# Death Awareness in Non-Human Minds: A Philosophical Inquiry

*Long thought to be exclusively a human concern, the idea of death may also be present in non-human animals, according to new research in comparative thanatology. This essay challenges anthropocentric presumptions that discount non-human awareness of life's finality by examining the cognitive and philosophical aspects of animal death recognition. By looking at viewpoints such as Susana Monso's minimum concept of death theory and Kristin Andrews' work on animal sentience, this essay makes the case that animals have a knowledge of death by looking at academic viewpoints. Through scientific and philosophical research, counter arguments are addressed and disproved, such as Descartes' rejection of animal cognition and assertions that death awareness is essentially instinctive rather than cerebral. The topic of animal grieving is also covered, with an emphasis on determining if observable behaviours of mourning indicate a depth of feeling or are purely physiological reactions. This work attempts to improve our comprehension of mortality across species and add to the larger conversation on animal awareness by combining viewpoints from philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science.*

## I. Introduction

Death is an inevitable part of life, experienced by all organisms. Some believe we go to a third realm, while others believe there is nothing after life. Identifying dead and alive organisms is a complex process. Humans are conscious of the separation between living and dead, distinguishing between living and dead. However, comparing the cognitive capacity of

animals to humans raises questions about their ability to identify dead or alive. This raises questions about anthropocentric approaches and the potential limitations of our cognitive abilities in recognizing dead organisms.

This essay will provide an explanation towards why it is true that animals can and do exhibit a concept of death similar to us humans. I will examine this philosophical topic starting with the definition of consciousness, starting the conversation off with the idea that animals are sentient beings supported by scholarly articles from Kristin Andrews. Arguments against such claims would include Descartes, stating that animals do not have a sentient mind because of their lack of vocally linguistic traits that us humans own, which I later respond to stating that an explanation like such is highly anthropocentric. My second argument relies solely on the argument as a whole – stating that animals do indeed have a concept of dead, however it is only at a minimal state, which is supported through Susana Monso and her minimal concept of death theory – which then goes into the study of comparative thanatology, the underlying different degrees an animal can go to understand the conspecific is truly and utterly, dead. Critique against this argument is that animals only understand that their conspecific is dead because of their innateness, their biological roots chemically endure the death of another organism, not because of their propositional attitudes. I respond to this with the idea of beliefs one must own in order to truly know death. Finally, once I have ultimately proved that animals do in fact understand death, I further my point with the ideology of animal grief and how they own properties of emitting emotion when a conspecific has decayed. Claims against this argument would include the challenge of anthropomorphism and that we simply cannot say an animal is grieving because it resembles the same characteristics as us

humans. I will then reply with how us organisms need a behavioural mechanism to influence a response out of a scenario shown to them.

## II. The Definition of Consciousness to Animals

To start, what can we identify as consciousness, let alone, animal consciousness? Do animals possess consciousness? The short answer is yes, animals do own consciousness across the board. In July of 2012, a handful of scientists signed The Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness in non-human animals—stating that evidence in non-human animals have all of the anatomical properties of consciousness and conscious states alongside the capacity to express intentional behaviours (Andrews 2020, 73). We can define consciousness on the surface level as "the experience in terms of qualitative feeling" (Andrews 2020, 75). It is purely based on the qualia of something you see versus what the person next to you sees with their visual perception, or it is simply Thomas Nagel's 'what it's like-ness', the idea of consciousness is simply the underlying understanding of one's phenomenological experience throughout life. It is you going out and enjoying the summer breeze that hits your skin and realizing you love this weather better than the snow. It is that feeling of knowing – knowing you are you, knowing yourself and the properties made up to make you, knowing your surroundings, who you are inside and out, knowing you have a mind made up of everything you have lived thus far. Cogito Ergo Sum, if you think, therefore you are.

