



Special Report for Members

Institute of Noetic Sciences

December 1985

Altered States of Consciousness and the Possibility of Survival of Death

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Selections from a Presentation for
The Symposium on Consciousness and Survival
co-sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences

in cooperation with the Office of Smithsonian Symposia and Seminars
at Georgetown University, Washington, DC
October 1985

Editors' note: *The presentation summarized here was one of nine from a panel of distinguished scholars and scientists, convened by the Institute of Noetic Sciences to address the question: does individual consciousness survive bodily death? This question raised related questions, equally provocative. What is the nature of mind? What is the nature of consciousness? Psychologist Dr. Charles Tart approaches these issues from the perspective of his work with altered states of consciousness (which include, for example, meditative states, hypnotic trance, dream states, states of sensory deprivation). Tart reviews the contributions of parapsychological research to the "survival question", and suggests directions for future investigation.*

The essence of the ideas I want to share is expressed in the following two sentences:

First, after some initial shock and confusion resulting from the process of dying, I will not be too surprised if I regain consciousness.

Second, I will be quite surprised if "I" regain consciousness.

To put it more precisely, I will not be too surprised if I regain some kind of consciousness after death, but that consciousness may be of a quite different sort than the ordinary

state of consciousness I am accustomed to. Further, I doubt that "I", in the sense of my ordinary self, will be the self that regains some sort of consciousness.

By thinking about survival in terms of our ordinary, taken-for-granted "I" surviving, we have inadvertently confused the issue, so it is no wonder that we do not have a clear answer about the possibility of survival.

What we call "I" is actually quite changeable from minute to minute, rather than being as fixed as we like to think it is. Some of these forms of "I" occur often, so it is useful, especially if we are interested in personal growth, to speak of our many "I"s or sub-selves (Tart, in press). Many of these ordinary "I"s do not long "survive" (in the sense of maintaining their presence and integrity) the small changes of ordinary life, like strong emotions, hunger, sexual desire, fatigue, alcohol. If ordinary "I"s cannot survive these minor shocks, how could ordinary "I"s survive the vastly greater shock of death?

The question "Will I survive death?" cannot really be satisfactorily answered except as a subset of the larger question "Who and what

am I?" This is the central question I will address as we explore the issue of survival of death.

The Nature of Ordinary Consciousness and of Altered States

Let us look briefly at the nature of ordinary consciousness (and the ordinary "I"s associated with it), and at the nature of altered states of consciousness, as background for examining the survival question.

Ordinary consciousness is a semi-arbitrary construction. In the course of growing up we have built up huge numbers of habits: ways of perceiving, of thinking, of feeling, of acting. The automated functioning of these habits in our ordinary environment constitute a system, the pattern we call our ordinary consciousness. Ordinary consciousness is stabilized, so it holds itself together in spite of varying circumstances. Forgetting the work that went into constructing this as children, and not realizing the cultural relativity and arbitrariness of much of it, we take it for granted as "ordinary" or "normal" consciousness.

We usually think of survival in terms of the survival of personality. Note though that personality, the set of characteristic behaviors and statements that distinguishes us from others, manifests through our state of consciousness. For our purposes here, "personality" and "state of consciousness" are largely synonymous. Every one of the psychological processes underlying ordinary consciousness can undergo drastic changes. To mention just a few: An ordinary face can be seen as that of an angel or devil. I don't mean *interpreted* here. I mean actually perceived. Your heart can be felt as a glowing mass of radiant energy instead of only a barely perceptible pulsation in your chest. Your memories can seem like those of someone else, or you may "remember" things that intellectually you know could not be known to you--yet they are "obviously" your memories. Totally new systems of thought can come into play for evaluating reality. What is most dear to you may change drastically. Space and time can function in whole new ways as in experiencing eternity.

Usually many of these sorts of changes occur simultaneously, and when they do we talk about experiencing an "altered state of consciousness". The change is too radical to

see it as a variation of your ordinary state. It is qualitatively as well as quantitatively different.

The Dream State

To further our understanding of altered states, let us look at the most commonly occurring one, nighttime dreaming. Modern sleep research has shown that we all spend about 20% of our sleep time in a specific brain wave state associated with the mental activity of dreaming, whether we remember it or not.

In order to dream we must go to and remain asleep, i.e., we must induce an altered state of consciousness. Usually this means reducing exteroception (our processes for sensing the external world) and interoception (processes that give us information about internal body state) to very low levels. We turn out the lights and close our eyes, eliminating visual input, for example. We relax our bodies and don't move, eliminating interoceptive kinesthetic input. If we survive death in some form we will certainly not have the physical exteroceptors and interoceptors we had during life, so this customary input would be drastically reduced as in dreaming.

