CHAPTER 6

Comforting Things: cherished possessions as sources of social comfort and security, from the Palaeolithic to the present

Abstract

All around us, almost all the time, we see objects with no obvious function that seem to play an important role in our lives. This apparently bizarre obsession with non-functional objects is one of the most obvious differences between ourselves and other animals. Our lives are filled with all kinds of objects, not just those with a practical function but a whole range of mementos such as photographs, or treasured childhood toys, or necklaces or bracelets whose special place in our hearts has little to do with physical appearance. Although many non-industrialised societies are far less materialistic, even constantly mobile hunting and gathering populations create and attach meaning to objects such as beads, figurines or amulets, which do not have any immediate practical function.

(Abstract continued from previous page)

Here, we consider the extent to which new emotional vulnerabilities may explain our apparently bizarre emotional attachment to certain treasured things and provide an explanation for the creation, significance and movement of many non-functional things in the archaeological record. We draw together evidence for an often-overlooked characteristic of cherished possessions – their capacity to provide comfort and a sense of connection and counteract loneliness. We then consider the characteristics of those kinds of objects that particularly inspire a sense of comfort and security in our own societies and the extent to which these characteristics can also be found in archaeological artefacts from the Upper Palaeolithic. There will have been many other aspects of meaning that are important in the creation and use of non-functional things by Palaeolithic societies. Nonetheless, the significance of new emotional vulnerabilities, and compensatory attachments to objects, appears to provide important insights. By moving away from the concept that our own species – modern humans – must have had a superior mind to other humans, we can begin to better understand how new vulnerabilities may have been integral to community resilience.

Understanding how we came to rely on cherished objects to bring us a sense of emotional security also leads to a better understanding of our human vulnerabilities and our need for warmth and social connection.

Figure 6.1: The treasured and now very shabby teddy bear belonging to Aileen Rogers and found on the body of her father, known as the Rogers teddy bear (1910–1915, housed in the Canadian War Museum). Artefact number 20040015-001 in the Canadian War Museum. For online catalogue with further details, see https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections /artifact/1368588. Photo copyright Canadian War Museum, all right reserved. Used with permission.

Introduction

In the early years of the 20th century, a Canadian girl called Aileen Rogers owned an unremarkable teddy bear. When Aileen was 10 years old, in 1916, her father, Lieutenant Lawrence Browning Rogers of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, joined the army and was sent to the Western Front. He served as a medic in the trenches of the First World War. Aileen wanted to make her father feel better about being so far away and, hoping to keep him safe, she sent him her precious teddy bear in a care package. Lawrence treasured the bear and always carried it with him every day. He wrote in a letter:

> Tell Aileen I still have the Teddy Bear and I will try to hang on to it for her. It is dirty and his hind legs are kind of loose but he is still with me.

Tragically, Lawrence was killed at Passchendaele in 1917 when tending the wounded, and the bear (who by that time had lost both legs and his eyes) was found with him and returned home. Its story gives us a profound sense of the love shared by Lawrence and his daughter, represented in her gift of the bear to him and how he always carried it with him. This small and very bedraggled teddy bear would later become one of the most significant artefacts in the Canadian War Museum (Figure 6.1).

By sending her father her teddy bear, Aileen sacrificed her own source of emotional support to give something similar to her father. For Lawrence, holding this bear close made his daughter somehow nearer to him (Bell and Spikins 2018; Spikins 2015). Our heart goes out to Aileen, and to her father, Lawrence, who so cared about his daughter that he carried the bear with him everywhere. This small object tells us a great deal about human love, loss and vulnerability.

Examples of objects with a similar power to comfort us are all around us today, as much as they were a hundred years ago. In March 2020, as the UK went into lockdown at the start of the COVID-19 crisis, for example, treasured objects seemed to take on a particular importance for many people, despite contributing nothing obvious in practical terms. During this period, an unusual and generally very low-budget programme became surprisingly popular. Around 7 million people watched *The Repair Shop*, a programme based on the careful repair of cherished but largely valueless possessions

brought in by members of the public. Many were regularly brought to tears. Credited with being one of the best programmes on television, *The Repair Shop* carefully cared for an assortment of treasured but broken and battered heirlooms, including stools and seats, teddy bears and varied toys, paintings, boxes and cases, which were restored and returned to their owners.

Why would *The Repair Shop* be so popular, and especially at the time of national crisis? Of course, there may be many different reasons, including nostalgia, escapism and a desire to find alternatives to throwaway culture. However, amongst these explanations, we cannot help but recognise that, as humans, we are unique in becoming remarkably attached to all kinds of valueless or impractical objects, and these attachments seem to become even more important at certain times. Our emotional relationships to treasured objects are not easily explained. This ability to form apparently one-way connections to entirely inanimate things, which cannot repay our emotional investments as people who care about us might be able to, might seem to be more of a weakness than a strength. We suffer at the loss of treasured personal possessions, and can invest tremendous time and effort in protecting and caring for these entirely non-human companions in our lives.

Our capacities to find emotional comfort in cherished possessions are unique, and nothing entirely the same seems to exist in other animals. However, these tendencies have been rather overlooked as an area of evolutionary research, and emotion is only just beginning to feature in archaeological or evolutionary discussions of past minds (Stade and Gamble 2019). We have focused, instead, on elevated cognitive capacities – how our increasingly complex human technology developed, how our aesthetic sense emerged or how artefacts may act as indicators of status or identity.

It is a little difficult to explain quite why the power of objects to give us a sense of social safety, and soothe, reassure and comfort us, should be somewhat sidelined. Of course, as we have seen, emotions tend to be thought of as overly complex, connected to bodily processes rather than mind, and are even seen as a somewhat woolly area of research in general (see the introduction to this volume). More than this, however, part of our reticence towards dealing with our emotional connection to cherished social objects may lie in our discomfort with our own vulnerability, particularly within a

narrative of our own distant origins. We prefer to see our distant ancestors as entirely independent and invulnerable (as discussed in Chapter 2). Any tendency to seek out certain cherished possessions to provide us with reassurance thus makes us feel somewhat uncomfortable in demonstrating an apparently irrational need for such support.

