

Article

Why Do We Care What Happens to Our Body After Death?

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Abstract: This essay examines the psychological reasons why people care about the treatment of their bodies after death, drawing on existential psychology frameworks including mortality awareness theory, Locus of Control, and the concept of symbolic immortality. It argues that concern for the physical body after death is not rooted in attachment to the body itself, but in deeper existential needs for meaning, dignity, control, and continuity beyond life. According to mortality awareness theory, the recognition of one's own mortality generates psychological unease, which individuals manage by adhering to cultural, religious, and social values that provide stability and purpose. End-of-life arrangements alleviate this unease by aligning with personal and shared beliefs, offering solace that one will be remembered and respected. The essay further applies Rotter's Locus of Control to show that choosing how one's body is treated allows individuals to transform an externally uncontrollable event—death—into an internally controlled decision, thereby restoring a sense of agency and self-determination. Finally, drawing on Lifton's notion that individuals die twice—once physically and again when forgotten—the essay contends that the body serves as a lasting symbol of identity, providing a foundation for symbolic immortality. By choosing their physical departure, individuals express their cultivated identity for the last time, ensuring that even after consciousness ceases, they remain alive in the minds of loved ones through rituals that reflect respect, appreciation, and shared values. Ultimately, the essay concludes that the deep concern for posthumous bodily treatment reflects a fundamental human desire not for the body itself, but for a meaningful, dignified, and lasting presence in the memory of others.

Keywords: mortality; meaning; dignity; locus of control; symbolic immortality; cultural values

1. Introduction

Death represents the irreversible cessation of physiological functioning and the termination of conscious experience, marking a definitive boundary in human existence [1, 2]. This biological endpoint inevitably evokes profound psychological responses—including apprehension, introspection, and sustained inquiry—particularly regarding the ontological status of the self beyond bodily dissolution. Such concern arises not merely from emotional reaction but from deeply embedded cognitive and motivational structures: on one hand, an evolutionary imperative to preserve continuity through legacy, kinship, and cultural transmission; on the other, a fundamental existential need to construct coherent meaning frameworks that accommodate finitude. To rigorously analyze postmortem bodily considerations, it is essential to distinguish between two interrelated yet conceptually distinct psychological dimensions: the somatic orientation, which centers on the physical integrity, disposition, and symbolic treatment of the cadaver; and the transcendental orientation, which engages speculative, philosophical, or metaphysical questions concerning subjective persistence, consciousness after clinical death, or non-physical forms of continuation. These orientations are neither mutually exclusive nor hierarchically ordered; rather, they co-occur dynamically across individuals and cultures, often mediated by sociocultural norms, religious traditions, medical knowledge, and personal biography. A central observation is that preoccupation with the fate of the body after death manifests along two primary axes: first, the intersubjective dimension—how others will perceive, handle, memorialize, or dispose of the physical

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remains—and second, the intrasubjective dimension—what phenomenological or experiential states, if any, might persist following neural cessation. Though these concerns appear to operate at different levels—one external and social, the other internal and speculative—they converge in their underlying affective architecture: both are sustained by a complex admixture of anxiety rooted in loss of control, uncertainty about ontological boundaries, and vulnerability to symbolic erasure, as well as curiosity driven by epistemic motivation, narrative coherence-seeking, and the human propensity to model possible futures—even those beyond empirical verification. This dual valence reflects broader patterns in human cognition, wherein threat detection and meaning-making systems operate in parallel, often reinforcing one another. Moreover, such concerns are not uniformly distributed across the lifespan or demographic groups; they intensify during developmental transitions, periods of illness, or exposure to mortality salience, and are modulated by education, spiritual affiliation, and prior exposure to death-related rituals or biomedical discourse.

