latest thinking about the nature of the living state.

In 1952, anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn famously gathered 164 definitions of the term “culture.”¹⁷ Nowadays we could doubtless come up with another hundred. In this essay, our preferred definition focuses on culture's formal properties: a piece of culture is any “shared regularity in the organization of experience or the generation of action acquired through social life.”¹⁸ The (weird) materialist turn comes from insisting on specificity in the location of bits of culture. They must be instantiated, either as patterns in the brain or as shared (if possibly transient) artifacts.

Cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber builds up an ontology of culture starting with “cognitive causal chains” (CCCs), each chain a sequence of cognitive processes linked by input-output relations.¹⁹ He calls the things that flow along these chains representations, and notes, quite brilliantly, their amphibian nature. They are creatures of both the abstract and the physical; the formal and the causal. A CCC is “a causal chain in which each of the processes involved has the function of instantiating a certain type of semantic relationship” – relationships like “justification” or “similarity of content.”²⁰ These amphibian causal processes are not limited to individual human heads. Rather, they flow between them as social CCCs, in which mental representations give rise to public productions (some of which are also representations, as their function is to continue the causal chain by producing a mental representation in another person).

When these causal chains spread widely and stably enough, they become cultural. Much is smuggled in by the term “stably,” however. Sperber's approach to culture – now pursued under the terms *epidemiology of representations* or *cultural attraction theory* – does not take stable cultural transmission for granted, as in classical meme theories. Rather, it embraces the potential moments of transformation when a mental representation is rendered into a public representation, which produces related

but not necessarily identical mental representations in its listeners or readers. While memetic transmission is necessarily a replicative process for biologist Richard Dawkins and others who insist on a tight analogy between cultural and genetic inheritance, Sperber posits a more reconstructive or even interpretive transmission. This makes novelty, transposition, and innovation a live possibility, and stability a special outcome. With cultural CCCs, features of the mental representation interact with its cognitive, cultural, and social environment to make it reasonably stable, so that tokens of the same type flow along the causal chain.

These chains become something like cultural lineages. A bit of culture in one mind is externalized as a piece of writing and produces a bit of culture in another mind. You happen to talk with a friend about this strange essay you read in *Dædalus*, and the bit of culture reproduces; the lineage continues.

These bits of culture are behaving very much like *living things*. We mean this as more than a metaphor. There has been a sea change in how scientists think about life, inspired by the challenges of astrobiology (the search for life on other planets). In the astrobiological context, it simply does not make sense to think of life in terms of a particular chemistry (like the use of DNA or RNA to provide stable memory). Instead, using the tools of complexity science, theoretical biologists Chris Kempes and David Krakauer argue that we should focus on the basic *functions* that characterize the living state.²¹ It all boils down to using matter, energy, and information from the environment to persist and reproduce. Of course, this is exactly what a cultural organism does, whether it uses neurons in your brain to persist or the organization of lines, dots, and other bits of musical notation on a sheet of paper to reproduce.²² We can drop the “as if” from Hrdy’s testimony: she has a living thing on (or rather, in) her hands.

Some examples will make this more vivid. Consider Carl Jung’s notion of the autonomous complex, in which an artistic idea literally possesses and consumes the cognitive resources of its host in its “effort” to be realized. Or consider the songs, slogans, sayings, and thoughts that seem to demand our conscious attention and to commandeer our voices or bodies to achieve expression. Like the last song you had stuck in your head: this earworm persists because some of the matter in your brain is organized in a particular fashion, and some of the energy available – which could be devoted to bringing all sorts of thoughts to conscious presence – has instead been hijacked by a musical loop. This musical loop has the form that it does because it encodes (quite literally) survival-relevant information about its environment: the musical and melodic relationships that might be especially memorable; the words in the listener’s first language from which lyrics can be selected and stored for much lower cost than, say, Sumerian ones; and so on. Is the earworm using matter, energy, and information in the same way a person does? Absolutely not. But in the same way a virus does? Or a bacterium? The distinction is harder to maintain. At a formal level, we would use much the same

explanatory machinery to account for the persistence and reproduction of a virus as we would an idea. The substrate would be different, but the functional principles would be the same.