### a. Phenomenal Consciousness

"Phenomenal consciousness", the qualitative nature of experience, feeling, or thinking" (Andrews 2020, 76). To dig deeper based on the phenomenal consciousness, we should take a better look at different variations of what phenomenal

consciousness can mean. From Eric Schwitzgebel: “positive examples of consciousness include sensory and somatosensory experiences, such as the sound of your hand cupping over your ear” (Andrews 2020, 76). It can also be explained by the emotional experience an individual has such as fear, going into a dark room after you have watched something scary. To think and desire something can be a case of phenomenal consciousness (Andrews 2020, 76). How does this tie into animals? We can say that we are certain that animals have a conscious aspect to their minds because we see them choose, decide, want, and dislike things all the time. Whether in the wild or domesticated, every animal owns a property of life, specifically their phenomenal consciousness, which is the underlying experience of how their life is. Animals do in fact think. Take Jane Goodall as an example. On November 4, 1960, a chimpanzee was observed assembling and utilising what she viewed as tools, which was previously thought to be a human capacity (like using sticks and rocks to make something of use). Goodall, a then 26-year-old English primatologist, was undertaking research at Gombe Stream National Park in Northern Tanzania, while she was thoroughly studying a group of about 150 chimps in their natural environment. She noticed one of the chimps, David Greybeard, using a straw stick to retrieve insects. After receiving word about the sighting, Goodall's supervisor, renowned paleoanthropologist Louis Seymour Bazett Leakey, said, "Now we must redefine 'tool,' redefine man,' or simply accept chimps as human.". The important discovery, together with Goodall's continuous documenting of chimps' cognitive capacities and problem-solving ability, overturned long-held beliefs about animal intelligence. Subsequent research found that chimps soaked up water using leaves for drinking and washing, and broke nuts open with stones, among other tools (Goodall 2025).

Again, it is seen through anecdotal behaviour that can be observed through their actions or movements. From western lowland gorillas breaking up fights between the females in their troops, to dogs rationalizing which toy is theirs based on the names the owners shout for them to choose (eg. 'where is the teddy bear?' or 'go get your squeaky'), is all shown to have a thought process before the action is executed.

**b. Are Animals Machines Rather than Souls?**

What can be said against this argument, that animals do not own such high quality properties of consciousness? The infamous René Descartes deems that animals do not possess consciousness to the same degree as humans do, or any consciousness for that matter, because they do not own any linguistic properties as we do, such as speaking in the same syntactic rule based approach like how we humans speak in every language. He claims that they do not have a feeling, which disputes my claim saying that every being has a phenomenal conscious experience of life (Descartes 2004). He ultimately argues that animals are nothing but machines, not anything nearly close to how us humans function. Since Descartes is a renowned dualist, he also claims that while animals do not own any sense of consciousness, which includes thinking, they also do not own any souls. "Descartes undeniably did set up a strict dichotomy between the immaterial, experiencing, thinking life of man, and the material, mechanical, mindless existence of animals" (Kaldas 2015). With that being said, morally Descartes believes there is a life which belongs to animals, though there is no soul attached to it. They are mindless, materialistic machines who part immensely from us humans.

## c. The Claim of Anthropocentrism

My response to this claim is simple, Descartes is being anthropocentric. To define what it is to be anthropocentric, it is that humans are often viewed as the most important entity in the universe, and the world is interpreted via their values and experiences (Webster 2025). To believe that us humans are to be top of the food chain, the best of the best, the ultimate higher quality species of life, is not only wrong, but is close minded. From Descartes having a dog himself (Monsieur Grat), he inevitably ignored all of the traits of consciousness that his dog could have possessed rather than investigating any anecdotal evidence. For anyone who agrees with Descartes, I challenge such ideology behind phenomena that have been proven in animal consciousness that have appealed in more recent studies. For example, psychologist Gordon Gallup proved animal sentience through self consciousness. To quickly elaborate, he placed a red dot/sticker on the forehead of animals and presented a mirror in front of them. The experiment reveals how Gallup's adoption of a self-concept is best understood as a result of his persistent investigation of the mirror's workings as an experimental tool. In certain cases, the stimulus qualities of the mirror altered considerably, which Gallup said justified the positing of a self-concept. For this reason, Gallup believed he could utilize a mirror to create an operationalized idea of the self, i.e., a definition that was consistent with behaviourist experimental standards (Guenther 2016). To add an example, a famous gorilla named Koko exemplified concepts that relate to her through sign language. Jane Goodall noted this with great appreciation for the Western Lowland Gorilla. “She had just learned signs for all colours, not just primary, but purple and gold and beige and so on. This young woman is idly testing her skills, occupying Koko while waiting for her supper. The young

