

The Nature of a Possible Afterlife

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How important is it to know something of what may happen to us should we survive physical death? I have the impression that for the majority of Westerners such a question hardly arises. Unlike many other cultures (including our own up to half a century or so ago), modern Western society has largely entered a state of denial about death. We know it occurs, but are insulated from its reality. Most people die in hospital, so we rarely have to watch the dying process in any detail. Advances in medicine have meant that death occurs less and less frequently before old age, so it has become less a source of ever-present anxiety. And perhaps most importantly of all, large numbers of the population have turned their backs upon organised religion and upon the lessons of life and death that religion teaches.

Yet as death – our own and that of others – is associated inescapably with life, psychological health would seem to require we learn to face and relate to the challenges with which death presents us, just as we learn to face and relate to those presented by life. Furthermore, the concepts we hold of death are likely to influence, often profoundly, our ideas on the meaning and purpose of life, as well as our value systems, our self-concepts, and our attitudes to our fellow beings and to bereavement and to human relationships. And first and foremost of the challenges presented by death is the question of whether the self exists after physical death, followed by the question of what, if it does exist, might that existence be like?

Here I must nail my colours to the mast and say in, answer to the first of these questions, that in my view and that of many others who are familiar with the literature and who have researched relevant pre-death experiences and the communications ostensibly from the deceased, the evidence that the self does exist after death is impressive. It is not my brief today to deal with this evidence (I have tried to do so, as in Fontana 2005), but members of the Society for Psychical Research and other investigators began to collect the data concerned over 120 years ago and have been adding to them ever since. The very great majority of those who summarily dismiss the case for survival have omitted to study this evidence and have shown little interest in remedying the omission. Perhaps we should ask with respect that they become familiar with it before venturing to publish high-profile opinions on the matter.

The evidence comes in fact from four sources. The first source is from those people who are approaching death, the second is from those who have clinically died but who are resuscitated and return to tell the tale, the third is from those who have clinically died and who do not return, and the fourth is the great spiritual traditions of both East and West. Dr. Peter Fenwick, in his presentation 'Wider human consciousness as shown by death and dying' dealt with the first two of these sources, and all that is left for me to add is firstly the fact that people approaching death, though lucid and drug-free,

frequently greet with joy deceased relatives and friends who seem to have arrived in order to accompany them on their journey to the next life. Secondly, that those who have clinically died and who return from near death experiences (NDEs) report returning to their physical bodies with great reluctance, typically describing the experience as akin to slipping into wet clay. Thirdly, that follow-up studies such as those of Professor Ken Ring (1984) suggest strongly that the NDE apparently produces a long-term increase in spiritual belief and removes the fear of death. These three facts, in addition to supporting the case for survival, suggest that the afterlife may not be without its attractions (at least for some). But it is to people who have died and not returned that we need to turn for more details as to its exact nature.

Communications from people who have died and not returned can be in the form of spontaneous messages to relatives or friends (e.g. in dreams, in connection with apparitions or with disembodied voices, or even with the seemingly meaningful movement of objects), or in the form of messages through mediums who claim to be able to act as channels between this world and the next. The evidence from spontaneous communications is of course usually anecdotal (though not always; in some cases information is given that is unknown to those present and that is found on investigation to be correct) and it is therefore the evidence through mediums that has commanded particular research attention. Mediumship is regarded with understandable suspicion by those with no direct experience of the phenomenon, but steps can be taken by researchers to establish if an individual medium deserves to be taken seriously. The two most readily available of these steps involve ascertaining:

1. Whether or not the information given through the medium and ostensibly from the deceased is correct and could not have been known to the medium at the time.
2. Whether such correct information can be forthcoming even if the person consulting the medium (usually referred to as the sitter) is acting as proxy for an absent individual unknown to the medium.

Although we can regard much mediumship, though not intended consciously to deceive, as of doubtful value, many of the leading mediums of the past such as Leonora Piper, Gladys Leonard, Eileen Garrett and Geraldine Cummins have produced good evidence even when both the above steps have been taken and when those investigating their gifts have been highly experienced researchers (see Fontana 2005 for details). Research has also shown that criticism to the effect that communications through mediums are so general that they would apply virtually to everyone is not viable. For example Roy and Robertson (2001) have shown that sitters are able to identify with odds of thousands to one against chance those communications intended for them from those intended for other sitters even in experiments where mediums and sitters are blind to each other and where sitters are known to mediums only as numbers.

