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The Varieties of Afterlife Experience: Epistemological and Cultural Implications

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When parapsychologists talk about survival, they are usually implying personal survival, that is, a process in which memories, motivations, and personality characteristics of a given person somehow persist after bodily death. Are there other conceptions of survival (and of personal identity) that deserve further scientific examination? My purpose with this brief commentary is to expand on Rock et al's approach by urging survivalists to discuss and investigate further the many different conceptions of (and explanations for) survival. I propose we critically reflect on our theoretical assumptions and their epistemological and cultural consequences.

Keywords: *afterlife beliefs, spiritual experiences, parapsychology*

I praise Rock et al. (2023) for their efforts to better estimate the probability of the survival hypothesis based on experimental findings in parapsychology. The application of the Drake equation to the survival question is a relevant exercise in critical thinking and open-mindedness. Their mathematical approach offers an interesting avenue for evaluating the extent to which different hypotheses (survival, psi, and known confounds, such as fraud and expectancy-suggestion effects) can account for the evidence. Of particular importance is their conclusion "that dogmatic 'pro or con' statements about the survival questions are misguided and unhelpful. We contend that neither ideological stance can sufficiently contextualize all the available empirical information" (p. 14).

As is the case with similar probabilistic arguments, its explanatory power and application will vary depending on the knowledge and evidence we have about the phenomena under investigation. In other words, the estimates will probably change as research on survival and related topics evolves. Similar to what happens in other fields of research, our knowledge about survival (if it is a genuine phenomenon) will become more and more nuanced and diversified. Thus, the equation may have to be revised or expanded to accommodate new information. There are different aspects and implications of the survival hypothesis that we do not even begin to address from a scientific perspective.

In my view, these aspects – outlined below – are neither secondary nor postponable. They are central to research on survival and should be more thoroughly discussed and taken into consideration in experimental parapsychology and related fields, such as transpersonal studies.

The Varieties of Life After Death

What actually survives death? Is it our personality? Memories? Our conscious experience? We tend to think of "survival" as one single process or condition. But is the process of survival the same for all individuals? Are there different types of survival? If yes, is it possible to empirically differentiate between survival processes? Are there differences between human beings and other animals? Do other animals survive bodily death? More important, can we test these different possibilities scientifically?

Some may think the above questions are not as immediately important as the empirical demonstration that consciousness cannot be completely reduced to brain activity. In this perspective, the evidence gathered from studies with mental mediums, research on recalled experiences of death (or near-death experiences), and psi in the lab, among other sources of parapsychological evidence, seems to indicate that *something* in us transcends the brain or the body, and thus possibly transcends death. Rhine believed, based on his and others' experimental findings concerning extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis

(PK) that “it is enough for the present to say that parapsychology has in a real sense confirmed the spiritual (i.e., extra-physical) nature of man” (Rhine, 1977–1978/1985, p. 194). Some may take that argument as lending indirect support to the survival hypothesis. But this line of reasoning neglects the fact that *the way* we survive bodily death will probably have an impact on our chances for success in scientifically demonstrating the existence of survival. One problem is not independent of the other; they are directly interconnected.

My purpose with this brief commentary is to urge survivalists to discuss and investigate further the many different conceptions of (and explanations for) survival. I propose we critically reflect on our theoretical assumptions and their cultural consequences. This discussion is too vast to be covered in a single paper, but I would like to modestly contribute to the debate by proposing some preliminary questions and recommendations that I consider of utmost importance to help advance research in this area.

The Problem of Identity

When parapsychologists talk about survival, they are usually implying *personal* survival, that is, a process in which memories, motivations, and personality characteristics of a given person somehow persist after bodily death. This view has its roots in modern Spiritualism and the practice of communicating with the dead through mediums, apparitional experiences, table-talking, and associated phenomena or practices. But what do spiritual or philosophical traditions other than Spiritualism have to say about survival? Are there other conceptions of survival (and of personal identity) that deserve further scientific examination? It is important to remember that although survival after death is typically conceptualized in terms of post-Cartesian forms of interactive dualism, some authors (e.g., Kelly et al., 2015; Kastrup, 2019) have also suggested alternative explanatory models based, for example, on idealism or a neutral or dual-aspect monism.