There is certainly a sense of vulnerability about our connection to cherished things. Indeed, we can be so attached to certain objects that we grieve deeply if they are broken. We may even find it difficult to let go of things and start to hoard objects, as each small letting-go feels too great a loss to bear. Whilst our cherished personal possessions reflect the strength of our emotional connections to each other, it can also feel as though they bring us only a step away from hoarding things irrationally, and that to be irrational is dysfunctional. *Emotional vulnerability* such as this is rarely recognised as part of our evolutionary story.

How can an understanding of our emotional brain, and evolutionary changes in physiological responses affecting tolerance and social sensitivity, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, help us to understand the emergence of apparently impractical cherished possessions? Might new emotional vulnerabilities and new needs for connection and support explain a rise in cherished personal possessions with the emergence of modern humans?

The appearance of widespread non-functional objects in the archaeological record

That there seems to have been a proliferation of objects of art and adornment after the emergence of modern humans has been an accepted feature of the archaeological record for decades. There certainly seems to be a relationship between the origins of our own species in Africa after 300,000 years ago (discussed in Chapter 5) and the later appearance of widespread non-functional objects, such as beads or small portable figurines, after 100,000 years ago, with a particular proliferation after 45,000 years ago. This proliferation has traditionally been seen as an explosion of symbolism, reflecting new 'modern' capacities of thinking and expression to such an extent that it has been seen as the major 'origin myth' of our species (Hopkinson 2013).

Apparently non-functional artefacts, often seen as early art or symbol-ism, certainly existed well before 100,000 years ago. Etched shells from Trinil in Java date to 500,000 years ago (Joordens et al. 2015), for example. The Berekhat Ram figurine from Israel, a natural stone whose human-like figures have been deliberately accentuated, dates to around 250,000 years ago (d'Errico and Nowell 2000). During the African Middle Stone Age, from around 400,000 to 300,000 years ago onwards, we see an increasing fre-quency of apparently symbolic artefacts at various locations (Coulson, Staur-set, and Walker 2011; Kissel 2017; Kissel and Fuentes 2018) and evidence for a greater use of colouring materials such as ochres (Brooks et al. 2018).

What we see as 'symbolic' artefacts do, however, become much more prev-alent after 100,000 years ago, which seems to indicate that objects that are not directly functional have taken on a new significance. As we have seen in Chapter 5, alongside changes in cranial and facial anatomy, we see extended movements of raw materials. This implies increased mobility and social connection in various places in Africa after 300,000 years ago, associ-ated with the emergence of anatomically and cognitively 'modern' humans. We see the appearance of beads in North Africa after 100,000 years ago (Wadley 2021), for example, with particularly notable finds including 13 similar shells of *Nassarius gibbosulus* found at Taforalt in Morocco dating to 82,000 years ago (Bouzouggar et al. 2007). At Blombos cave in South Africa, 41 marine shells (of *Nassarius kraussianus*), perforated for suspension and showing wear from this use, were recovered in deposits dating to around 72,000 years ago (d'Errico, Vanhaeren, and Barton 2009; d'Errico et al. 2005). Several artefacts that have been seen as clear examples of early art and date to the period 100,000 to 70,000 years ago, including ochre fragments with incised crosshatch lines, have been found at Blombos cave and surrounding sites (Henshilwood et al. 2018; Tylén et al. 2020). Burials with clear examples of grave goods are seen in the Near East around 100,000 years ago, such as that at Skhul V, with a wild boar mandible placed in the hands of the individual who is interred, and that at Quafzeh 11, in which an individual is buried with fallow deer antlers on their chest (Hovers et al. 2003; Wadley 2021). These burials, as well as finds of perforated marine shells (*Glycym-eris*) that had travelled over 40 kilometres and also date to 100,000-year-old deposits at Quafzeh, are associated with an early migration of modern humans out of Africa (Bouzouggar et al. 2007). Shells used as ornamentation

are also associated with burial at Border cave in South Africa around 70,000 years ago (d'Errico and Backwell 2016). At this latter site, a perforated Conus shell is found with a four- to six-month-old infant. Later in the archaeological record, marine shells and ostrich eggshell beads, which are identical to those created and exchanged by modern Jo'huansi, appear in the archaeological record at around 42,000 years ago at Border cave in South Africa (d'Errico et al. 2012). These remain in use until modern times. The widespread use of beads of various forms extends to early Upper Palaeolithic communities as far apart as China (Wei et al. 2016) and Siberia (Lbova 2021). Clearly, beads, art and other items of ornamentation are playing newly significant and increasingly essential roles in people's lives.

The most well-known proliferation of beads and other personal ornaments, as well as small figurines, is that seen in Europe, particularly after 45,000 years ago alongside the movements of modern humans into this region (Mellars 2005; Vanhaeren and d'Errico 2006). These beads are not only produced from naturally occurring shells but also created out of mammoth ivory and soapstone, often circulating over huge areas along extended networks of communication (Heckel 2018). It is also during this period that we see the only documented, potentially systematic production of personal ornaments by Neanderthals in the form of the somewhat contentious Châtelperronian industries of south-west France (Caron et al. 2011, Gravina et al. 2018). Though a Neanderthal's capacity for symbolism is not in doubt (discussed in Chapter 9), objects such as shell ornaments or portable art are extremely rare.

It is not difficult to see why a relationship between the emergence of our own species and the proliferation of symbolic ornamentation and art has always been seen in terms of a cognitive advance, albeit over a delayed timeframe from the first emergence of our species. Cognitive differences are known to exist between modern humans and archaic humans such as Neanderthals (Bruner 2021). Art and ornamentation provide a physical, and aesthetically remarkable, image of what makes a 'modern' mind, seen in terms of a symbolic revolution (Klein 2008). Furthermore, this apparent cognitive advance seems also to have made new relationships possible. Beads, used as personal ornamentation in necklaces or on clothing, have traditionally been interpreted as a mechanism by which connections between groups could be made and maintained – as demonstrations, perhaps, of ethnic identity (Gamble 1991; Gamble 1998).