Like more familiar biological organisms, cultural organisms exist at multiple scales. They are embedded in rich ecologies. When a cultural organism uses a human author to perpetuate itself through writing, it relies on an entire multiscale ecology of literacy and literary institutions that allows its efficient and effective reproduction. Cultural organisms faced with mismatched ecologies undergo fascinating transformation and hybridization. For example, psychologist Frederic Bartlett showed that when English students played a game of telephone with Native American ghost stories, unusual properties of ghosts in the Native tradition were replaced with familiar properties from the English tradition.²³

In work with his former student Bernie Koch and computational biologist Daniele Silvestro, one of us (Jacob Foster) has shown that cultural organisms actually follow some of the same basic evolutionary principles as biological organisms.²⁴ By studying the complete population of metal bands over many decades, they found that the birth and death of bands were driven by competition for limited resources (in this case, literal metal “heads” – the time, attention, and cognitive bandwidth that folks would dedicate to metal music). Just as in biological organisms, key innovations can unlock new niches, but instead of evolving wings to take to the air, artists such as Sunn O))) developed new genres like drone metal, opening up space for explosions of cultural diversity.

This view of culture produces a sort of figure-ground reversal in how we think of both the living and the dead.²⁵ The dead are caught up in an endless web of cultural reproduction. They are both relays – critical hosts for cultural organisms making their way from past to present – and seed beds – bringing forth new cultural lineages that struggle to find their place in the cultural fabric. These new cultural lineages often have a certain poignancy: they most distinctly bear the stamp of the time, place, and (mortal) life of their originator. As literary scholar Robert Pogue Harrison writes in *The Dominion of the Dead*, some of these cultural lineages are nothing less than “the gifts of human worlds, cosmic in nature, that hold their place in time so that the living and the unborn may inhabit them at will.”²⁶ Such lineages grant a sort of partial, imaginal immortality to their constituents. Every time their story is told, the living breathe life into them and the dead come to fleeting reanimation.

These reanimated dead are more than mere ghosts, fated to an eternal return of the same. The curious power of the living imagination gives such cultural life forms continued freedom. In the most extreme cases, a congeries of densely related cultural lineages may allow the imaginal resurrection of the long dead. Think of Le Guin’s intimacy with Boccherini, or Rumsey’s host of long-dead friends, called up through strange acts of academic necromancy.²⁷ On the weird materialist account we’ve developed, to call this imaginal engagement “resurrection” isn’t

entirely ridiculous. Such figures cast so many cultural lineages into the future, and these have been tended and passed forward so meticulously, that it isn't unreasonable to think that imaginal reconstruction by a scholarly intimate might have something like the same fidelity as the everyday imaginal reconstruction of a living friend from the many threads of memory and culture that entangle us.²⁸

For if the dead become relays and seed beds, the living become seething ecologies of interrelated, interacting cultural organisms. Competing for memory, competing for dreams, competing for access to our conscious thoughts, words, and deeds. Copulating in the recesses of the unconscious to breed new organisms that might strike out and spread and become cultural. Harrison is right to remark that "we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead."²⁹ Indeed, our minds are constituted by ecologies of cultural organisms handed down to us and ultimately authored by those long dead and buried. Paleontologist, philosopher, and Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote that our very species depends on this entanglement with the dead:

From the moment when . . . the phyletic strands began to reach toward one another, weaving the first outlines of the Noösphere, a new matrix, coextensive with the whole human group, was formed about the newly born human child – a matrix out of which he cannot be wrenched without incurring mutilation in the most physical core of his biological being.³⁰

For us, this way of thinking about culture, tradition, and the dead stirs deep feelings of care and obligation. In part, this reflects the duty of care – or at least close consideration – we feel toward any fellow living thing. In part, it arises from a profound sense of debt and gratitude to the hands and minds that authored so much of who and what we are today, for good and for ill.³¹ We are stuck with our dead. We need to learn how to live with them, especially if they are – in some sense – still kicking around, still bringing us joy, still causing us trouble. Walking away is not an option.

This line of thought can run swiftly toward the tragic. Think of the numberless forgotten dead; even worse, the endlings of memory, carrying the last spark of some cultural organism that will soon be lost forever. Certainly, this elevates the sense of duty we feel toward our personal dead, toward the cultural organisms within our immediate care. Recognizing this, perhaps we can be better collective stewards of the noöspheric matrix and its numberless cultural organisms, striving for more equitable and even-handed access to imaginal immortality. We can also recognize that neglecting the mighty dead doesn't make them go away; it leads to our continued haunting with ever coarser, ever flatter, ever more attenuated versions of their cultural legacy, organisms reduced to crafty parasites that lurk in the darkest corners of our collective unconscious. Ignoring the dead and trying to "start over" doesn't lead to utopia or the overthrow of "necrocracy." The choice

is between conscious necromancy and unconscious possession. The myths and ghost stories that we moderns love to bracket with the great “as if” were actually right: either we deal with the dead – honor them, critique them, care for them, cure them – or we will be troubled by them forever. They will not be forgotten; they are always already inside us.