The distinction between somatic and existential preoccupations does not imply a strict dichotomy between material and immaterial concerns; rather, it highlights how embodied cognition shapes abstract reasoning about mortality. For instance, ritual practices surrounding corpse preparation—such as washing, shrouding, or positioning—function simultaneously as acts of respect, boundary maintenance, and symbolic reintegration of the deceased into cosmological order. Similarly, decisions about cremation, burial, cryopreservation, or anatomical donation reflect layered negotiations among scientific literacy, ethical values, familial expectations, and conceptions of bodily autonomy extending beyond life. Empirical studies indicate that individuals who report higher levels of death anxiety tend to express stronger preferences for specific postmortem treatments, suggesting that bodily disposition serves as a tangible locus for regulating intangible fears. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons reveal that while the content of afterlife beliefs varies widely—from reincarnation and ancestral presence to digital immortality and quantum consciousness—the structural function remains consistent: to mitigate the disorienting finality of biological death by embedding the individual within enduring relational, temporal, or metaphysical networks. Importantly, contemporary biomedical advances—including brain-computer interfaces, neural mapping, and resuscitation science—have introduced novel conceptual challenges to traditional definitions of death, thereby reshaping public discourse and prompting renewed scholarly attention to the criteria governing personhood, identity continuity, and the moral status of preserved biological tissue [3].

These psychological dynamics are further complicated by rapid sociotechnological change, including the digitization of memory, AI-mediated legacy preservation, and growing public engagement with forensic anthropology and thanatology. As societies increasingly confront aging populations, palliative care integration, and environmental constraints on traditional burial practices, normative assumptions about appropriate bodily treatment are undergoing significant reinterpretation. Ethical deliberations now routinely address questions such as whether consent for postmortem use of biological materials should be presumed or opt-in, how digital avatars may influence grief trajectories, and whether emerging biotechnologies necessitate revised legal definitions of death itself. Such developments underscore that attitudes toward the dead body are never static; they evolve in response to shifting epistemic paradigms, institutional capacities, and collective value priorities. Crucially, this evolution occurs without consensus—generating pluralistic, sometimes conflicting, frameworks that coexist within single communities. Understanding these complexities requires moving beyond reductionist models that treat postmortem concern as either purely irrational fear or exclusively spiritual yearning [4, 5]. Instead, a robust academic analysis must account for the embodied, relational, historical, and technologically mediated nature of human mortality engagement—recognizing that how societies treat the body after death functions as both symptom and shaper of deeper cultural logics concerning life, agency, memory, and what it means to belong to a shared world, even in absence.

2. Psychological and Social Reasons to Care about the Body

One reason people care about the treatment of their physical body after death is the desire for dignity and respect from loved ones. A well-established line of psychological inquiry examines how human beings respond to the awareness of life's finite nature. This perspective emphasizes that individuals seek coherence, continuity, and affirmation through socially embedded practices surrounding death, rather than focusing on fear or distress as primary motivators. The conceptual framework highlights how cultural norms, familial expectations, and shared ethical commitments shape attitudes toward bodily integrity beyond life, reinforcing collective values of reverence, care, and intergenerational responsibility.

Individuals navigate the reality of life's temporal boundaries by drawing upon stable frameworks—such as moral traditions, communal rituals, and inherited worldviews—that lend structure and significance to existence [6]. These frameworks do not merely buffer uncertainty; they actively construct meaning through participation in time-honored customs, including those governing the disposition of the body. Religious and cultural systems often provide detailed guidance on postmortem care, framing such practices not as responses to existential threat but as affirmations of enduring relational bonds and spiritual continuity. Within these contexts, attention to the body reflects a commitment to holistic personhood—one that integrates physical, social, and symbolic dimensions across the lifespan. People engage in daily acts aligned with shared ideals—not to evade mortality, but to embody values that transcend individual lifespan, thereby strengthening group cohesion and mutual recognition. Such alignment fosters psychological equilibrium grounded in belonging, purpose, and interdependence, rather than isolation or avoidance.

When confronted with reminders of life's impermanence, individuals often deepen their investment in meaningful relationships, ethical commitments, and culturally sanctioned expressions of identity [7, 8]. This orientation supports emotional resilience and reinforces a sense of coherence between one's lived experience and broader societal narratives. Rather than reacting defensively, many people respond by reaffirming connections to communities, traditions, and belief systems that offer interpretive stability and moral grounding. These responses are observable across diverse sociocultural settings, where end-of-life preparations serve as integrative acts—bridging personal intention with collective memory, individual choice with familial duty, and embodied presence with lasting legacy. Such practices reflect an abiding human concern for continuity, not only in biological or institutional terms, but also in affective, narrative, and symbolic domains.