Much of this progressive narrative does not entirely fall into place, however. That changes in both anatomy and mobility significantly predate the appearance of such personal ornamentation poses a notable issue. Furthermore, whilst capacities for elaborate symbolism are ubiquitous, there is a pronounced concentration of expression in very specific regions and periods. Though depictive art dating from after the arrival of modern humans is found in Indonesia (Aubert et al. 2014), portable art and personal ornamentation are particularly widespread with the arrival of modern humans in Europe. What initially appeared to be a clear distinction between the symbolic capacities of Neanderthals and those of the early members of our own species has been eroded in recent years (Hoffmann et al. 2018). Furthermore, personal ornamentation and art emerged in South Africa from 100,000 to 70,000 years ago but then declined, before emerging again after 50,000 years ago. This makes little sense if some critical cognitive threshold is meant to have been crossed.

Increasingly, there is a sense that there must be other explanations for the proliferation of symbolism than cognitive superiority, though it is not entirely clear what these might be. However, the changes in emotional tendencies discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 provide a potential explanation. Rather than a cause, personal ornamentation may instead potentially be a side effect of changes in emotions and increasing social connectivity. Likewise, rather than a proliferation of symbolism demonstrating some exceptional cognitive advance, such as understanding of symbolism, an ability to be creative, or an elevated sense of imagination, these capacities might have equally existed in earlier humans but without an emotional need for elaborately created non-functional objects. As discussed in Chapter 5, elevated friendliness and social sensitivity often brings with it an almost desperate need for comfort and social connection. Indeed, we only need to take the most casual of glances at our close companions, dogs (discussed in Chapter 7) to appreciate how changes associated with domestication affect needs for social context (and it may be no coincidence that dogs are unusual in also sometimes showing strong attachments to objects). This raises the question of whether new relationships with objects might be a reflection of emotional changes rather than of elevated capacities in symbolic thought. Increased intergroup tolerance brings with it emotional vulnerabilities, particularly an extraordinary sensitivity to social surroundings, greater needs for social connection, and elevated susceptibility to the effects of any lack of attachment security, social connection or loneliness. Rather than signs of a cognitive advance,

the increasing prevalence of non-functional artefacts and their distribution within social networks after 100,000 years ago could perhaps be far better explained, at least in part, by new vulnerabilities occurring with increased intergroup tolerance.

New emotional relationships to objects?

As humans, we seem to be uniquely capable of forming unusual *compensatory attachments* whenever human relationships fail to provide everything we need. By reaching out past our close human relationships into realms of real, part-real or entirely imagined companionships, we seem able to cope better with emotional vulnerabilities. These *beyond-human relationships* reflect our ability to imagine other social worlds, and an acute social focus, and they also reflect our need for this type of connection. These unique relationships have not always been part of the human experience, however.

Might a proliferation of non-functional objects after 100,000 years ago be, at least in part, explained by new needs for sources of emotional support?

To address this question, we will initially consider the nature of compensatory attachments to objects and how these objects can make us feel comforted and secure both as children and as adults, as well as their common characteristics in modern society. We will then move on to consider cultural and individual variations in these objects and attachments. Lastly, we will consider the characteristics of the archaeological record, which might argue for the significance of so-called 'symbolic' material culture as a source of emotional comfort and support.

Compensatory attachments to objects in childhood

As we have seen in Chapter 1, our childhood experience can provide us with important insights into the key elements of our adult emotional responses. Children's emotional attachments often present us with a simplified form of what becomes important to adults and may help us to understand the possible role of personal ornaments, portable art or other things seen as symbolic objects which we find archaeologically.

As children, we will all have sought compensatory relationships to cope with the day-to-day experiences of being alone. These compensatory attachments are many and varied. It is typical in the modern Western industrialised context for children to form close relationships with pets, or become attached to a particular comforting object such as a blanket or teddy bear, for example. However, of all of their attachments, it is those that children make to the rather curious phenomenon of *imaginary friends* that provide us with perhaps the most revealing insight into both our capacities and our needs to find sources of emotional support, often in what might appear to be unusual ways. Often sidelined as an area of research, children's imaginary friends give us an extraordinary insight into our ideal companions and the role of our social imagination in bolstering rather fragile human securities.

Children's imaginary friends used to be thought of as a reflection of some kind of emotional issue or even weakness. However, we now recognise that they are, instead, an effective means of bolstering emotional resilience. Imaginary friends appear to us as children when they are most needed. We tend to develop imaginary friends in response to times of loneliness and social stress, and to help to improve our sense of connection, self-esteem and security (Hoff 2004). They tend to be supportive, providing companionship and emotional support, and improving self-esteem. Children with imaginary friends tend to have better theory of mind abilities, and be more social (Giménez-Dasí, Pons, and Bender 2016; Taylor et al. 2013), and even create more interesting and elaborate stories (Trionfi and Reese 2009). They straddle the world of reality and imagination and, whilst children are aware that imaginary friends do not really exist (Taylor and Mottweiler 2008), imaginary friends seem so real that they provide the emotional support of an ideal friend (Majors 2013).

The character of imaginary companions may provide us with some important insights into ideal supportive figures for children, and how these then may relate to material objects. These companions are clearly not just a fleeting sense of something or someone but are fully formed individuals with not only physical characteristics but also separate lives and opinions. Taylor et al. (Taylor et al. 2004: 1178) described several examples, such as a child's imaginary friend called *Alicia*, who was an invisible eight-year-old female dog, with green fur and blue eyes, who lived under the child's bed. The child

liked Alicia's good sense of humour but did not like that no one else could see her. Another child's imaginary companion was called *Rose* and was an invisible female squirrel, nine years old, with brown fur and hazel eyes, who lived in a tree in the yard and slept in her imaginary house. Imaginary friends can be close companions when children are lonely, enabling them to be more socially confident. Ella, a child of 11, explained how her imaginary friend *Polly* helped her become more confident as, without her, she says, 'I'd probably feel like very shy, 'cos before when I was like 3 years old, I wouldn't talk to anyone and when I got my imaginary friend, I got, I built up my con-fidence and if she wasn't there I'd probably be quite shy now' (Majors 2013: 560). Polly emerged when Ella was four years old and her grandmother died (Majors 2013: 555).