Let us take stock then. On the one hand, we have the preceding vision of culture as a continuous process of appropriation and interpretation, where novelty subtends each new and living link in the causal chain. Culture à la Sperber. Culture in the world of weird materialism. On the other hand, we have a deterministic vision of culture postulating the mechanical replication and replacement of fixed “memes.” Culture according to Dawkins. Culture in the world of orthodox scientific naturalism.

These two models exemplify two very different attitudes toward the dead and the past. The latter model offers an almost *digital* view of the world of the dead – “digital” in that memes act as *discrete* bits of culture, transmitted from one generation to the next and either retained or rejected at each step in the evolutionary process. In the Sperberian model, by contrast, the view is *analog*: our current ideas and beliefs are links in a chain that extends backward and forward in time, ever shifting and transforming. There is infinite granularity. We could even dispense with the chain analogy and speak of living vines creeping along a trellis of human history. In this model, *no* cultural organism can be apprehended as a static object external to us. As the fruit of a creative engagement on the part of our forebears, each cultural organism acquires its valence and function from the creative acts by which the living appropriate and reinvent it, effectively allowing it to “reincarnate” in a world entirely composed of such organisms.

This essay is an attempt to model this model, so to speak; to show how a materialism tuned to a slightly weirder frequency can overcome the myopic tendency to dismiss the cultures of the dead as simply obsolete. Premodern societies – and contemporary ones that defiantly cling to practices at odds with the secularist modalities of a postcolonial, postindustrial age – overwhelmingly perceive the dead as being alive in a very special way. However odd it might seem to some of his neighbors, Phil’s practice of burning incense for the ancestors is a ritual that goes back millennia and persists in many places today. Though we educated moderns may not share the metaphysical assumptions that motivated those who first breathed life into this particular cultural organism, recognizing that these innovators were human beings – as cognitively and culturally competent as we are – may grant us the intellectual charity needed to adapt and reenvision where we have hitherto scoffed and rejected.

Recall again Hrdy’s amazement at how the Cucutini figurine fit perfectly in her hand. In merely holding it, she felt a communion with the anonymous person who

carved and cherished it in the distant past. A human lifeworld seemed encoded in its very structure, just as Harrison has proposed. We suspect that such feelings of continuity and contiguity with the dead are rare today, when cultural mechanisms, many of them increasingly automated, seem bent on imparting a “year-zero” mentality, according to which the past is cleaved from the present at the ontological level. Such an outlook makes the past appear something like a faded black-and-white film that, though it clearly *refers* to reality, plays no active part in it. This is presentism in a nutshell, and it is nowhere conveyed more compellingly (if parodically) than in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, whose protagonist comes upon the following passage in a political treatise describing the ideology of the dystopian controllers:

The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc. Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it. It also follows that though the past is alterable, it never has been altered in any specific instance. For when it has been recreated in whatever shape is needed at the moment, then this new version is the past, and no different past can ever have existed. This holds good even when, as often happens, the same event has to be altered out of recognition several times in the course of a year. At all times the Party is in possession of absolute truth, and clearly the absolute can never have been different from what it is now.³²

The logic of Ingsoc is clear: Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the dead controls the unborn.

What should trouble us, on reading this, is how difficult it is for us moderns to object on metaphysical grounds. Where, pray tell, is the past? Is it not true that it exists only in manipulable records and unreliable memories? Precisely because of its metaphysical bravura, Orwell’s satire hits uncomfortably close to home. While we may flatter ourselves for having dispensed with central committees explicitly mandated to turn the dead into the sock puppets of some politically expedient morality play, one does sense in our presentism a desire to obliterate the past and thereby deny any claim it may have upon us. The view of culture developed here can help counteract this desire by confirming the wisdom of certain “memes” that our presentism may too quickly dismiss as clichés: William Faulkner’s quip that the past, far from over, is “not even past”; or the proverb often attributed to David Hume or George Santayana that “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”³³ Cultural CCCs are not mere representations that have value only in the present: each cultural organism is entirely composed of the past; its temporality is what gives it life. The past is affirmed in it, the dead resurrected.