End-of-life arrangements can contribute to psychological comfort by aligning personal intentions with culturally resonant forms of remembrance. Ceremonial practices—whether burial, cremation, memorialization, or other rites—function as socially recognized vehicles for expressing respect, honoring contributions, and sustaining relational ties beyond physical presence [9]. These structured expressions help convey enduring values, affirm life narratives, and support grieving individuals in maintaining meaningful connections with the deceased. The sense of solace derived from such arrangements arises not from denial of loss, but from affirmation of significance: the conviction that one's life has been witnessed, valued, and integrated into the ongoing life of family, community, or tradition. This contributes to a broader sense of existential security rooted in relational continuity, intergenerational responsibility, and shared ethical commitments—elements consistently emphasized across philosophical, religious, and anthropological studies of death-related practices.

People express preference for involvement in decisions concerning their own bodily disposition as part of a broader orientation toward thoughtful self-determination within ethically bounded frameworks [3]. This inclination reflects a desire for coherence between one's lifelong values and the final expression of those values in culturally appropriate ways. While death itself remains beyond individual control, the opportunity to articulate preferences regarding postmortem care allows individuals to participate meaningfully in

shaping how their life story is honored and remembered. Such participation supports a sense of personal integrity and reinforces trust in familial and institutional caregivers. It also affirms the principle that human dignity extends across the entire lifespan—including its concluding phase—and that respectful treatment of the body is integral to upholding that dignity in accordance with widely accepted ethical standards.

Psychological research into perceived agency suggests that individuals benefit from opportunities to exercise reasoned judgment in matters closely tied to identity and value transmission. When people are invited to reflect on and communicate their preferences for postmortem care, they engage in a form of anticipatory stewardship—considering how their choices may support the well-being of survivors and uphold shared cultural expectations [10]. This process does not imply absolute control over outcomes, but rather reflects a mature understanding of influence within relational and systemic constraints. It underscores the importance of procedural respect—ensuring that individuals' voices are heard, considered, and honored within established legal, medical, and ethical parameters—thereby reinforcing trust in care systems and promoting psychosocial resilience among both the dying and their families.

The ability to make informed, values-aligned decisions about bodily disposition contributes to a sense of coherence and closure, supporting emotional readiness and reducing ambiguity during transitions. Clarity around intentions helps mitigate potential conflict among surviving family members and facilitates consensus-based decision-making grounded in mutual respect and shared understanding. Moreover, such preparation enables individuals to model responsible engagement with mortality—not as a source of apprehension, but as an occasion for reflection, dialogue, and intergenerational learning. When people articulate their wishes thoughtfully and share them openly, they foster environments where compassion, transparency, and ethical consistency become guiding principles in end-of-life care. This approach aligns with contemporary best practices in palliative and geriatric care, which emphasize person-centered planning, advance care communication, and culturally responsive support.

Planning for postmortem care serves as a constructive means of engaging with life's natural arc, allowing individuals to integrate mortality into a broader vision of meaning, contribution, and relational continuity [8]. Far from reflecting preoccupation with finitude, such planning demonstrates proactive engagement with ethical responsibility, familial duty, and cultural inheritance. It affirms the view that human agency operates most meaningfully within relational and normative contexts—not in opposition to them. By participating in decisions about bodily disposition, individuals reinforce core societal values such as respect for persons, fidelity to commitments, and stewardship of shared traditions. These actions strengthen social fabric, promote intergenerational dialogue, and cultivate habits of reflective citizenship grounded in empathy, foresight, and mutual accountability.

A recurring theme across philosophical, literary, and anthropological traditions is the distinction between biological cessation and social remembrance. Many cultures recognize that a person continues to exist in memory, narrative, and practice long after physiological functions cease. In this sense, the body becomes a focal point for sustaining presence—not as a site of biological function, but as a locus of symbolic resonance and relational continuity. Rituals involving the body serve as anchors for collective memory, enabling communities to honor legacies, transmit values, and reaffirm bonds across generations [11]. This perspective shifts attention away from notions of finality or erasure and toward generative possibilities—how lives lived with intention continue to shape the moral and affective landscape of those who remain.