Children's choice of imaginary friends reflects certain common patterns (see Table 6.1). They often mimic those types of relationships that are most reas-suring to them, such as with friendly furry animals, with powerful animals that might protect them, or with friends with combinations of human and

Key characteristics of imaginary companions
Imaginary companions:
– are supportive: they provide companionship, emotional support, nurturance and help to foster self-esteem (Hoff 2004; Taylor 2001)
– cannot be created at will 'on demand', but will appear such as in times of loneliness
– can be human, animal or a combination of the two, or fantasy animals (and often have human and animal traits) (Taylor, Carlson, and Gerow 2001)
– are common (50–60% of children in modern contexts have imaginary friends, often several; Hoff 2004)
– in animal form tend to be mammals (i.e. able to nurture), and often large mammals (for example, elephants or lions) (Hoff 2004; Taylor, Carlson, and Gerow 2001)
– are associated with higher levels of theory of mind, creativity, achievement and absorption in children and the adults they become (Kidd, Rogers, and Rogers 2010; Wigger, Paxson, and Ryan 2013)
– are known by their creators not to be 'real' (Taylor and Mottweiler 2008)

Table 6.1: Characteristics of imaginary companions.

animal features. Imaginary friends are most commonly human or animal, or a combination of the two, or even fantasy animals (Taylor et al. 2004: 1178). For example, one child's companion, called 'quack quack', was a duck with a human head and hands (Wigger, Paxson, and Ryan 2013). They tend to most often be mammals (perhaps unsurprising given a shared mammalian nurturance response) and particularly large mammals (for example, elephants or lions).

It is not surprising that medium-sized or large mammals are common imaginary friends. Being mammals, animals such as bears, elephants and horses share a common nurturing response with us. Also, given their size and intelligence, they seem to be more powerful caregivers or friends than rabbits or mice might be (Vanutelli and Balconi 2015). Furthermore, social and empathetic animals may be particularly comforting in ways that humans sometimes are not. Performance in a stressful test is enhanced more by the presence of a dog than a friend, for example (Allen et al. 1991). We might think that our friends could surely understand us better than an animal could. However, many of our stresses stem from worries about social judgements, and animals provide support that is more clearly non-judgemental. Medium-sized and large mammals seem popular choices as imaginary friends, therefore. They have the clearest abilities to protect, as well as befriend, and it seems no coincidence that the animals chosen as companions are those that seem most capable of understanding how we ourselves feel.

Children's personified objects share many common features with imaginary friends, perhaps not surprisingly. Personified objects, such as teddy bears, dolls or soft or hard animal toys, have personalities of their own and are seen as protectors (Morris, Reddy, and Bunting 1995). As such, these personified objects are typically imagined as comforting companions, similar to imaginary friends, albeit ones with a more tangible physical presence. So-called transitional objects, such as comfort blankets or teddy bears, even seem to play a crucial function in development, particularly in modern Western societies. They bridge a transition to independence and to being able to comfort oneself in the absence of a human caregiver (Winnicott 1953).

Whilst imaginary friends are protected from the distress of accidental loss, personified objects benefit from provoking a sense of touch and bringing

a certain permanence to children's lives. Whilst our imagination conjures up an ideal personality in these objects, such as nurturing caregiver or fun-loving companion, our sense of touch at the same time responds to the warmth and softness of favourite personified objects such as teddy bears in a very bodily way, and the very constancy of such objects provides an additional sense of security. Given their power to heal distress, it is no surprise that certain personified objects take on such important emotional roles. Most parents in a modern Western industrialised context understand only too well the powerful attachment infants can form to personified objects.

Compensatory attachments to objects in adulthood

We might imagine that tendencies to derive support from personified objects are discarded as we grow to adulthood. However, it seems that, rather than disappearing entirely, compensatory attachments to things that once comforted us seem to simply change in form, and often become far less visible, perhaps as we feel somewhat embarrassed by the role in our lives. Where invisible or intangible companions are concerned, beliefs in spiritual beings show many similarities with childhood imaginary friends (Mackendrick 2012). Creating in our imagination an ideal caregiver has a powerful effect in relieving stress and in reducing depression, anxiety and other emotional disorders (Gilbert 2014; Rockliff et al. 2008). Where physical and tangible replacements for companions are concerned, animal spirits and amulets or talismans often take similar forms to the animals chosen as personified objects (Varner 2008). Many people continue to cherish their childhood teddy bears, and others transfer their source of security into other forms such as jewellery (Bell and Spikins 2018). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that personified objects attain the significance seen in *The Repair Shop*. We learn as children that teddy bears or dolls can be companions that, despite being inert, feel like they are living beings who are on our side (Keefer et al. 2012; Keefer, Landau, and Sullivan 2014).

Although each object has its own story and set of beliefs surrounding it, the way in which attachment objects affect us emotionally is remarkably similar from teddy bears to cherished gifts to photographs. Like genuine caregivers, such cherished objects stimulate the soothing neuroendocrine responses that make us feel cared for. We reach for our keepsakes when

suffering pain and separation (Niemyjska 2019) and they affect us in turn. Remarkably, simply touching a teddy bear makes us feel more secure and also in turn to become a nicer person to be around (Tai, Zheng, and Narayanan 2011). Cherished personal objects that affect us in this way contribute to our sense of *social safeness*, a warm, soothing emotional state that protects us from stress (Armstrong et al. 2021; Gilbert et al. 2008) and mitigates against feelings of loneliness (Best et al. 2021). Research even shows brain changes in people who are lonely over a long time period and find support outside of human relationships. In their brains, regions known as the default network seem to have been particularly strengthened so that the kind of mentalising, reminiscence and imagination used in personifying objects can 'fill the social void' (Spreng et al. 2020: 1).