Further, we now know that there is a very active inhibition of what input does reach our receptors. If you deliberately stimulate a sleeper, but not intensely enough to wake him, and then awaken him and get a report, you find that most stimuli do not make it through into the dream world. The few that do are usually distorted so they fit in with the ongoing dream. Calling the dreamer's name, for example, could become another dream character asking him about the state of his health! If an after-death state is like a dream state, might similar distortions of our questions to the deceased occur?

Similarly our sense of identity, our emotions, and our evaluation processes can operate quite differently, as if the dream were of someone else with different emotional reactions and styles of timing. What is sensible by dream standards may be outrageous by waking state standards. The space/time sense is totally changed. If such alteration of the processing styles of emotion, evaluation, sense of identity and space/time sense occurs routinely in dreams while alive, why couldn't these and other alterations occur after death? Suppose the after-death state is more like a dream state than an ordinary conscious state? Would

someone who knew your personality in its ordinary state recognize your personality in something closer to its dream state?

Let us look at another common characteristic of dreams: Dreams usually seem to just happen to us, rather than feeling like our active creations. Who is creating this world and these actions? Where does the scenery come from? How do various actors know when to come on stage? If the after-death state is like nighttime dreaming, will it be so passive? From the after-death side of things will we care about helping to prove our survival?

The subconscious is given the credit for the intelligent and active creation of dreams, since the dreamer declines credit. This is not a terribly good explanation, of course, but it is the best we have at this time--and a good reminder of how little we understand about our minds. If such a potent source of experience as dreams is controlled by mental processes we hardly understand at all, it reminds us of how careful we must be in extrapolating the characteristics of waking consciousness to the possible after-death state.

State Specific Knowledge and Altered States

One of the most important qualities of knowledge is that it is state-specific. *What you can know depends on the state of consciousness you are in.*

A simple analogy is using a net to troll through the ocean. If your net has a one inch mesh, it will not pick up anything that is smaller than an inch, thus excluding an enormous amount of life. If you understand this property of your net, your "data collection system", there is no problem. If you are too enamored of it, you are likely to think that ocean life is all bigger than one inch. You cannot study small life with your net.

Altered states of consciousness research has shown us that some kinds of human knowledge are state-specific. If you aren't in a certain state of consciousness, certain things cannot be known.

Some knowledge is only partially state-specific, in that it can be known in two or more states of consciousness. If you ask someone the street address of his home, for example, he will probably give you a correct answer in his ordinary state, in a dream state

(assuming you are some dream character asking the question), in a sexually aroused state, in a depressed state, and in a state of intoxication. But there are things you can know in an altered state of consciousness that you cannot really remember in your ordinary state, much less tell others about in any adequate way. This seems to be the case with many of the great spiritual issues.

If we want to know all that a human can know, we must study some things in an appropriate altered state of consciousness. If we do not enter that state and work appropriately with it, we will never really know the answers. I think one of the tragedies of our times is that we have forgotten about the state-specificity of knowledge in regard to many vital spiritual questions. Thus we approach them only from an ordinary states perspective, and get answers that are distorted and pale reflections of reality. We have, as it were, traded direct knowledge of something like Unity of Life for abstract verbal statements and theories about unity. It doesn't satisfy, and it doesn't work very well.

Altered States and Survival

What does this have to do with survival of consciousness? Just this:

The direct experience of existing and experiencing in some form that seems partially or fully independent of the physical body is relatively common in various altered states of consciousness, and this kind of experience constitutes the most direct knowledge of survival an individual may have.

There is nothing wrong with indirect forms of evidence per se, of course, but by this wholesale rejection of direct altered state of consciousness experience, we force the survival issue to be solely one of indirect experience, of abstraction and deduction instead of direct experience. This also amounts to throwing away some of the most relevant evidence about survival, and may make it impossible to ever get a personally satisfactory answer.

Further, contemporary research in humanistic and transpersonal psychology has shown that the wholesale rejection of dream and other altered state of consciousness experience has strong and largely pathological consequences

for our happiness and our full development as human beings.

There are many personal and cultural roots for the rejection of altered states of consciousness. The one we will focus on now is the dominance of materialism as a philosophy of life.

The materialist view of man, so widespread today, says that any discussion about human consciousness is essentially a discussion about computer circuits. Biocomputer circuits, to be specific, but nothing more than this. Consciousness is like an actively running program in the biocomputer; altered states are simply different programs. Various aspects of consciousness are merely subprograms of the larger program which is nothing but the totality of my biological, material self. The programs and subprograms may produce all sorts of outputs and experiences. Many of them are very useful to our pleasure and biological survival, but many of them are quite arbitrary or even nonsensical.