woman picks up various items and Koko correctly signs their colour. Until she is asked the colour of a white cloth. 'Red' she signs. And she insists on red several times until she is told that if she doesn't give the correct colour she won't get apple juice for supper. At that dire threat, Koko reaches out, takes hold of the cloth, picks off a minute scrap of red fluff, and vigorously signs 'red, red, red' whilst uttering loud grunts of gorilla laughing." (Goodall 2018). Nevertheless, not only did Koko exemplify concepts, but she showed that there is a preference, a concert that ties into what the self is. Koko knew the difference between colours and successfully distinguished which she preferred and which she did not. Compared to other gorillas, those who possibly could do the same as Koko, might possess different qualities of preference with the same stimulus presented. This again, does show that animals, through this example, possess the ideology of the self and concepts that follow. Not only that, let us say that apes are out of question here, since they are very similar to humans based on the phylogenetic tree we share with them. What other animals pass the mirror test and can be argued that they possess not only consciousness, but the self that is within. Asian Elephants, Bottlenose Dolphins, Orca Whales, Eurasian Magpies, even promising candidates, Manta Rays, all show that they do recognize themselves when given a mirror (Pachniewska 2024). Not only do they recognize their own selves in the mirror, but also show great interest in what they see, themselves. There is acknowledgement of the self through animals, which means there is a conscious entity at which they hold. Therefore, they are conscious.

## III. Death Consciousness in Animal Minds

Now that we have established animal consciousness and their quality of life, we must now investigate how far consciousness can go, their quality of life and death. Comparative thanatology is the term used for when we need to study how animals react to individuals who are dead or close to dying, their physiological processes that underlie the reactions, and what these behaviours tell us about the minds of animals (Monso 2024, 2). Although every time we think of high functioning cognitive animals, we usually think of the phylogenetic tree, which consists of the five great apes, which we are inevitably a part of. However comparative thanatology has had an increasing number of articles relating to species that are different from the ecologies of apes and monkeys, such as elephants, whales, horses, crows, and even insects (Monso 2024, 3). "Having a concept does not imply being free of the possibility of making a mistake in a classification, but it should have come with the capacity to learn and improve one's concepts" (Monso 2024, 19). This being said, animals that are exposed to dead conspecifics may not only be capable of distinguishing dead and alive, but will also have some knowledge regarding what it means to be dead and or alive.

### a. Minimal Concept of Death

One notable part of having a minimal concept of death, which both Susana and I agree on, is that animals do have such concepts, though the highest functionality is irreversibility. An animal adapted to irreversibility, is conscious enough to be aware about how once a conspecific is dead, they can no longer go back to living. One thing that should be noted, is National Geographic publishing a video regarding how gorillas react to a dead conspecific within their enclosure. Once the gorillas found

the dead conspecific, various reactions ensued upon recognizing the irreversibility state of the minimal concepts of death. Some gorillas brushed the teeth of the dead conspecific, while most poked, sniffed, and examined the body further. One notable feature of behavior that one gorilla did, was to throw what seemed to be a tantrum. Although before discovering the dead conspecific, the gorilla remained calm and behavior that was not out of the ordinary. Again, when finding the dead conspecific laying on the ground, the gorilla proceeded to throw branches at other gorillas, punching the rib cage of the dead gorilla, and shaking it profusely. This behavior cannot just be something that can be defended through innateness, but more so of a reaction of knowing. it's a reaction that the gorilla knew that the gorilla laying on the floor lifeless, was indeed dead. It was the recognition of the irreversibility minimal concept of the mind that the gorilla fixated on. Therefore, the gorilla henceforth knew that there was a dichotomy between living and dead.