Different types of objects may provide comfort in different ways to different people. In some cases, what feels comforting is that the object, such as a teddy bear, seems to have its own personality or soul, and is capable of befriending or even protecting us. In other cases, however, objects connect us to particular people in our lives. A photograph has the most immediate effect in making us feel like someone might almost be there with us, but often clothes, or things that loved ones touched or used, often seem to transport us to their presence in other ways. These kinds of object have a powerful effect on emotional wellbeing by stimulating our sense of attachment security (Table 6.2), a trait which seems to have become more vulnerable to being disrupted as a result of recent evolutionary changes (described in Chapters 4 and 5).

Differences within human populations even hint at evolutionary selective mechanisms acting on physiological and emotional capacities, which may have influenced capacities to find comfort in things. Though people in general tend to anthropomorphise objects at times of stress, those with more social imagination, and a greater tendency to anthropomorphise objects, are those who find the greatest comfort in certain things at times of stress or loneliness (Keefer 2016). They seem better at visualising a comforting presence. Certain people are also more prone to feel nostalgic through objects, apparently relating to differences in serotonin receptor genes that make them more sensitive to negative experiences and more driven, therefore, to find security in comforting things and memories (Luo et al. 2019). Broad

Improvements in attachment security

Priming attachment and promoting social safeness with reminders of caring relationships:
   – Thinking of attachments reduces noradrenergic stress response (Bryant and Chan 2015) and pain (Jakubiak and Feeney 2016).
   – Thinking of a romantic attachment figure reduces blood pressure, to the same extent as having a romantic partner in the room (Bourassa, Ruiz, and Sbarra 2019).
   – Thinking of attachments reduces painfulness of traumatic memories (Bryant and Foord 2016).
   – Priming attachment security reduces negative reactions to out-groups (Mikulincer and Shaver 2001; Saleem et al. 2015).
   – Priming attachment security reduces depression and anxiety (Carnelley et al. 2018).
   – Fostering abilities to feel a sense of social safeness reduces loneliness (Best 2021).
   – Repeated priming of attachment security by various means leads to more lasting secure attachment (Hudson and Fraley 2018).

Table 6.2: Ways in which objects can improve emotional wellbeing through fostering attachment security.

differences in social sensitivity, as we have seen in Chapter 5, also have a genetic component and affect widespread emotional vulnerabilities and potentials (Assary et al. 2020; Flasbeck et al. 2019).

Like dogs (Kurdek 2008), discussed in Chapter 7, or spiritual beings (Lenfesty and Morgan 2019; Niemyjska and Drat-Ruszczak 2013), cherished objects can even function emotionally like human attachment figures, giving us a sense of safety and promoting positive physiological effects (Keefer, Landau and Sullivan 2014; Keefer et al. 2012). These compensatory companionships can, in effect, reset our bodies away from competitive insecure and threat-based systems that damage not only our own health but also our social relationships, and towards more emotionally connected and healthy social schemas (Gilbert 2019). As we have seen in Chapters 4 and 5, these changes can affect our tolerance of differences or strangers, our willingness to explore, our sense of trust in our close relationships, and even our immune systems.

Are there common forms or features to cherished personal objects?

Disentangling which objects are emotionally significant as a source of social comfort can be challenging. Clearly, in modern Western societies with a focus on materialism, objects also fulfil many roles other than being comforting or useful, such as being signs of status or achievement, or providing some sense of comfort in familiarity without bringing with it a sense of supportive social connection. The boundaries between functional objects and those that provide comfort can also be fluid, and our grandfather's toolkit, belt or other practical items might be both useful and comforting, for example. Moreover, an old belt, a handmade box or cheap jewellery may carry real emotional significance for one person, yet appear to another to be of no value. We may not even acknowledge, or be able to articulate, why some particular object makes us feel cared for or socially supported.

Research into objects that provide comfort for adults in modern contexts does, however, provide some support for a continuity of common characteristics seen in children's personified objects to those that become significant objects for adults. Cherished possessions that provide a significant source of comfort often conform to certain forms, such as representing humans or animals and being easily portable (Bell and Spikins 2018); see Figure 6.2. Research on over 200 cherished personal objects (see Bell and Spikins 2018),

Figure 6.2: Examples of cherished personal possessions that can provide comfort. Left: Girl with teddy bear. Lisa Runnels, 2015, via Pixabay: https://pixabay.com/photos/girl-backside-woods-teddy-bear-961648/. Right: Brooch with photograph. Penny Spikins, CC BY-NC 4.0.

for example, revealed not only teddy bears kept by adults but other types of animals as well, such as a toy guinea pig recorded by a student as a constant stable presence reminding them of friends and family, or jewellery. Certain jewellery, including animal pendants, are described as providing comfort, much like speaking to parents or grandparents, and small animals, either as toys or figurines, are also described as being reminders of the feelings of being safe at home.

A common theme of continuity with childhood imaginary companions, described above, with common human or animal figures, albeit often in portable form, is evident. Objects that act like compensatory attachment figures also tend to be easily portable and show many signs of wear. Like our childhood caregiver, we want to be close to them, and touching them is important. Like imaginary friends, they also often take the form of modified animals, particularly large mammals, such as teddy bears or animal pendants. In this case, they are more likely to have 'a life of their own' as something similar to an attachment figure, rather than simply be intangible reminders of loved ones. Animals seem to have a certain power.

Any object can become meaningful and provide us with a sense of comfort, much like a caring attachment figure, but some types of objects – those representing animals, in particular, and which are able to be carried, held or worn – are more likely to fulfil this role.

Cultural variations

Culture and context affect the types of objects we may become attached to and, moreover, whether it is objects that we look to to provide us with comfort or if we seek support elsewhere, such as in companion animals (discussed in Chapter 7) or even in less tangible imaginary entities.