Evidence of this nature helps lend credibility to the mediumistic gift, and at face value allows us to turn to the descriptions of the afterlife obtained through mediums with a measure of confidence. This confidence is strengthened by the fact that there is an impressive degree of consistency between the various descriptions. The descriptions themselves are far too numerous for me to do more than mention briefly the information contained in a few of them, but I have tried to provide more extensive details (see Fontana 2008). I must emphasise that at no point is anything I say intended as dogma. My intention is simply to present a snapshot of the information as we have it, and it is very much up to the reader to decide on its credibility. Shortage of space means that I cannot go beyond this snapshot, and I regret having to look fleetingly at so many profound and important issues.

Sudden Death

One of the most interesting aspects of this information is the warning frequently repeated of the negative consequences of sudden death. This warning also features prominently in the so-called Books of the Dead used by the spiritual traditions to give instructions to the dying (for example the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol*, the Western *Ars Moriendi* and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*). It is said in these instructions and in communications through mediums that sudden death leaves the unprepared individual in a highly confused state, and unaware in many cases that death has actually taken place, particularly if he or she had no belief in an afterlife.

Sudden death can seem in fact very different from the relatively ordered transition reported in NDEs. A soldier killed instantly in the First World War reports through non-professional medium Wellesley Tudor Pole (a friend of Winston Churchill and responsible with Churchill for the initiatives that led to the Armistice Day Ceremony and the One Minute Silence) that

... I imagined I was still physically) alive ... the whole of myself – all, that is, that thinks and sees and feels and knows – was still alive and conscious! [Later] the shock came... I was dead!... I had been killed!... the shock came and it was very real ... (Tudor Pole 1984)

Jane Sherwood, a respected writer and gifted non-professional medium was told by one of her communicators who met sudden death that:

... there is a vast difference between a sudden passing and a quiet and prepared one. The shock of an unnatural death sets the... being in a mad turmoil... One finds oneself in a fantastic dream world with no continuity of experience... [and with] unconnected states of mind [and] no proper framework of space and time... (Sherwood 1969)

It seems that in both sudden death and some more normal deaths part of the problem arises because the mind is not prepared for the transition between life and death. Jane Sherwood's communicator tells us that:

... the experience of death must vary considerably because it is governed by the state of mind in which one passes over.

If this is so, in what state of mind should one pass over? We can summarise, using secular language, the guidance the *Ars Moriendi* (the 'Art of Dying', a 15th Century Christian text routinely read in medieval times to the dying – see Shinnars 2007) gives us. We should die in a tranquil state of mind, having forgiven others and been forgiven by them, free from bitterness, unattached to worldly goods or concerns, and with the mind turned towards spiritual realities. In addition we should relinquish the self-satisfaction that feeds the ego, and avoid impatience or loss of faith. The Tibetan *Bardo Thodol* goes into even more detail and describes each stage of the dying process and instructs the dying person to remain conscious during each of them and thus retain some control over the transition to the afterlife in order to influence where possible the experiences involved.

Earthbound Spirits

Communicators tell us in addition that those who experience sudden death or have no belief in an afterlife may remain 'earthbound', that is still attached to the material world, unaware in some cases that death has occurred and resentful at the sight of others enjoying their old homes and possessions. It is said that such earthbound individuals may be responsible for poltergeist and perhaps other hauntings, and possibly for influencing the thoughts and behaviour of susceptible individuals. Psychiatrist Dr. Carl Wickland took this last notion seriously and reports that patients who failed to benefit from normal clinical procedures were helped back to health by his successful attempts (in conjunction with the trance mediumship of his wife) to contact earthbound spirits who were 'possessing' them, and persuading these spirits to move on to the next stage in the afterlife (see Wickland 1978). Such methods would hardly be taken seriously by modern psychiatry, but Wickland presents numerous case studies that supposedly demonstrate that for him at least this approach appeared to work.

Hades Conditions

Some reports of NDEs contain descriptions of brief glimpses of an idyllic world, usually referred to as representing Paradise conditions, in which meetings take place with deceased relatives or beings of light. Is this where we go on leaving the material world and the earthbound environment? Communicators suggest that in many cases it is not. Although this initial glimpse of Paradise conditions would seem to be a promise of things to come, it appears that only the very spiritually advanced journey there immediately after death. Others must first progress through intermediate stages or levels. Professor Ken Ring, formerly of the University of Connecticut and one of the leading researchers into NDEs, writes that although the beautiful light seen by many in connection with 'Paradise' conditions:

appears to shine on all with its unconditionally accepting radiance, and everyone seems to enter in an atmosphere of all-pervasive pure love... [this does not] make all things well after death, regardless of how we have lived.