To put it simply, the materialistic equation is:

Mind *equals* Brain

and this is considered to be the complete story.

This completely materialist view, by invalidating vital aspects of human nature, creates a dismal outlook on life, an outlook that is usually not explicitly acknowledged because of its dismalness. When hope, love, and joy, when intellect and the materialist philosophy itself are reduced to their "ultimate reality" of nothing but electrochemical impulses in a biocomputer that originated by chance in a dead universe, what is left?

Because the practical and intellectual results of materialistic science are so powerful, we (including almost all scientists) are too impressed with the materialistic philosophy intermixed with it. We can consciously reject materialism because of the loss of vital spirit it leads to, but it is hard to effectively reject the cultural conditioning and emotional involvement that we as westerners almost invariably have in the "scientific" outlook. Thus it is important for us to be able to rationally deal with the intellectual claim of comprehensiveness of materialism, not just take a position like "I don't like the way materialism feels, so even if I have to ignore my intellect I'm going to reject it."

The good news is that you don't have to be ignorant or unscientific in order to reasonably argue that the scientific position is far from complete, and thus is not an all powerful set of reasons for rejecting the possible reality of the spiritual. Not that I'm arguing the opposite and encouraging you to believe everything that is labeled "spiritual": there is a lot of nonsense under that label that should be sorted out and rejected. But not everything.

Scientific Parapsychology as an Underminer of Materialism

The good news is based on the findings of scientific parapsychology, a collection of thousands of naturalistic observations and at least 700 laboratory experiments in the last six decades that, to my mind, conclusively demonstrate that there are aspects of the human mind that simply cannot be reduced to materialistic explanations. Thus the equation "Mind=Brain" is woefully incomplete, and should not be used to rule out spiritual realities or the possibility of survival on an a priori basis.

Briefly, parapsychological research has firmly demonstrated the existence of four major psychic abilities. "Psychic" means that while we observe information transfer or physical effects on the physical world, there are no reasonably conceivable physical means whereby the information transfer or physical effects can have come about. There may be other psychic abilities--I think there are--but they have not been investigated and established to the degree that these four have, so I focus on them as the foundations of parapsychology. The four are telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis.

Telepathy is the transmission of information from mind to mind, after we have ruled out ordinary physical means like talking to one another or sign language, and ruled out inference from physically known data. The laboratory studies that firmly established telepathy were mostly card guessing studies. A sender, isolated in his or her own room, looked at one card after another from a thoroughly shuffled pack of cards, trying to send his or her thoughts. A receiver isolated in another room wrote down his impressions of the cards. Perfect scores are extremely rare, but enough studies showed more hits than could be reasonably expected by chance to establish telepathy.

Clairvoyance is the direct extrasensory perception of information about the physical world, without the intervention of another mind which already knows the information by ordinary sensory means. The classical card test studies involved a percipient giving impressions of the order of a deck of randomized cards when no living human knew what the order of that deck was. Many studies showed enough hits to establish clairvoyance. The information transmission rate is about the same as in telepathy studies (5). Both telepathy and clairvoyance seem unaffected by physical factors like spatial distance or physical shielding.

Precognition is the prediction of the future when the future is determined in a random way, such that inference from present knowledge would not be helpful. The classic experimental design is to ask a percipient to predict the order of a target deck of cards, but the cards will be randomly shuffled at some date in the future. Precognition of this sort has been successful at intervals of up to a year. Curiously the average information transfer rate is much lower than in present-time telepathy or clairvoyance studies (5).

Collectively, telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition are known as extrasensory perception (ESP), as they all involve information gathering.

Psychokinesis (PK) is the fourth well-established psychic phenomenon. It is popularly called mind over matter. The classic tests involved wishing which way machine thrown dice would turn up, although the target object is now usually an electronic random number generator. The frequency of PK appearance is about the same as precognition (3).

The importance of these psi phenomena, as the four are now collectively referred to, is that they are manifestations of mind that have resisted all attempts to reduce them to known physical forces, or straightforward extensions of known physical forces. I exempt some of the speculations on the frontiers of quantum physics to explain psi as "straightforward" extensions of physics, for they are controversial ideas in physics per se, involve such a radically different view of what is "physical" that they should not be lumped in with the old materialistic physics, and, quite important from a scientific view, have not shown any notable degree of success in understanding and controlling psi phenomena.