The role of cherished possessions is seen more clearly in some cultures, and at certain times. For example, whilst many people still believe that things like a preserved rabbit's foot could be 'lucky' (Thwaite 2020), historically there was a much greater function for charms and amulets and a belief that they had healing and protective properties. Nonetheless, common patterns of seeking support in *something* seem resilient, despite the differences in what seems the right sort of object to make us feel safe. The tendency for people

hiding in shelters in the London Blitz of 1940–1941 to carry lucky charms, including rabbits' feet, has, perhaps, some similarities to the changing significance of personally meaningful objects seen during the COVID-19 crisis. Whilst, in both cases, many people sought comfort from touching cherished objects, the form of the objects chosen has changed through time.

There is also much individual variation within any culture. For some people, cherished possessions, with their power to make us feel safe, secure and socially connected, are essential to make life bearable, whilst for others they may come into focus only at certain times of crisis, if at all. They are not always significant, or significant for everyone. Whether some people worry about appearing vulnerable, find it difficult to reach out for support, are anxious about objects being lost or find a sense of social warmth and safety elsewhere, there tends to be considerable variation in the personal significance attached to cherished possessions. A certain emotional austerity in modern contexts can even lead some people to have a sense of disdain for such things. Nonetheless, whatever the cherished objects, whether a rabbit's foot in the London Blitz or a grandfather's toolbox in the COVID-19 crisis, things provide comfort, security and safety for some people everywhere. Charms or talismans, in the form of beads and animal figurines carried or worn by adults, are found widely across many different cultures (Varner 2008).

Attachments outside of human relationships seem to be more necessary, and the bonds between people and things stronger, in cultural or social contexts of less social connection and support or where caring figures are not constantly present (Bowlby 1969; Fortuna et al. 2014). This makes sense of the relative scarcity of such objects in hunting and gathering communities. Such societies typically create supportive contexts during childhood development and adulthood, high levels of attachment security, and constant close physical contact during infancy (Hewlett et al. 2000). These are also societies with beliefs that include ubiquitous spiritual beings, the presence of which reduce loneliness. Furthermore, the constraints imposed by a highly mobile lifestyle and the significance of sharing and giving that is so central to modern foraging societies (Lavi and Friesem 2019; Peterson 1993) mean that few things are owned. However, objects continue to be a source of emotional comfort in these societies, albeit in different ways than in industrialised contexts. Cherished possessions providing some kind of social comfort are most evident in childhood. Often, as is the case of the

Yamana of Tierra del Fuego, children's personified objects in hunting and gathering societies are made from perishable materials such as wood, skins or grasses (Gusinde 1986) and represent animals or people. Albeit crudely fashioned from organic materials, such birds, animals or human dolls are significant figures in children's lives. Only in very rare cases would any indication of these objects remain in the archaeological record (Langley 2020). Children's personified playthings, imagined to have their own thoughts, feelings and identities, are, however, found across all cultures (Hong and Townes 1976). For adults, highly portable items, such as beads, figurines or amulets, can be important emotionally (Wiessner 2014). For the Awá of Brazil, the act of making, using and carrying stone arrows is important for their sense of self (González-Ruibal et al. 2011). Whilst not practical, compared to alternative hunting weapons that are much more efficient, they are emotionally important, providing a sense of comforting familiarity, identity and tradition. In many other cases, objects are felt to be significant spiritually and have their own living identities. Even in hunting and gathering contexts, we see cherished possessions playing a role in many people's lives, albeit often being less visible or less relied upon than those we see in modern industrialised contexts.

The emotional role of cherished possessions, as well as animal companions or spiritual beings, in *keeping us sane* may be more important than we think. Objects are an example of non-human attachments that seem to play an important, and often unrecognised, role in supporting our emotional wellbeing, a role that is often left outside of our human evolutionary story.

Art in search of empathy – reappraising the proliferation of symbolic objects

Anyone who studies Upper Palaeolithic portable art and ornamentation quickly concludes that much about its precise meaning will remain lost in time. However, emotional insecurity can have far-reaching effects on us as individuals (such as limiting our capacities to explore, affecting our immune system or making us less trusting) and as communities (such as through hampering a sense of collaboration or willingness to forge relationships based on high levels of give and take), as discussed in Chapter 5, art and personal ornamentation may play an important role in counteracting these insecurities. That cherished objects can provide a sense of security, and even compensatory attachments where supportive others are lacking, may help

us to understand some elements of 'symbolic' objects, particularly personal ornaments and portable art.

The timing of a proliferation of 'symbolic culture' after populations of modern humans spread into new regions may be explained in terms of newly evolved emotional vulnerabilities and new needs for support, rather than elevated symbolic capacities, imagination or creativity. After modern humans appear, the proliferation of such objects plausibly follows times of particular stress, for example. 'Symbolic' artefacts appear to particularly proliferate globally after the 'Adams event', 42,000 years ago, when we know that there were major environmental changes and extinction events, as well as decades of electrical storms, for example (Cooper et al. 2021). It seems at least plausible that people sought natural forms of comfort in creating animal-like objects. Moreover, further proliferation of such objects particularly appears as populations move into new and challenging regions of the globe. The emergence of elaborate art in Europe after 30,000 years ago also makes sense in terms of a particular context of elevated needs for social safeness, without any need to rely on narratives of European distinctiveness. Aurignacian beads number in their thousands, for example, and mark the progressive movement of modern humans across Europe (Mellars 2005; Vanhaeren and d'Errico 2006), when meeting existing archaic populations, as well as challenging environments, may have placed them under particular social stress. A proliferation of modern human personal ornamentation and art during the period of interaction between the two species has also been seen as a potential response to the presence of Neanderthals themselves (Greenbaum et al. 2018). That both species felt a greater need for compensatory attachments seems entirely plausible.