The light and the visions of Paradise 'may... dissolve our personal sense of sin' but we cannot be absolved from the responsibility for our own lives. At each moment we are 'writing the script for our own after-death' experiences'. How we have lived 'will be evident – perhaps painfully so – after death' (Ring 1984). This helps explain the reason for the levels said to exist before progressing to to-called Paradise conditions (and even Paradise is not the end of the journey). Supposedly, these levels provide opportunities to work through the script we have written for ourselves, and make recompense in some way for the less admirable passages.

In all, there are said to be seven levels in the afterlife, with the earth and 'earthbound spirits' as the first and lowest level. The second of these levels is sometimes referred to by the Greek term *Hades*, and it seems that this is the level that many – or perhaps most – individuals experience soon after death. Hades is said to be the shadowy, misty environment described by the ancient Greeks and to which the Jews gave the name Shaol (see Crookall 1978). Spiritually advanced individuals are said to bypass Hades, but for others it seems to be a place of half-light. Maurice Barbanell, a respected journalist in his lifetime, when communicating through Marie Cherrie (1987) refers to it as 'like walking around in a fog... almost like trying to stop myself daydreaming'. Other communicators also refer to it as a dream-like condition. Albert Pauchard, founder and President of the Geneva Metaphysical Society, reported that after death he found himself in a dark region where he walked along a seemingly endless road and was aware at one point:

that '... there was no sky... no depth... no perspective... no free space... There was nothing. I was alone in a desolating solitude'. (Pauchard 1987).

One of medium Jane Sherwood's communicators reports:

[I spent] a long sojourn in what I think of as Hades, the place of the shade, a dim and formless world which I believe is peopled by the miasma of earth emotions and the unconscious projections of its inhabitants... (Sherwood 1969).

But the Hades experience seems to depend in large part upon the individual's state of mind. The deceased F. W. H. Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, when communicating through Irish author and outstanding medium Geraldine Cummins (Cummins 1984), reports that Hades can be:

a place of rest, a place of half-lights and drowsy peace... As a man wins strength from a long deep sleep, so I gathered that spiritual and intellectual force I needed...'. [The individual] is affected in a different manner by this place or state on the frontiers between two lives, on the borders of two worlds.

Thus Hades is for some a place of haunting shadows, of regrets and unfulfilled longings, of aching loneliness and of sadness for lost opportunities,

while for others it is a state of peace and recuperation. Those who report Hades as a place of drowsy peace in fact describe it as being followed by a joyful sense of freedom, though it seems that it is not yet time to move on to the next level. Purgatory has still to be faced.

Purgatory

Although recognised by the Roman Catholic Church, the concept of Purgatory is not generally accepted in other Christian denominations, despite the fact that in one form or another it crops up in other major spiritual traditions. Communicators refer to it quite frequently, and describe it as an opportunity to review one's earthly life and start the process of learning the necessary lessons from it. Thus it is said to be a developmental rather than a punitive experience, and as such it may be connected with the so-called 'life review' said to occur after death (with a foretaste sometimes before death, as in the reported experiences of those who come close to drowning), and which enables the individual to study his earthly behaviour in detail and experience at first-hand the emotional suffering it may have caused to others.

Referring to this process, a communicator reported by Ralph Harlow (a university professor with mediumistic gifts whose interest in psychical research was aroused at Harvard by the great William James), informed him that what may seem like 'punishment' is therefore the 'opportunity... to rectify error'. Another communicator tells Harlow that although 'God's love includes all... his love cannot change a Hitler into an Albert Schweitzer' (Harlow 1968). Transformation is only accomplished through genuine repentance and atonement, a transformation that starts in Hades and continues through at least the two levels that follow. One of Jane Sherwood's communicators informed her that 'one cannot just lay down the burden with a sigh of relief and go on free of it. One has to find the real man behind the façade' (see also Sherwood 1964). Thus Purgatory is described as a process of reflection and purification, with Hell simply an extreme form of this purification. Portrayals by medieval artists of Hell should therefore perhaps be taken symbolically. It is difficult to represent pictorially the deep emotional suffering that maybe is a feature of 'hell', so artists possibly used images of physical suffering in its place, in which case, erring on the side of generosity, perhaps we should absolve them from the usual charges of gratuitous sadism.