A fundamental question emerging from research on personal survival is: are we dealing with the genuine, original personality of the individual or just a fraction of what once was there? Is it the same individual or a simulacrum? For example,

are theosophists’ “astral shells” (i.e., remnants of the dead appearing to be the authentic individual) really possible? If yes, how can we discern between an astral shell and the original individual? If an individual is more than his or her body, then what is an individual?

Once we start considering the many hypothetical scenarios and variations of survival after death, we realize how vast and complex the scientific task ahead is. For example, could survival after death be nothing more than the return to a greater, undefined whole? Are the departed like little water drops falling into the ocean, only occasionally sending their messages through a medium, apparitional experience, and so on, before completely dissolving? Or is survival an enduring process, allowing for extended communications (say centuries or more time) between the living and the departed, with many opportunities for the deceased to demonstrate their existence beyond the grave?

Do we reincarnate? If yes, how does reincarnation impact our ability to communicate with the personality of a previous life? Does this personality cease to exist the moment we reincarnate? If yes, then *what* has actually survived death? If reincarnation does occur, what does the term “survival after death” mean in the cycle of birth and rebirth? Could it still deserve the name of “survival?” What does the evidence gathered so far (for example, from cases of the reincarnation type and memories from the intermission between lives) tell us about such problems? What epistemological and methodological caveats remain to be addressed in this regard? The future of the survival hypothesis depends to a great extent on our ability to answer those questions *empirically* and to form a coherent theoretical perspective of what survival is.

Going Beyond Psi Functioning

The differentiation between survival and psi functioning in the evaluation of the parapsychological evidence remains as a main theoretical and methodological challenge. But we sometimes forget that psi functioning is not the only alternative (supernormal) explanation for the findings. Maybe one of the oldest hypotheses developed to explain mediumistic experiences and other allegations of anomalous processes is that of

demonic possession, which was virtually abandoned by most parapsychologists a long time ago. But can we be sure that something like demonic influence does not exist? Could a trickster or demon delude us into thinking that our deceased loved ones are communicating through a medium? Can we test the demonic influence hypothesis empirically?

The intervention of demons or malicious spirits is only one of the many possibilities beyond super-psi. We should not forget that in some spiritualist and New Age circles, belief in angels (as a separate, specific category of beings) is still active. Many other spiritual traditions around the world defend the existence of entities (from elementals to West African and Afro-Brazilian deities) that are said to have powers and knowledge similar to those sometimes ascribed to the spirits of the deceased (e.g., specific knowledge about a person's life which would be difficult to explain in terms of known confounds; Maraldi et al., 2014; Maraldi, 2017). How can we control for these other explanations? Are they amenable to scientific investigation? Does the evidence gathered so far provide some insight in this regard?

Even if we remain limited to a single scenario and decide to postpone the consideration of other hypotheses for the future, we might still have to consider 1) the multifaceted and multicausal nature of anomalous experiences and 2) the constraints that certain allegations impose on our ability to estimate the probability of the survival hypothesis. "Mediumship," for example, is actually an umbrella term for different phenomena, and some of them may or may not provide significant evidence in favor of survival. For example, some cases of alleged mediumistic painting are best explained in terms of psychological processes and other known confounds, rendering it unnecessary to resort to survival as an explanation (e.g., Maraldi & Krippner, 2013). If we are to consider evidence from physical mediumship, it might be difficult, even in the best cases, to distinguish between survival, psychokinesis, and highly skilled methods of trickery (Richet, 1923). Physical mediumship does not always involve "intellectual" or mental manifestations, which makes the proof of identity more difficult in comparison to mental mediumship. So for every type of phenomenon potentially

relevant to survival, the factors in the equation may vary depending not only on the evidence we have but also on the characteristics of the phenomenon or allegation under consideration.