Understanding all this, the presentists in us would like nothing so much as to concoct a radically new current of thought and practice, some new school of necromancy, to favor intellectual work that truly cares for the dead. To give in to this temptation, however, would be to miss the point. Rather, let us turn to the dead and see what they have to say. As we write this, humanities programs in universities across North America are facing significant challenges as funding priorities, student enrollment trends, job market pressures, and public perception conspire to devalue and marginalize these essential fields of study. The crisis in the humanities, of course, reflects broader societal shifts prioritizing economic utility over critical, cultural, and ethical thought. But what are the humanities if not a *Wissenschaft* predicated on the daunting prospect of understanding the past by entering it, of knowing the dead by conversing with them?

The humanistic approach is founded on the recognition that the limitations characterizing our ancestors' perspectives are ones we share. This condition underscores a deeper search for meaning that transcends any individual belief or practice; it gives culture a value that a utilitarian metric can only occlude. By viewing both the past and the present as the endeavors of limited humans living in time, we relativize both temporalities. In the humanities, the dead and the living engage in dialogue as equals, united by a shared existential journey. It is no mere hyperbole, then, to characterize the humanities as inherently necromantic: they are driven by a will to sympathize with the dead. If this pushes the humanities toward the creative arts on the epistemic spectrum whose other pole is the natural sciences, so be it.

As one of us (J. F. Martel) argues in his book *Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice*, by operating in an epistemic space where the exploration of the *possible* takes precedence over the apprehension of the actual, art plays a role that is as important as that of physics and biology. It is an objective pursuit with the same claim to truth as science, albeit truth of a different order.³⁴ Often, efforts to resolve the crisis of the humanities have hinged upon making them more quantitative and scientific. Perhaps understanding them as a means of engaging with the cultural organisms that make up our world on their own transtemporal terrain can breathe new life into intellectual practices where the dead can be seen as a polity in no less need of care than the living. Indeed, perhaps the needs of the living would be best served by such an approach.³⁵

In *The Dominion of the Dead*, Harrison writes:

Our basic human institutions – religion, matrimony, and burial, also law, language, literature, and whatever else relies on the transmission of legacy – are authored, always and from the very start, by those who came before. The awareness of death that defines human nature is inseparable from – indeed, it arises from – our awareness that we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead.³⁶

G. K. Chesterton grasped the political implications of this fact when he defined tradition as “the democracy of the dead.” For him, tradition mattered because it acted as a counterweight to “the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”³⁷ The dead, of course, do not vote by filling out a ballot, but by providing us with the ballot and the ballot box. Through these institutions, practices, and countless other ideas, the dead – though they remain dead – are no longer tethered, in our minds, to the past. Seen in their transtemporal presence, the dead subtly remind us that their era was as real to them as ours is to us, and that our era may seem as unreal to our unborn descendants as theirs may now seem to us. Caring for the dead, then, means acknowledging the continued relevance of the past as well as our duty toward ourselves and our descendants. It amounts to self-care and care for the unborn. As art critic John Berger said, “The living reduce the dead to those who have lived; yet the dead include the living in their own great collective.”³⁸

In our politically polarized age, it is too easy – especially in the academy – to dismiss care for the dead and their ideas as regression. Balancing the scales requires us to identify a third way between regressive atavism and radical progressivism.³⁹ At present, then, we face two different visions of managing the ever-growing dead. On one side is the perpetual new beginning favored by the most presentist currents of (hyper)modernity. On this view, the dead are an affront, and the cultural organisms they spawned should be neglected, deleted, or forgotten. Make way for the (monetizable) new! On the other side is the perpetual preservation of the (imagined) past favored by certain strands of reactionary (hyper)traditionalism. On this view, the (imagined) dead are to be revered and their (imagined) cultural progeny carried endlessly forward from past to present to future in a formaldehyde relay. Bow down before the (sanctified) old!⁴⁰

The hypermodernist construal leaves us with a cultural desert, haunted by the ghosts of the discarded dead: Angry ghosts, prone to lash out as seemingly inexplicable cultural poltergeists; old currents, surging to the surface. Each new cultural organism gets its fifteen minutes before withering away in the glare of the new. The hypertraditionalist construal leaves us with a cultural jungle, choked by the hypertrophic progeny of the overpraised dead, whose decadent excess becomes an impenetrable overstory, blotting out new cultural life and breeding monsters in its unexamined depths.