**b. Innateness? or Consciousness?**

On that note, claims against such arguments revolve around innateness. What if the reaction was driven through a biological structure internally rather than a mental state? Animals such as possums or ants exhibit reactions that are more chemical and survival rather than cognitive or emotional. To elaborate, when possums feel threatened by predators nearby, they play dead. Ants, for example, release a chemical toxin, specifically oleic acid, when they are dead. They therefore do not have that cognitive capacity of distinguishing dead versus alive, they know through biological structure. So this case doesn't prove that animals have a minimal concept of death, it is just a biological reaction to how to live. Possums use it for survival and use it to clean up their colony. So the arguments that both Susana

and I are making are thus refuted through such biological arguments. Reductionism as well claims that everything can be reduced into smaller pieces, more neurological reasoning behind why things happen the way they do. The biological structure of death can be added onto what reductionists believe, that death is innate and does not occur whatsoever on an emotional processing level. Pain as well, it can be reduced to what physicalists and reductionists believe as 'c-fibers' firing. So, death awareness could be considered 'd-fibers' firing, rather than the recognition and emotional state of what animals understand as death. Rather than understanding what death is, it is a mere understanding of a neurological state of, 'ant A is dead', not a feeling of loss.

**c. There Must Lay Grounds for a Belief System**

My response to this is simple, let's say that indeed, the reaction is through innateness. Sure, when an animal sees a dead conspecific, the d-fibers in their brain fire to understand the difference between dead and alive. Regardless of how one sees it, animals do exhibit life or death, from both arguments. Though, what remains consistent between both arguments is that there lies a belief system of what is distinguished from dead or alive. To have a belief system of what one thinks, means that, yes, they are conscious, but it also shows that they can understand what death is. When a predator of a possum sees that they are 'dead', they do not attack it. Why? Because of the irreversibility concept they have in their minds, not a biological structure. Not to mention, ants release such acids to alert other ants part of their colony that there is a dead conspecific nearby. There must be an underlying belief system to distinguish what animals know with what is dead and what is alive. To even counter the last argument with their own logic, I believe that if

this was through a biological standpoint, the theory of mind still lays down the grounds that it helps the animal through survival instincts. An animal must know that through understanding of what dead and alive is, it helps them with the functionality of life. If it was purely biological, then the instincts they would have living in the wild would not be as efficient as if the mind was there. The mind needs to have credit when looking at two different conspecifics when they are dead and alive. What arguments against mine and Susana do not acknowledge, is that once ants find their dead conspecific, they hold what is called a funeral. "For ants, once they have detected a dead or dying comrade by the chemicals released from them, the undertakers will carry the dead outside the colony and take them a safe distance away, often to the same place" (Evans 2019). With this evidence, it is thus true that ants know and believe that there is a dead conspecific and therefore execute their 'funeral'.

## IV. Animal Grief

Branching off of my last point on proving the underlying knowledge of a dead conspecific, I gave an example of gorillas recognizing their dead fellow gorilla. We have asserted the recognition of the concept of death, now, we will investigate the concept of grief. Recognition of someone that has died is one thing, to grieve is an emotional process that takes place when the individual who has died has a personal connection to us. Let us go back to Koko for this argument. When her beloved kitten died (named 'All Ball' as a joke), who was killed by a car unexpectedly, Koko took the news and whimpered for days. Not only that, but days after the death, Koko was given a toy kitten for biologists and researchers to attempt bringing Koko back to herself again (McGraw 1985). However, when receiving the toy, Koko threw it away, refused to play with it, and kept signing the

words ‘sad’, ‘frown’, ‘cry’ and ‘bad’ (Eustachewich 2018). I present Millar’s argument, stating that certain animals can, and do, grieve. The argument overview is as such:

### a. Animals do Possess a Specific yet Practical Understanding of Loss

The practical concept of loss differs across humans and animals, yet animals do have a distinct and practical grasp of what loss is (Millar 2024). They can also comprehend and notice the absence of someone who has an influence on their life. This response that these animals display in their absence matches what we may call grief, even if it is not as identical to human behaviours (Millar 2024). Evidence supporting Millar’s claim includes Monso’s rendition of exposure to animal death. She states that, “animals in the wild engage in death far more often than humans do. For us, it is an ‘abstract term’ but for animals, it is something very tangible and present in society” (Millar 2024). Another piece of evidence supporting Millar’s claim is aside from primates, as we know them to be the closest towards cognition to us, but we now turn the attention toward elephants. “Elephants have been observed taking great interest in the bones of their dead. They have been known to cover the bodies of their dead with dirt and branches, smell and touch the bones of their dead, and visit them numerous times (Bradshaw 2010, 10-13), and studies empirically confirm that they show more interest in elephant bones than those of other species” (Millar 2024). “Barbara King: diverse descriptions of animal loss responses, ranging from cats, dogs and rabbits crying and searching for their companions, to horses gathering around the grave of one of their herd, to chimpanzees, whales and dolphins carrying the bodies of their deceased offspring. She takes such responses to demonstrate capacities to love and grieve.” (Millar 2024).