That what we see as an explosion of art and symbolism may be more related to a need to fill a void than to some elevated European capacity for imagination or innovation seems important. We like to see the European creators of elaborate and highly realistic art as uniquely talented, but an alternative perspective is one in which they were sensitive and emotionally vulnerable, within communities that faced challenges from their environments. Ice Age environments placed remarkable challenges on human communities, with often-radical shifts in climate leading to severe resource failures and localised extinctions. Moreover, people are likely to have been pushed into lower population densities or isolated refuges, where connections with others, and a sense of belonging, were difficult to sustain (Maier and Zimmermann

2017). Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, there are indications of at least incipient or occasional hierarchisation in these societies (Pettitt 2020; Vanhaeren and d'Errico 2005; Wengrow and Graeber 2015). Depictive art is extremely rare in the most egalitarian of hunter-gatherer societies (Bird-David 2006), yet becomes more common in hierarchical societies where other people are competitors rather than allies, creating physiological arousal rather than safety. From this perspective, a drive for perfection may be motivated by insecure striving, and the widespread production and use of personal ornamentation, figurines and engraved objects a means of bolstering social security.

The form of portable art seen in European contexts also makes sense in terms of sources of emotional support and connection. As we have seen, children's imaginary friends take animal, human or combined forms, with a particular focus on large animals and on mammals as these companions naturally stimulate our sense of something which can protect us. These same forms tend to feel most comforting to us as adults, with easily portable objects that we can touch being most effective at making us feel secure. Whatever its cultural or individual meaning, portable art may have been important emotionally in terms of promoting a sense of safety and connection, particularly in difficult times. Similar motifs might, thus, naturally become prevalent in the more widely discussed cave art.

Some of the earliest and most famous of these portable art pieces come from south-west Germany, and date to not long after the arrival of modern humans into the region. Here, figurines of therianthropic (human-animal) forms or animals have been recovered. Particularly famous examples include a lion-headed figure from Hohlenstein-Stadel, dating to around 32,000 years ago (Kind et al. 2014; Piprani 2011); see Figure 6.3. Dating to the same period, at Hohle-Fels there are other, smaller pieces, including a waterbird, a smaller human-lion figurine, and a horse, for example (Conard 2003), and, at Vogelherd, a further horse figurine amongst other similar figurines (Dutkiewicz, Wolf, and Conard 2018). The form of portable art pieces seems significant, particularly as, amongst portable art pieces across Europe throughout the Upper Palaeolithic, large mammals tend to predominate (Figure 6.4). Characteristics of objects that may have had a spiritual meaning also seem to have tapped into shared human needs for compensatory attachment figures (see Table 6.3).

Figure 6.3: Lion-headed figure from Hohlenstein-Stadel, 40,000–35,000 years bp. Left: *Loewenmensch1*. Dagmar Hollmann, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loewenmensch1.jpg. Right: *Loewenmensch2*. Thilo Parg, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loewenmensch2.jpg.

Like both imaginary friends and personified objects, these objects, quite possibly held close and carried around for some time, typically represent those living beings that share a mammalian capacity to responding to our needs, and the size to viably protect and nurture us, such as mammoth, woolly rhino, felines, horse and bison. When we consider these famous examples, it is not hard to see how holding and touching such objects, and sensing a living and caring soul with them, might give a sense of comfort, stability and constancy.

We have appreciated for some time that personal objects, art and ornamentation can be important socially but, perhaps, ignored the emotional significance of such items. Attention has tended to focus on how non-functional items play a role in sharing and exchange systems in small-scale mobile societies, for example. That the exchange of gifts, like beads and personal ornaments, functions to sustain networks is clear in the

Figure 6.4: Small portable art figurines from Vogelherd cave, *c.* 35,000–30,000 years bp. Top: Horse. Museopedia, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pferd_Vogelherd_Kopie .jpg. Middle: Cave lion. Hermann Junghans, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE, via Wiki media Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%C3%B6we _Vogelherd-H%C3%B6hle.JPG. Bottom: Mammoth. Thilo Parg, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File :Vogelherd_Mammut_2006.jpg.

Similarities between the characteristics of Upper Palaeolithic portable figurines and personal objects that promote comfort and security in modern contexts:

- small size (portable close to the body or able to be suspended next to the skin)
- preferential selection of large or socially complex mammals as figurines/depictions (e.g. horse, elephant/mammoth, lion)
- rounded morphology (beyond that of the animal-human depicted): teddy bears have evolved to be more rounded through time, for example (Morris, Reddy, and Bunting 1995)
- signs of wear from frequent touch

Table 6.3: Similarities between the characteristics of Upper Palaeolithic portable figurines and personal objects that promote comfort and security in modern contexts.

anthropological context (Wiessner 2002). There is certainly a relationship between the exchange of items as gifts over many hundreds or thousands of kilometres and the maintenance of social networks (Ambrose 1998; Balme and Morse 2006; Dunbar, Gamble, and Gowlett 2014; Gamble, Gowlett, and Dunbar 2011). As Coward explains, since artefacts persist in time, they can be an aid to memory and a record of social relationships, acting as the scaffold for social understanding and making it possible to extend social networks (Coward 2016; Donald 2000; Jones 2007). However, the underlying emotional motivations behind the creation, exchange and use of cherished objects of art or ornamentation is rarely explored and may lie more in the realm of emotional comfort than in any calculated social exchange. Gifts such as beads, in ethnographic contexts, do cement social networks. However, they also play a far less socially strategic and more personal role in people's lives. More than simply representing identities, they make their wearers feel connected and safe (Morris and Preston-Whyte 1994). Personal ornamentation, such as beads, satisfy a feeling of needing touch and closeness, perhaps much like modern items like cherished necklaces or bracelets. Though the appearance of such objects may indicate new social capacities, they may also tell us about new vulnerabilities and emotional responses, and responses to social challenges.