Collaboration with Spiritual Practitioners

It is now possible to see that exceptional psi functioning is far from being the only important challenge in the scientific demonstration of the survival hypothesis. The varied questions outlined above will require a great dose of creativity to be framed on scientific grounds. The members of spiritual traditions may offer some answers, and their collaboration is certainly appreciated since it might contribute to increasing ecological validity in experimental research. But will we be able to translate their spiritual knowledge into systematic research programs? There are many epistemological and cultural challenges to consider in this regard – I discussed some of them in greater detail in another work (Maraldi, 2021). Some spiritual explanations may be hard to examine empirically or may require a long process of scientific developments in other fields (e.g., physics, technology) before being significantly established – for example, the existence of another dimension or spiritual world. It may turn out that we can demonstrate scientifically only certain aspects of survival (e.g., that some residue of our conscious experience or personality persists after bodily death) but not others (e.g., that the departed are still living somewhere in space and time and will continue existing). In the short term at least, we may not even be able to differentiate our deceased loved ones from astral shells and other possible spiritual entities.

The knowledge provided by spiritual or religious traditions might in some cases be incomplete or biased by pre-existing opinions and dogmas that are resistant to change. Thus, it would be wise to rely on additional sources of inspiration, such as philosophy, arts, personal experiences and anecdotal evidence concerning past-life memories, apparitions, and other phenomena potentially relevant to survival.

Sociocultural Implications

The answers to the survival questions would likely have huge societal and psychological consequences. Science is not just about gathering

and analyzing data; it is also about how we translate and share our findings with society at large. Belief in the afterlife is an important coping resource for those in bereavement (Cooper, Roe, & Mitchell, 2015). Being able to demonstrate it scientifically would likely provide comfort and strength to those in grief. However, other possible cultural consequences are less often mentioned. For example, some conservative Christians may deny the validity of the evidence for survival on the ground that it contradicts their faith. Members of spiritual traditions, denominations, and cultures for which communication with the dead is impossible, incoherent, or prohibited may also question the evidence for survival or the way we *interpret* the evidence or its implications.

Thus, as research on survival progresses, survivalists may have to deal not only with academic orthodoxy and skepticism but also with religious and cultural confrontation. Maybe the realization of a more transdisciplinary, holistic, or integral perspective will be required to deal with such cultural and epistemological issues. Maybe science (in the sense of the scientific community), society and spirituality will require significant transformation before we can fully accept the existence of the afterlife, as Myers (1900, 1903) had already envisaged. But the conditions for such a transformation are not yet clear and may require substantial cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration to be established.

The survival questions should be more widely debated and explored, ideally with the participation of different social actors (e.g., spiritual leaders, scientists, philosophers, and members of the public). It would be of little practical importance to convince ourselves that the evidence points to a high probability of postmortem survival if we cannot also convince the scientific community and society at large. Survival is much more than an empirical problem. It is much more than an adversarial hypothesis to super-psi. Survival is in itself part of the answer to these two fundamental questions: what is life? Who are we in this universe?

Concluding Thoughts

My purpose with the above questions and considerations is not to discourage research

on survival, quite the contrary. It is imperative to move the field to another level of evidence and specification. We need to devise a more coherent picture of the afterlife and the conditions under which it can (and cannot) be scientifically demonstrated and explored. I think Rock et al.'s mathematical analysis (which complements and expands on the previous study by Laythe & Houran, 2022) contributes in a fundamental way to these goals and can certainly help guide future research.

Is bodily death a necessary condition for us to know what lies beyond the veil? Can we know something about the hereafter while still in this world or condition? For those who believe in postmortem survival, it is common to think that the departed probably have the answers to all (or most of) our questions. But Jung (1963) believed the opposite, i.e., that the dead are actually waiting for us to find out the answers: "Only here, in life on earth, where the opposites clash together, can the general level of consciousness be raised" (p. 308–311).

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