**b. Animals have "grief-like" mechanisms.**

The actions shown by the animals are supported by extensive empirical evidence that animals engage in 'grief-like' systems. There have been reported cases in which animals exhibit powerful emotional responses to a lost significant other (or mate) and their own babies (Millar 2024). Evidence supporting this claim goes towards chimpanzees and bonobos, where, "Female baboons who had lost a close relative were shown to have increased stress hormones, which are also associated with us humans when we lose someone." (Millar 2024). Think back to when I had stated that the gorillas recognizing a dead conspecific included unusual behaviours to us such as cleaning and grooming. Well, "Chimps and baboons: cleaning the wounds and mouths of their deceased infants, sometimes removing debris using tools such as stems of grass… researchers have not witnessed such mouth activities (such as the cleaning mechanism as just mentioned) to be directed or to be completed towards the living, only the dead" (Millar 2024). It is noted as well that infants die from grief when the mother dies.

**c. Animals have the Concept of Grieving through Particularity and Temporal Organizations.**

Animal particularity (the uniqueness of an individual), temporal organisation (mental time travel, as an example), and the grief concept. According to Millar, animals are capable of displaying particularity in their own grief processes. She claims that people can further structure their lives around the circumstance of losing a friend as a result of their emotional experiences, such as autobiographical or episodic. This clearly fits with how we humans respond to death. Statistics show that when they lose a close companion, around 90% of dogs show unfavourable behavioural changes (both dogs are domesticated

and live together) (Millar 2024). Overall, this premise suggests that animal loss feelings can be directed towards a single individual. Its "personal" quality seems to be one of the characteristics of bereavement sadness that distinguishes it from another more general emotion of loss.

**d. Is Behaviour Taken too Literally?**

Grief is a subject matter that can easily be disputed when it comes to animals because all we have really is anecdotal evidence. This goes onto the argument against what Millar and I have just claimed – the power of anthropomorphism–which is "the interpretation of nonhuman things or events in terms of human characteristics" (Guthrie 2025). To say that these grieving scenarios that I have just provided with thanks to Millar, they are eerily close to how humans may react. To easily attribute animal behaviour so close to our mechanisms we use to grieve a loved one loses the uniqueness of how animals think differently than we do. Pooling them with such properties of humanistic traits is an 'easy way out' to defining what the animal is thinking, or truly implying when seeing a dead conspecific.

**e. Grief is not just for Humans**

My response to this is similar to Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2012): "There's always room for scepticism about these attributions of intelligence and emotions to animals. But at this point, it is useful to remind ourselves that our attribution of emotion to other human beings itself involves projection that goes beyond the evidence". I believe that these grief-like mechanisms that influence the reaction of the animals can be shared with us humans. Emotion is something that is underlying and truly internal. With the evidence I have provided through Millar's article, I believe that animals exhibit grief mechanisms like us because grief is so broad. In humans, it is evident that we

go through stages of grief (denial, acceptance, depression), so who is to say that some animals that go through grief are going through it, but differently we do. Of course, we would never hit the chest of a dead loved one at a funeral service, but a gorilla would. But again, we would hold funeral services for the dead loved one, like an ant would. Overall, grief varies, and such actions can show that indeed, animals go through such emotions as well, either sharing traits like us or differently.

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, although death is an inevitable part of life for all living things, its actual nature is still up for debate. The capacity to differentiate between life and death is not exclusive to humans, despite the fact that we have developed a variety of definitions and beliefs to do so. This essay has examined how animals think about death and makes the case that they do have a basic understanding of it. I have shown via the work of researchers such as Susana Monso and Kristin Andrews that animals are aware of death, but in an alternate manner than humans. Although this viewpoint is contested by anthropocentrism-based concerns, the data indicates that animals not only understand death but also exhibit grief-like emotional reactions. We may better understand how death is viewed in other animals by looking at the junction of awareness, sentience, and comparative thanatology. This challenges the idea that only humans can grasp mortality.

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