Caring for the dead does not mean idealizing them any more than it does denigrating them. A mentality that would give more weight to the votes of the dead than those of the living would only replace one oligarchy with another. Giving greater authority to the dead – or rather, to certain ideas of certain dead – is a move that only makes sense if it serves some faction of the living. The various reactionary traditionalisms of our day are thus *no less presentist* in their approach to the valence and meaning of the past than their revolutionary opposites. Both

camps are aligned with Orwell's Ingsoc insofar as they are attempting to *control* the dead.

To *care* for the dead means avoiding both extremes. It means creating a garden in which the dead and the living can walk together; in which old growth is carefully tended, protected from decay, and lovingly pruned of disease; in which new growth is nurtured and nourished, never forgetting its roots in the humus of the long dead and long forgotten. We think of the image conjured by the anonymous author of *Meditations on the Tarot*, one guide to responsible cultural necromancy:

The links in the chain of the tradition are not thoughts and efforts alone; they are above all living beings who were thinking these thoughts and willing these efforts. The essence of the tradition is . . . a community of spirits from age to age.⁴¹

This is true for any tradition. At its living best, it is a community of spirits from age to age. Those who are dead live on, dwelling in and amongst us. And they need our care, if we are all to carry on.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ENDNOTES

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, letter to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513, in *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 264.

² Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (University of California Press, 2006), 24.

- ³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Complete Dictionary of Music: Consisting of A Copious Explanation of All Words Necessary to A True Knowledge and Understanding of Music*, trans. William Waring (London: J. Murray, 1779; AMS Press, 1975).
- ⁴ Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body*, 25.
- ⁵ Sarah Hrdy, email to Phil Ford, June 25, 2024.
- ⁶ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," quoted in Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Duke University Press, 1987), 48.
- ⁷ Most notably, Frederic Jameson framed Lacan's conception of schizophrenia as a "crisis of historicity" within postmodernity. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 25–31.
- ⁸ To substantiate this claim would be the work of an entire monograph. Suffice it to say that some of the most distinguished works of recent cultural theory have argued the point quite convincingly. See, for example, Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (Bloomsbury, 2018). Adorno's writings on the "culture industry" foreshadowed much of this discourse, and we use his coinage here to stand in for a set of cultural relations that would also take an entire monograph to theorize fully.
- ⁹ For an eloquent argument for the continued relevance of long-dead writers, see Cornel West and Jeremy Tate's editorial on the closing of Howard University's classics department, "A Classics Catastrophe at Howard," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2021.
- ¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2017), 53. Those reading our essay in the aftermath of the 2024 U.S. presidential election may think first of the calculated deployment of "weird" by the Harris-Walz campaign. This usage is entirely in line with Fisher's. Harris and Walz sought to position Trump and Vance on the far side of a line between acceptable and unacceptable (or even unthinkable) political attitudes and behaviors.
- ¹¹ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford University Press, 1946), 129–158.
- ¹² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press, 2007), 29–30.
- ¹³ Marshall Sahlins, *A New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 2.
- ¹⁴ To put this another way: for most of humanity, the dead are seamlessly included in both a community of fate—"those with whom we perceive our destinies to be entwined"—and a community of care. Margaret Levi, "Expanding the Community of Fate by Expanding the Community of Care," *Dædalus* 154 (1) (Winter 2025): 240–241, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/expanding-community-fate-expanding-community-care>.
- ¹⁵ Indeed, contemporary religious communities provide ample evidence that enchantment and care remain closely intertwined, with Sahlins's meta-persons as both the subjects and objects of care. Zachary Ugolnik, "Divine Care: Care as Religious Practice," *Dædalus* 154 (1) (Winter 2025): 150–165, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/divine-care-care-religious-practice>.
- ¹⁶ Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