The psi phenomena are examples where we must say:

Mind does not equal Brain

Certainly some aspects of mind and consciousness are partially or wholly based in brain and nervous system functioning, but psi phenomena are not, and so openly demonstrate the need to investigate mind on its own terms. These psi phenomena do not "prove" survival, but insofar as mind has aspects which do not seem limited by space or time, such aspects of mind are the sort we might expect to survive bodily death.

Scientific Research on Survival

Modern parapsychological research has focused on the four aspects of psi mentioned above, but historically parapsychology, originally called psychical research, focused specifically on the question of survival of death.

Modern spiritualism was born near the end of the last century when mysterious rappings in the home of the Fox sisters were interpreted as PK-like effects of departed spirits who were trying to communicate with the living. In a short time Spiritualism was a world-wide religion. Its basic message was very appealing, and scientific in style. Spiritualism accepted the fact that much that was called religion, based on authority, was indeed just superstition. Scientists were right who said that experience, data, facts, were more important than belief or dogma. "Don't believe in survival," said the spiritualists, "test the idea of survival against the facts!"

Spiritualist mediums claimed that that is just what they were: mediums of communication, channels between the living and the deceased for exchanging messages. If you want to know if your Aunt Sara had survived death, don't believe or disbelieve the idea, sit down with a medium at a seance and ask to speak to Aunt Sara. When the spirit who claimed to be Aunt Sara is contacted and speaking through the medium, ask her questions about herself until you are convinced that it is indeed Aunt Sara speaking.

Many, many people carried out this experiment. Some were not convinced of survival. As the early psychical researchers noted, many of the ostensible spirits gave only the vaguest details of their earthly lives, or were just plain wrong in what they said.

Some seance communications from the ostensible spirits were of a very high quality, though, and convinced sitters of the reality of survival. Here is an example of the kind of high quality sitting that has been reported, this one from after the Second World War by the British investigator Rosalind Heywood:

"After the war I went to a Scottish medium to see if she could pick up something about a friend, a German diplomat who I feared had been killed either by the Nazis or the Russians. I simply didn't know what had happened to him. The medium very soon got onto him. She gave his Christian name, talked about things we had done together in Washington, and described correctly my opinion of his character. She said he was dead and that his death was so tragic he didn't want to talk about it. She gave a number of striking details about him and the evidence of personality was very strong." (1)

I believe any of us would be strongly impressed by this kind of evidence for the survival of death, and it has convinced a few parapsychologists.

Complexities of Survival Research

Survival research is now a very small part of parapsychology (itself a miniscule field--see Reference #2). Compared to the central role it once had, survival research has been almost abandoned for half a century. The reason is quite interesting.

When psychical researchers first began investigating mediums, the idea that living people had extraordinary psychic abilities was not generally accepted. If information from an ostensible surviving spirit was in accord with what the investigator knew about the deceased, he was inclined to accept it as evidence of survival: who but he and the deceased knew it? As researchers gradually established that ordinary people sometimes showed telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition, however, the picture became more complicated. The validating information might have come from the deceased, but it might also come from the medium's unconscious telepathic reading of the investigator's (or some friend's of the deceased) mind, or from a clairvoyant pickup of information from surviving documents and records. If *precognition* existed, how about the possibility of *retrocognition*, where the medium's unconscious psychic abilities went

back in time to get information about the deceased when he was still alive?

Added to these psychic complications were the facts arriving from the study of hypnosis and of abnormal mental states like those involved in multiple personality that showed that the subconscious part of a person's mind could do marvelous imitations of people. Further add in the fact that subconscious processes could distort a person's mental functioning to alter experience so it supported deeply held beliefs, and the grounds were established for a powerful alternative explanation of the best data for survival.

The Undead Deceased

To illustrate the complexities of survival research, let us continue the high-quality case we just looked at. I did not present the whole report on the case:

"If I had never heard any more, I would have thought it very impressive.

"But after the sitting, I set about trying to find out something about him. Finally the Swiss Foreign Office found him for me. He was not dead. He had escaped from Germany and had married an English girl. He wrote to me that he had never been so happy in his life. So there I think the medium was reading my expectations. She was quite wrong about the actual facts, but right according to what I had expected." (1)

Most parapsychologists abandoned survival research and focused on the psi abilities of the living because cases like this made it look just too difficult to decide between the survival hypothesis and the unconscious impersonation theory. The abandonment is probably premature, and a few parapsychologists are still actively working to devise better tests of survival that could distinguish these two explanations. Ian Stevenson, for example, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia, has proposed that subconscious ESP on the medium's part might account for factual knowledge shown by an ostensible surviving spirit, but would not account for complex skills if they were shown. To responsibly speak a foreign language you were sure was unknown to the medium, for example, rather than just mention isolated words or phrases from that language, would be very convincing. Unfortunately we

do not have good cases of that type--yet. Perhaps we will.