The Plane of Illusion

Having negotiated Hades/Purgatory, the individual is said to be ready to move to the third level, often referred to as the Plane of Illusion. This is described as essentially a world of thought, resembling somewhat in appearance the world that is left behind. Philosophers such as the late Professor H. H. Price, Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford University who had an enduring interest in psychical research, seem prepared to accept that a post-mortem world of thought makes logical sense (Price 1995) and it is worth remembering that Professor A. J. Ayer, the leading philosopher of positivism and a notorious sceptic on survival of death, reported (much to the discomfort of his materialist colleagues) not only that to his surprise he found himself surviving during an NDE but that he was aware at the time that his 'thoughts became things'.

Although analogous in some ways to the thought world created in dreams, there would appear to be limits upon what thought can or cannot create in the Plane of Illusion. If it were not so, each person would live exclusively in his or her own thoughts, thus creating a personal illusory world, whereas we are told that individuals are drawn towards groups of like-minded people and that each group participates in a shared 'reality'. Those who in life loved nature thus inhabit an environment resembling the natural world, while those who on earth were drawn to towns and cities find themselves in a facsimile of an urban environment. This means that certain parts of the Plane of Illusion are said to be less pleasant than others, leading some communicators to maintain that it is a place of contrasts, and that at its worst it is a continuation of the more hellish regions of Purgatory (which makes it sound even more like parts of our own world). As to our own destination in the Plane of Illusion when the time comes, we are told that as in Hades 'it all depends how you are when you come over – what your earth life has been like' (Cummins 1935).

Descriptions suggest that as a consequence of its dream-like nature, the Plane of Illusion is unstable, with many people (perhaps the majority) unaware of its illusory nature. Maurice Barbanell reports through medium Marie Cherie that there is:

some confusion with realities, so much depends on what you want to see. [It is] difficult to keep readjusting.

Having met his deceased mother in the afterlife he goes on to tell us that:

Mother's reality is not my reality ... it's a strange thing this reality. You've got to realise constantly that you'll only see what you want to see and so you've to make a conscious effort to broaden the field... Can be confusing. I am groping towards my own reality... I know how easy it is to see what you want to see... [It is a] comfortable trap but still a trap.

There is an ever-present need to exercise 'will-power and discipline', for if your concentration fails, 'other people's reality intrudes' and you become confused (Cherie 1987). A young woman, living with deceased members of her family, reports in fact that if as a group they fail to concentrate sufficiently, they find that some rooms in their house have puzzlingly ceased to exist.

People creating much of their own reality in the Plane of Illusion refer to people wearing 'clothes' and living in 'houses' and indulging in some of the pleasures enjoyed on earth. Sir Oliver Lodge's son Raymond, communicating through the medium Gladys Leonard after his death in the First World War, tells us of a deceased fellow soldier who 'would have a cigar'. Apparently one was produced for him 'not out of solid matter but of essences' (Lodge 1916). F. W. Myers, through Geraldine Cummins (1935), claims that objects such as the cigar are fashioned unconsciously – and presumably also sometimes consciously – from the 'plastic ether' (perhaps the same 'substance' as Raymond's 'essences') that also yields light, blue skies, breezes, water, and

vegetation. This suggests that the 'plastic ether' might be a subtler version of our own quantum reality, although this possibility raises far too many issues to be pursued further here.

In a second volume of communications via Geraldine Cummins (Cummins, 1935) Myers tells us it is even possible for beings to 'eat' and 'drink' and to 'sleep' and experience 'sexual passion' if they wish. (Such a possibility seems rather less absurd when one remembers that these things can also happen in dreams on earth). Communicators seem virtually unanimous in referring to a 'body' and to bodily senses that resemble those possessed on earth (this illusory 'body' is also referred to by many of those experiencing NDEs and other OBEs). This body – as if in response to an idealised image of how one would like to look – is said to gravitate towards the prime of physical life. Old people grow younger, children become adults. Would such a body have internal organs? Presumably yes if the individual thinks that it does, though what use such organs would be is difficult to imagine.