- ¹⁷ A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Peabody Museum Press, 1952).
- ¹⁸ Jacob G. Foster, “Culture and Computation: Steps to a Probably Approximately Correct Theory of Culture,” *Poetics* 68 (2018): 145.
- ¹⁹ Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Blackwell, 1996).
- ²⁰ Dan Sperber, “Conceptual Tools for a Naturalistic Approach to Cultural Evolution,” in *Evolution of Culture: A Fyssen Foundation Symposium* (The MIT Press, 2006), 154, 153.
- ²¹ Chris P. Kempes and David C. Krakauer, “The Multiple Paths to Multiple Life,” *Journal of Molecular Evolution* 89 (7) (2021): 415–426.
- ²² If we acknowledge this, then we must also acknowledge that the changing boundaries of life raise urgent moral questions about what care for the dead means, and what states care (in general) should aim to bring about.
- ²³ Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 1932).
- ²⁴ See the preprint by Bernard Koch, Daniele Silvestro, and Jacob G. Foster, “The Evolutionary Dynamics of Cultural Change (As Told through the Birth and Brutal, Blackened Death of Metal Music),” SocArXiv (2020), <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/659bt>.
- ²⁵ A figure-ground reversal involves a shift in perception; the background of an image (the “ground”) becomes perceptually primary, while the erstwhile focus (the “figure”) becomes the new ground. Many classic visual illusions play with the instability of figure and ground: Are you seeing two faces in profile? Or a vase? And so on.
- ²⁶ Robert P. Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 15.
- ²⁷ We’re being playful here but—really, what else do you call it when the living summon up the spirits of the dead for a little chat?
- ²⁸ The term *imaginal* is not to be confused with *imaginary*. As a term of art in religious studies and philosophy, *imaginal* refers to a world of vivid images and possibilities—not physical but nonetheless real. It is most closely associated with the great French scholar of Islam, Henry Corbin, who called the other world described by certain Muslim philosophers the *mundus imaginalis*. See Henry Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” 1964, <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/bibliography/mundus-imaginalis-or-the-imaginary-and-the-imaginal>.
- ²⁹ Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, ix.
- ³⁰ The term *noosphere* builds on the familiar terms *lithosphere* and *biosphere*, taking its distinctive beginning from the Greek word *nous* (a highly polysemous word that is often translated as “mind” or “intellect”). Just as the *biosphere* refers to the products of life that enrobe the earth, the *noosphere* refers to the products of mind. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Formation of the Noosphere,” *Revue des Questions Scientifiques* (1947), republished at The Library of Consciousness, <https://www.organism.earth/library/document/formation-of-the-noosphere> (accessed November 22, 2024).
- ³¹ Our analysis demonstrates that the fundamentally “relational” character of human beings extends beyond our contemporaries to include our predecessors and their still-living cultural progeny. On the picture we develop here, our “destinies” are literally “entwined” with the dead. Levi, “Expanding the Community of Fate.”
- ³² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin Books, 1990), 222.

- ³³ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (Knopf Doubleday, 2011), 73.
- ³⁴ J. F. Martel, *Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice: A Treatise, Critique, and Call to Action* (North Atlantic Books, 2015), 20 and passim.
- ³⁵ We also note—with no small irony—that the natural sciences are becoming more like art in the twenty-first century, insofar as they shift “from studying what is to what could be.” This point is argued by the theoretical physicist and former director of the Institute for Advanced Study, Robbert Dijkgraaf, who draws on examples ranging from synthetic biology and AI to the strange physics of carefully engineered condensed matter systems. In light of this, most efforts to make the humanities “more scientific” are emulating the natural sciences as they were, not as they have become. Robbert Dijkgraaf, “Contemplating the End of Physics,” *Quanta Magazine*, November 2020, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/contemplating-the-end-of-physics-20201124>.
- ³⁶ Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, ix.
- ³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (John Lane, 1908), 85.
- ³⁸ John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (Vintage Books, 2007), 4.
- ³⁹ Although beyond the scope of this essay, it would be fascinating (albeit difficult and delicate) to work out the role of the state in these endeavors. At the very least, it seems that the intemperate slashing of public support for the humanities represents a failure of the state’s duty of care—for the dead as well as the living. See Levi, “Expanding the Community of Fate.”
- ⁴⁰ As an illustrative example, consider those who want the King James Bible (or some other, more recent translation into English) to be treated as the exclusive authority on Christian doctrine, never mind its theologically tendentious translational choices. This is not to deny its sublime beauty as a work of literature!
- ⁴¹ While the identity of the author is widely known, we respect his intended anonymity and refer to him as our Known Friend—reciprocating his address of the reader as an “Unknown Friend.” Known Friend, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (Penguin, 2005).