As I stated earlier, however, what little survival research has been done was implicitly about the survival of ordinary consciousness. We have seen how ordinary consciousness and ordinary "I's" are just one manifestation of whatever our more basic nature is. Let us now look at possibilities of survival that include some of the realities of altered states of consciousness.

Models of Survival

• *Ordinary Consciousness, Equivalent Body Survival*

This model assumes that existence after death would be rather like permanent exile to a foreign land, but with consciousness and "external" reality much like they were before death.

• *Stable Altered State of Consciousness Survival*

This model would assume that there is a primary, "ordinary" (for the after-death) state of consciousness after death, with stable and comprehensible (at least from within) qualities. It would be an altered state of consciousness compared to pre-death embodied ordinary consciousness. . . .

• *Multiple, Stable Altered State of Consciousness Survival*

There may be several altered states of consciousness that the surviving person exists in from time to time. Communications from the same deceased person, but originating from different states, might seem contradictory or disjointed. . . . To gather evidence in favor of the possibility of survival, we have to make an assumption in this and the previous model, namely that at least some of the altered states of consciousness the deceased can communicate from bear a clear enough resemblance to the pre-death personality and state of consciousness so we can see the connection.

• *Unstable, Transiting States of Consciousness Survival*

I have theorized elsewhere (4) that the most comprehensive explanation for some of the altered states of consciousness phenomena we see, especially those induced by powerful

psychedelic drugs in untrained individuals, is to recognize that we are not dealing with a single, stabilized altered state of consciousness but with continuous, unstable transitions from momentary configuration to momentary configuration. The colloquial term "tripping" illustrates the flavor of this. A person's condition, whether induced in life by a powerful destabilizing force like a drug or by the nature of the after-death state, is a lack of stability, a rapid shifting from one momentary configuration of conscious functioning to another. Such a condition would be rather like delirium. To both the person experiencing it and to outsiders, there would be moments of sense and lucidity, perhaps moments of even greater lucidity than normal, but overall it is confused rambling.

The Body as a Stabilizer of Consciousness

Given the importance of the body and brain as stabilizing mechanisms for both ordinary and altered states of consciousness, as we discussed above, the lack of a body and brain in an after-death state might well mean that it would be characterized by great instability. If we would investigate what happens to mental functioning in life when body awareness is greatly reduced or temporarily eliminated, we might have a better understanding of what an after-death state might be like.

Our discussion of dreaming earlier is quite relevant to this idea, for in dreaming we have almost no awareness of our actual physical bodies, only our mentally constructed dream bodies. Sensory deprivation studies also shed some light on this question. Ketamine intoxication might also be an excellent analogue for studying the qualities of mind when no body is perceived in life. Used as an analgesic in surgery, it has also been used in much lower doses (about one tenth the surgical dose) as a psychedelic drug, with a major effect in some users of making the physical body effectively disappear from consciousness.

Interoceptive input from our physical bodies is not the only major source of stabilization of consciousness in physical life, of course, so it may be possible for stable states of consciousness to develop in an after-death state based on other kinds of stabilization processes.

More Appropriate Tests for Survival

We can summarize the implications for

improving the quality of survival research now around the question of "Who might survive death?"

The ordinary personality, the ordinary "I", does not seem a likely candidate for more than temporary survival. It has little enough unity itself, being made of many "I"s itself, each of which often fails to "survive" the shocks of ordinary life for very long. The shock of dying might destroy many of these aspects of ordinary "I" either temporarily or permanently. Further, ordinary "I", ordinary consciousness, is heavily dependent on a number of body-based processes for its stabilization, processes like exteroceptive and interoceptive input. Without these processes consciousness can change drastically, as in ordinary dreaming. Unless something very analogous to an external world and body is provided in the after-death state, much of ordinary "I" would seem unlikely to survive.

If we want to ask "Does John Smith survive death?" we had better get to know the full range of possible manifestations of "John Smith" before he dies. Aside from knowing factual and personality details about the ordinary "John Smith", what is the drunken "John Smith" like? How about the "John Smith" when he has lost his body temporarily through sensory deprivation or ketamine administration? Or the "John Smith" after a profound meditative experience? Or the "John Smith" in a state of depression? Or the "entity" that may appear in some altered state of consciousness that tells us that "John Smith" is a small and not very important

manifestation of something much greater? When we can identify all of these "John Smiths", we will be in a much better position to ascertain if any of them survive.

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