What of psychological factors? Does the individual retain earthly characteristics? Communicators insist that they do. Earthly emotions survive, as do memories (much as they appear to survive in OBEs and NDEs), and although this makes no sense if we identify memories exclusively with the physical brain, it would be essential if the individual is to be said to live on, as memories are an integral part of personal identity and of a sense of self. Communicators also stress that learning continues in the afterlife, which implies that it builds in part at least upon learning retained from what is acquired on earth, and then advances to new levels of understanding. The impression is given that after death, as in life, the individual remains a work in progress rather than in any sense a finished article, with what is experienced and learnt on earth acting as a foundation for what is to follow.

Reincarnation

What of reincarnation? Does it seem as if at some point the individual must return to earth for another lifetime? Although widely accepted in the Eastern spiritual traditions, reincarnation ceased to be part of Christian belief at the Council of Constantinople in 553 (though it persisted in Western occult philosophies and reappears as part of some so-called New Age beliefs). This is one of the few subjects on which communicators appear divided. Some say they have never heard of anyone reincarnating, others that it is a matter of choice and yet others that those attached to material existence are automatically drawn back to earth. Those who choose to return are said to do so because they recognise they have not yet learnt some of the essential lessons of earthly life. Buddhism in particular stresses that there are certain lessons that can only be learned on earth, since earth is the only level where one faces challenges and the problem of evil.

Those communicators who accept reincarnation as a fact claim it typically occurs from Hades or from the Plane of Illusion. At higher levels of the afterlife, we are led to believe it occurs only for perfected souls who choose to return to earth purely for the benefit of others. For those who do not reincarnate, progress from the Plane of Illusion to the next level, the so-called

Plane of Colour, takes place only when the lessons of the former have been learnt, and the individual is able to see through its illusory and fundamentally unsatisfactory nature.

The Plane of Colour

Sometimes referred to as 'Summerland' or 'Paradise', this is said to be the final plane of form before the individual progresses to the formless realms. As such it is the ultimate perfection of form, and the 'Paradise' conditions sometimes briefly glimpsed during the NDE. As a world of form it is still, in spite of its peerless beauty, illusory in the sense that all form is illusion, arising from ultimate reality certainly, but not representing that reality.

It is said that not only is the scenery of the Plane of Colour enchanting, it also conveys a profound and direct sense of 'love and hope'. One of Jane Sherwood's communicators speaks of:

real people moving about in a glorious world... Beautiful buildings... in surroundings of surpassing loveliness...

One of Geraldine Cummins' chief communicators, when speaking of the deceased Professor Verrall, tells us that he lives near 'an ancient Greek temple and near an amphitheatre, mountains, sparkling sea and deep blue skies' (Cummins 1984). But Paul Beard, a leading expert on the afterlife literature, points out that although buildings such as Verrall's ancient Greek temple:

...will seem perfectly solid to their occupiers, they will not live on, like obstinate bricks and mortar, and will vanish as soon as their use for them vanishes. (Beard 1980)

Communicators also tell us that opportunities in the Plane of Colour arise in response to the individuals' wishes. Many follow their existing interests as scientists, musicians and artists, not for egotistical reasons but because the value of the creative act lies in the opportunities for self-development it provides. Creativity is one of the great gifts enjoyed by the human race, but few people on earth have the chance to develop this gift – and that part of the self to which it belongs – adequately. Some communicators speak of great 'halls of learning' and of breathtaking gardens, and maintain that as there is no need to struggle with weeds or pests or adverse weather conditions the garden lover can concentrate instead on perfecting form, design and beauty.

We are told that 'time' does not exist in the Plane of Colour. 'Time' is only a term we invent to explain the process of change, and in the Plane of Colour change such as birth decay and death do not exist, and change becomes solely a matter of inner spiritual development. We are also told that all life eventually graduates to the Plane of Colour – in which case, as there is no longer a struggle for survival and no longer any sexual competition, all species exist together in harmony.

Moving On

It seems strange that anyone would choose to leave the Plane of Colour, but the desire to draw closer to the divine source of reality, plus the realisation that the Plane of Colour is still illusory, eventually lead the individual, at his or her own wish, to undergo what is referred to as a joyful 'second death' and to then pass beyond the world of form into the formless realms, realms that are accessible to those of us on earth only in moments of profound mystical experience in which we realise that ultimate reality is love and that all things share in a cosmic unity. The subject is far too vast to touch on here, but suffice it to say that in the Western tradition this state is described as contemplating the Divine while in the East it is referred to as Unity with the Divine. But such terms are largely beyond our comprehension, so this must be the right point at which to stop.

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