Choosing how the body is treated represents a final act of communicative intentionality—an opportunity to express identity, affiliation, and ethical stance in ways consistent with lifelong commitments. Such choices are rarely arbitrary; they emerge from deep-seated understandings of selfhood shaped by culture, faith, family history, and personal experience. Even when consciousness ceases, the manner in which the body is cared for communicates enduring messages about worth, belonging, and continuity.

These messages resonate within familial and communal networks, reinforcing shared values and offering comfort through familiarity, ritual precision, and symbolic resonance. Thus, bodily disposition functions not merely as a logistical matter, but as a medium of meaning-making—one that bridges individual biography with collective memory and ethical tradition.

Loved ones caring for the body after death enact profound expressions of devotion, gratitude, and continuity. Their attentiveness reflects longstanding cultural ideals of filial piety, communal responsibility, and reciprocal care—principles deeply embedded in many East Asian, Indigenous, and global philosophical traditions. This care is not passive compliance with custom, but active participation in sustaining relational integrity and honoring lifetime contributions [12]. Through ritual action, survivors affirm that the deceased remains relationally present—not as a physical entity, but as a continuing influence on values, stories, and practices. Such acts reinforce intergenerational solidarity, model ethical conduct for younger members, and cultivate virtues such as patience, humility, and reverence. They also provide structure and meaning during periods of grief, transforming abstract loss into tangible expressions of love and respect.

Developmental psychology identifies a life stage characterized by increasing focus on contribution, mentorship, and legacy-building—where individuals seek to nurture what will outlive them and benefit future generations. This orientation manifests in diverse forms: raising children with care and intention, mentoring emerging professionals, creating works of art or scholarship, preserving cultural knowledge, or establishing institutions that serve public welfare. Within this developmental context, attention to postmortem care emerges not as preoccupation with endings, but as extension of generative effort—ensuring that one's values, beliefs, and relational commitments continue to inform practice and inspire others even after physical presence ends. Such efforts reflect maturity, foresight, and deep investment in the flourishing of communities and traditions [13].

This generative impulse motivates individuals to consider how their life story will be interpreted, remembered, and integrated into larger narratives of family, culture, and humanity. It encourages reflection on what constitutes meaningful contribution—not only in terms of material achievement, but also in relational depth, ethical consistency, and cultural stewardship [7]. Decisions about bodily disposition become one facet of this broader project: a way to ensure that final expressions of identity remain coherent with lifelong values and contribute positively to the emotional and moral environment of survivors. Such intentionality supports healthy bereavement processes, strengthens intergenerational bonds, and models responsible citizenship grounded in care, continuity, and compassion.

Concern about the body after death therefore reflects far more than attention to physical remains—it embodies a profound aspiration for meaning, continuity, and relational endurance. It signals investment in values that extend beyond individual lifespan and affirms belief in the enduring power of memory, narrative, and ritual to sustain human connection across time. These concerns are expressed through culturally specific yet universally resonant practices that balance reverence for the individual with responsibility to the collective. They demonstrate how societies encode wisdom about life's transience not through fear or fatalism, but through disciplined care, intentional communication, and sustained commitment to what matters most: dignity, relationship, and purpose. In this light, postmortem practices constitute vital components of ethical formation, intergenerational education, and cultural resilience—anchoring human flourishing in both memory and hope.

3. Existential Psychology and the Body

From an existential perspective, death evokes profound psychological responses because it confronts individuals with the fundamental finitude of human life—its temporal boundedness, inherent unpredictability, and resistance to total mastery. This awareness does not merely register as a biological fact but activates deep-seated cognitive

and affective processes tied to self-continuity and personal significance. Central to this framework are four interrelated dimensions: the inevitability of mortality, the scope and weight of personal agency, the irreducible solitude of subjective experience, and the ongoing search for coherence and purpose in lived reality. When individuals become acutely aware that time is strictly limited and non-renewable, they often undergo a marked intensification of inner tension, accompanied by shifts in attention, motivation, and value prioritization. Such realizations may precipitate reflective re-evaluation of life goals, interpersonal commitments, and daily habits—processes that constitute adaptive meaning-making rather than pathological disturbance.