A need for a sense of social safety does not answer all our questions about so-called art or symbolic objects, of course, and many existing interpretations have cast important insights into many other elements of their use. As we have seen in Chapter 3, archaeologists in recent years have increasingly appreciated the evolutionary basis by which the material culture around us influences how our minds work (Malafouris 2015). We have discussed and debated how material culture influences how we think (Knappett and Malafouris 2008), how material things can seem to be part of us (Coward 2010) and create our identities (Miller 2013), and even how material evidence reveals emotions, particularly those of grief (Tarlow 2012). It has become clear that objects can have 'agency', that is, a power to influence the world, almost like living things. Indeed, many ethnographically documented societies do not draw the rigid distinctions that we do between living things and inanimate objects (González-Ruibal 2012). These differing ontologies help us to understand the relationship between people and art (Ingold 2006; De Castro 2007). However, the concept of objects as a source of attachment, security or emotional comfort is rarely raised. Quite why this should be the case remains a mystery. Perhaps emotional insecurity seems too raw or too personal to contemplate, emotional attachments too much connected to bodily responses to seem sufficiently academic, or vulnerabilities too difficult to navigate. Whatever the reason, our emotional needs for social safeness and security, and our abilities to find this in compensatory attachments, including those to objects, are a much-understudied area.

There are also characteristics of portable art and ornamentation that do not entirely fit a role in terms of social safety. Portable art shares many characteristics with cave art, and yet the latter cannot be carried around to provide a sense of support and is even, in many cases, never seen again after its production. Even when we consider art that is portable, we can reflect that many such items may be shared rather than personal, though the connections this creates may themselves be part of the power of the items. Moreover, many such objects, including the lion-headed figure, were deliberately destroyed, something hard to bear in the context of emotional attachments, though perhaps demonstrating a certain ambiguity about the emotional power of such objects. Furthermore, it is entirely possible to argue, conversely, that some elevated social imagination is key to the way in which modern humans relate to their world, providing a new ability to create social safety through imagined relationships that may have been restricted prior to our

own species. After all, we have seen that some children are more imagina-tive, more social, and more able than others to conjure imaginary friends, and some adults more prone to find solace in things, or other compensa-tory attachments, than others, and that these abilities have some genetic basis. Elevated social imagination may be prompted by the genetic changes occurring under self-domestication that we have discussed in Chapter 5. However, it seems at least plausible that new emotional needs and vulnera-bilities are part of the explanation for the so-called symbolic explosion with modern humans.

Perhaps this is the right moment to turn ideas of a progressive elevated symbolic capacity of modern humans in general, and some elevated European capacity for the depictive art, on their heads. These may not have been people with some unique imagination or elevated symbolic capacities but, rather, sensitive and emotionally vulnerable populations reaching for objects as a source of support.

Conclusions

Our attachment to cherished possessions, and our capacity to derive comfort from them, are areas of human experience that are often ignored. However, when we consider these tendencies in more depth they give us an insight into several realms of our emotional lives – from our human sensitivity and need for connection to the flexibility of our attachment systems and ways in which we are able to seek out and find the social warmth and safeness we need. Faced with isolation or loneliness, from that caused by harsh environ-ments or social stresses in the distant past, to wars and pandemics in modern times, we have remarkable ways of continuing to feel the social connections we need to thrive even in the absence of the people who care about us.

An understanding of our emotional vulnerabilities and responses suggests that Upper Palaeolithic portable art and ornamentation may be a product not only of our creativity but also of our need for a sense of social safety, connection and understanding. Much as we have experienced ourselves at times of war or crisis, portable items of Palaeolithic art and ornamentation reflect the responses of people who know what it is to be lonely and inse-cure about their role in the world. Reaching out to find a sense of connec-tion and social safety in objects provides some social comfort. Moreover,

this is not just about emotional wellbeing. When we feel more secure and socially safe, we are better people to be around, more open to new things, more tolerant of differences and perhaps just a little kinder than we would have been otherwise. In appreciating this, we should perhaps be less hasty to see anyone as overly sensitive when they feel attached to a precious heirloom, or to spend time caring for a treasured object.

Rather than demonstrating a human pinnacle of artistic talent, a proliferation of art and personal ornamentation alongside the global spread of modern humans may, rather, be a response to the need to accommodate new emotional vulnerabilities. Cherished objects seen as portable ornamentation or art, which become more common after 100,000 years ago and particularly prolific after 45,000 years ago, may be a product of new emotional vulnerabilities as much as, or even more than, cognitive advancements. The characteristics of objects which provide us with a sense of social connection and comfort in modern societies, and similarities to those of new regionally connected societies after 100,000 years ago, argue for a common role in providing comfort, alongside whatever other complex meaning they may hold. Hidden beneath the surface of our natural attraction to aesthetically pleasing things, it becomes evident that changing emotional capacities and vulnerabilities may prompt particular material objects to begin to play a new role in people's lives. As much as cherished personal possessions may be the most visible aspect of this in the archaeological record, it is reasonable to imagine whole realms of new compensatory attachments, including those towards imaginary or spiritual beings, as well as attachments to animals (explored in Chapter 7).

Many of the cherished personal objects left to us from the Upper Palaeolithic may, in some very human way, share similarities with the Rogers bear. Though we might not know *for whom* they provided reassurance or support or a sense of connection, we might nonetheless have the glimmerings of an understanding of how.

Key points

- We all share a capacity to find social comfort in things outside of close human social relationships, with cherished objects playing an important role in many of our lives. Compensatory attachments to these objects, as

well as to other figures, imaginary, inanimate or non-human, can provide a sense of social safeness and security, and allow us to be more confident and resilient.

• The archaeological record shows a proliferation of 'symbolic objects' at times of particular stress, after 100,000 years ago, which can be explained as a response to physiological changes (discussed in Chapter 4 and 5). These changes enabled both greater external tolerance and approachability, and were also associated with elevated social and emotional sensitivities. Characteristics of compensatory attachment figures that provide emotional comfort in modern societies show similarities to new types of non-functional artefacts appearing at this time.

• New emotional vulnerabilities and sensitivities, rather than elevated and superior cognitive abilities, may explain a need to derive comfort from things and the proliferation of 'art' or 'symbolic' objects in the Upper Palaeolithic.

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