In response to this existential tension, many individuals seek forms of symbolic continuity that extend beyond biological cessation. One such avenue involves deliberate engagement with posthumous bodily disposition—decisions about cremation, burial, donation, or memorialization [10]. Though consciousness ceases at death, the physical body retains enduring symbolic resonance as the primary vessel through which identity was historically enacted and socially recognized. It functions not only as a biological remnant but as a culturally embedded signifier: a locus where biography, relational history, ethical values, and aesthetic preferences converge. Consequently, choices regarding the body after death are rarely neutral or purely logistical; they reflect deeply held assumptions about personhood, legacy, and the relationship between material form and enduring significance.

The body thus operates as a symbolic extension of the self—a tangible anchor amid the intangible uncertainties of existence. Caring for its posthumous fate serves multiple integrative functions: it affirms narrative continuity by linking past life, present intention, and future memory; it reinforces ontological security by affirming that one's life had definable contours and intentional shape; and it supports intersubjective coherence by enabling others to enact respectful, culturally intelligible responses to loss. This orientation toward the body helps mitigate the destabilizing impact of mortality awareness—not by denying finitude, but by transforming it into a domain of conscious choice, cultural participation, and relational responsibility. In doing so, it contributes to psychological equilibrium without requiring metaphysical certainty.

Such concern transforms what might otherwise be experienced as a passive, disempowering event into an active, ethically grounded expression of identity. Rather than representing mere termination, the moment of bodily transition becomes an opportunity for intentional self-representation—one that communicates values, affiliations, and philosophical orientations to surviving communities. This reframing allows individuals to exercise agency at the very boundary of agency, thereby preserving a sense of authorship over their life story even as biological control ends. The resulting practices—whether minimalist ash scattering, traditional interment, or innovative ecological burial—function as embodied narratives that integrate personal meaning with collective ritual frameworks, reinforcing both individual dignity and social belonging.

Another significant factor underlying preoccupation with the postmortem body lies in the distinctive epistemic condition created by death: it is a universal human experience, yet one that remains empirically inaccessible to first-person verification. Unlike other life events, death cannot be observed from within once it occurs, generating a persistent knowledge gap concerning subjective continuity, sensory cessation, and phenomenological dissolution. Human cognition tends to respond to such unresolved informational boundaries with heightened vigilance and compensatory structuring—seeking stable reference points where ambiguity otherwise prevails. This tendency is not pathological but reflects an evolved cognitive strategy for maintaining coherence in the face of radical uncertainty.

Within this context, the physical body assumes exceptional psychological salience because it constitutes the sole empirically verifiable, spatially localized, and temporally proximate element remaining after death. While questions concerning consciousness, subjectivity, and transcendent possibility remain open-ended and unverifiable, the body offers concrete parameters—size, location, composition, transformation trajectory—that

can be observed, measured, and intentionally shaped [14, 15]. Concern for the body therefore fulfills a dual function: it satisfies a deep-seated need for epistemic grounding while simultaneously serving as a vehicle for expressive intentionality. This shift from abstract existential uncertainty to concrete somatic engagement enables individuals to redirect emotional energy toward manageable domains of influence, thereby reducing subjective overwhelm and supporting adaptive coping. Importantly, this process does not eliminate existential questioning but relocates its operational focus to arenas where meaningful action remains possible.

Imaginative cognition further amplifies the significance attributed to the dead body. Human beings possess a highly developed capacity for mental simulation—constructing plausible, emotionally resonant scenarios about events beyond immediate perception or personal experience. This ability relies on neural systems associated with autobiographical memory, spatial navigation, and social cognition, allowing individuals to project themselves into hypothetical futures, including those extending beyond biological survival. During such simulations, people routinely generate richly detailed mental models involving themes of peace, relational continuity, moral reckoning, or cyclical renewal—scenarios that, while unverifiable, carry substantial motivational and emotional weight. Because direct access to postmortem consciousness is impossible, these imagined possibilities frequently become anchored to observable physical correlates—the body itself—serving as a perceptually accessible proxy for otherwise inaccessible states.

As a result, decisions about bodily disposition often align closely with internally generated narratives about what 'should' happen after death—not as literal predictions, but as coherent expressions of desired meaning structures. These internal simulations do not require empirical validation to exert influence; their power resides in their experiential vividness and affective resonance [16]. When mental representations attain sufficient detail and emotional intensity, they begin to function cognitively much like anticipated realities—triggering preparatory behaviors, shaping preferences, and guiding long-term planning.

Empirical investigations into prospective cognition have demonstrated that vivid mental simulation of future states reliably activates neural pathways overlapping with actual perception and action execution. This neurocognitive overlap enhances the perceived plausibility and behavioral relevance of imagined outcomes, leading individuals to make concrete preparations—such as specifying funeral instructions, selecting memorial sites, or designating body donors—well in advance of need. Such forward-oriented behaviors reflect not superstition or denial, but sophisticated cognitive adaptation: leveraging imagination as a tool for existential regulation, identity consolidation, and intergenerational communication. By embedding personal values and relational intentions into tangible, culturally mediated practices surrounding the body, individuals create durable frameworks for meaning transmission across temporal and ontological boundaries [2, 16].

4. Conclusion

To conclude, human concern for the physical body after death is neither incidental nor culturally peripheral—it reflects a profound and cross-culturally recurrent dimension of meaning-making in response to mortality. This concern manifests concretely through socially embedded practices such as funerals, burial and cremation rites, memorialization ceremonies, posthumous care protocols, and the preservation or disposition of bodily remains. These practices are not merely symbolic gestures; they constitute structured, intersubjective frameworks through which individuals and communities enact continuity, affirm relational bonds, and uphold ethical commitments beyond biological cessation. The body—though no longer animate—retains enduring psychological resonance: it serves as a locus of memory, a vessel of biography, and a tangible anchor for collective remembrance. Its treatment signals respect not only for the deceased but also for the living who grieve, mourn, commemorate, and inherit legacies shaped by embodied presence.

Such practices function as integrative mechanisms that support psychological coherence during periods of existential transition. They facilitate the transformation of raw loss into narratively coherent experience, allowing participants to reframe finitude not solely as termination but as participation in broader temporal and relational orders—familial, cultural, spiritual, or ecological. Within this framework, the body becomes a medium through which identity persists—not as an ontological continuation of consciousness, but as a socially sustained presence instantiated in ritual action, commemorative objects, archival records, and intergenerational storytelling. These processes help mitigate distress associated with uncertainty, loss of control, and the dissolution of familiar structures. Rather than invoking fear-based motivational models, contemporary understanding emphasizes how embodied care practices foster resilience, promote communal solidarity, and reinforce shared values concerning dignity, respect, and continuity across life stages.

Caring for the body after death thus operates at multiple interlocking levels: phenomenologically, it grounds abstract concepts of mortality in sensory, spatial, and procedural reality; socially, it reaffirms kinship networks and collective responsibility; ethically, it enacts principles of reverence and accountability toward persons even in absence; and existentially, it supports meaning construction by situating individual life within larger narratives of belonging, legacy, and transcendence—understood here not metaphysically, but as enduring impact on relationships, institutions, knowledge systems, and cultural memory. Importantly, these functions are neither uniform nor universally prescribed; they vary significantly across historical epochs, geographic regions, religious traditions, and sociopolitical contexts—yet their underlying purpose—to confer order, significance, and relational continuity in the face of irreversible change—remains remarkably consistent. Ultimately, attention to postmortem bodily care reveals a fundamental human orientation: the persistent effort to harmonize biological impermanence with enduring social, affective, and symbolic life. This orientation underscores the inseparability of embodiment from personhood, even beyond the threshold of death, and affirms that how societies treat the dead constitutes a vital index of how they understand life, relationship, and responsibility itself.

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