

# The Possible Nature of Post-Mortem States: A Discussion

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## *Part I. By Ian Stevenson*

In his recent article in the *Journal* on "The Survival of Personality in a Mind-Dependent World," Michael Grosso (1979) has made a bold attempt to describe a realm that we may enter if we survive the death of our bodies. I respect this kind of endeavor so much that I hope the following comments will not seem captious or detract from my commendation of Grosso's paper. I do believe, however, that if conjectures like Grosso's are to appeal to empiricists they should remain closely related to pertinent data. I acknowledge that parapsychologists—including myself—cannot follow this precept as easily as we can preach it. When we examine data, we are all inclined to emphasize whatever harmonizes with our favored concepts; and we tend to minimize and even not to notice data that do not agree with these concepts. Nevertheless, I feel that Grosso has neglected some important considerations that could affect the validity of his conclusions, and I would like to draw attention to these, particularly in the examples he has cited from cases that I have investigated.

First, however, I wish to offer a more general challenge to the idea that a person's identity (and also his sense of his own identity) depends on objective verification of his experiences, most particularly through observation by him and other persons of his physical body. This is a popular concept with many philosophers, although some, such as H. H. Price (1953), have rejected it as an unwarranted assumption. Grosso (pp. 369–370) stresses the instability of mental life and, by contrast, the dependability of a person's physical body as a guide to his continued existence. Speaking for myself, I find that my physical body gives me only marginal assurance concerning my continuing existence. When I shave in the morning and look at my face in the mirror, I do not say to myself—even casually—"Here I am still." I grant the usefulness of my physical body to my incarnate friends for the purpose of quickly reassuring them of my persistence from day to day. For me, however, my

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sense of identity derives much more from some of my memories, and also from some of my long-term traits of character, than it does from my physical body. Consider, for example, a memory that I have of a certain unpleasant experience—a minor surgical operation—that I had when I was (I think) less than three years old. The memory of this occasion has persisted unchanged, so far as I can tell, for 59 years. During that time, my body has lengthened from about 30 inches to nearly 73. It has also expanded in other dimensions and has undergone a variety of illnesses and additional surgical operations. Most of the cells and nearly every molecule of my body have been replaced numerous times during this period. Grosso takes into consideration too short a span of time in comparing the stability of a mind and its associated physical body. Surely my memory of the event mentioned, and other memories also, have more durability and therefore provide a better criterion of my unique identity than my physical body does. I grant that my personal memories—such as that of the surgical operation I had when a young child—are private, at least as to my claim of their not having changed over these many years. But I have other memories of early childhood that are publicly verifiable. And even if I had none, what counts surely, at least for me, is *my* sense of my identity, not whether other persons believe that I am or am not the person I claim to have been earlier.

Grosso appears to believe that what he calls the “nuclear personality” will disperse or disintegrate when no longer held together by a physical body. I agree—and who could deny?—that our experiences will greatly change when, after death, our perceptions are no longer primarily mediated by the sensory organs of our physical bodies; but I do not agree that this will necessarily entail the dissolution of our nuclear personalities. If I may play with analogies, I think our bodies may act for our minds as a corset acts for some bodies. Removal of the corset allows the body to expand—but the body remains what it was, even though it has changed shape.

I seem to have a wider view of my nuclear personality than Grosso has of his. My dreams are not always pleasant and they are rarely as well organized as I would like them to be; most of them, I must admit, seem quite profitless. Nevertheless, the connections between my waking life and my dreaming life are obvious to me—if not for all of my dreams, at least for most of them. Plato said that good men dream of doing the things that bad men do. The nuclear personality surely includes both what we do and what we are inclined to do, but do not do.

Similarly, the schizophrenic patient and the patient with a febrile delirium seem not to be their “real selves.” Nevertheless, one can see—a trained psychiatrist at least can see—that the themes of a

psychotic patient's ravings are those of his main preoccupations when he is healthy. His mode of expressing his concerns has changed, but the concerns themselves have not. Similar changes occur under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. Grosso points out that these may induce amnesia, and I certainly would not trust myself to drive a car while under the influence of LSD. But having taken hallucinogenic drugs myself on five occasions (and watched their effects on many other persons), I can say with earnest assurance that they can also enhance memory for *some* events. In one of my experiences with LSD, I relived the surgical operation I had when I was about three years old with an intensity that I never achieve when I merely recollect this event in my ordinary condition.

I do not mean to say that, if we survive death, our perceptions of ourselves, as well as of other persons, will remain unchanged. To paraphrase St. Paul, I now see myself through a glass darkly, but will then see myself face to face. I think, however, that although after death I shall confront different aspects of myself than those I now like to dwell on, an essential sameness of me will persist. I shall be, as the Buddha said, both the same and not the same as I now am.

I turn now to two cases from which Grosso (pp. 377–78) draws support for the concept of a post-mortem dissolution of the nuclear personality. Grosso does not mention the cases by name, but I think I can identify them.

The first is the case of Imad Elawar (Stevenson, 1974, pp. 274–320). Grosso does cite elsewhere in his paper (p. 375) a discussion of this case published by Roll (1977), whose ideas about what aspects of personality may survive death seem to have influenced Grosso. Roll mistakenly thinks the case of Imad supports the idea that the streams of memories of two deceased persons may enter into a new physical body and there become confused in the mind of a child who seemed to remember two previous lives. I think that a careful reading of my report will show that the confusion about the identity of the previous personality in the case derived from faulty inferences on the part of Imad's parents, not from a muddling of memories on Imad's part; I made this point clear in several places in the text (see, in particular, pp. 277 and 310, and the comments to items 7–12, 15, 22, and 52 of Table 1). It is true that Imad recalled some events that had happened to Said Bouhamzy, who was a cousin of Ibrahim Bouhamzy, the person whose life Imad seemed to remember. He may, additionally, have been a little befuddled concerning what had happened to Said and what had happened to Ibrahim. Yet even though Imad remembered, somewhat confusedly, a few events that had happened to Said Bouhamzy, this

does not justify us in saying that he had Said Bouhamzy's memories. It seems more likely that what Imad had were Ibrahim Bouhamzy's memories of events that had happened to Said Bouhamzy during Ibrahim's lifetime. If I survive death, reincarnate, and remember important events in the life of one of my cousins, no one should therefore conjecture that my cousin and I have merged post-mortem.

Roll also cited a personal communication from me about the belief among some Eskimoes and Burmese that the soul can split and reincarnate in two or more physical bodies. Some Eskimoes and Burmese do indeed believe this, as do some Tibetans and Nigerians. But belief and evidence are very different. In the cases I have investigated in which there were, so to speak, two subjects as candidates for the same previous personality, the conflict has always developed because one or more wrong candidates were put forward on the basis of inadequate evidence. This is not to say that personalities cannot split as Roll and Grosso would like to think they may. But, as of now, no one should claim support for this idea from any actual case, at least from any among those that I have investigated.

The second case to which Grosso refers must, I think, be that of Suleyman Andary (Stevenson, 1973, pp. 244-266). Suleyman recalled the previous life of Abdallah Abu Hamdan, who had lived in Gharife, Lebanon, a village about 30 kilometers from Suleyman's village of Falougha. Suleyman went to Gharife at the age of 13 and there recognized one of Abdallah's houses. However, he failed to recognize Abdallah's widow, Zehna. Contrary to providing evidence for the survival of only fragments of Abdallah's personality, this case neatly illustrates my point about the inadequacy of the physical body as a means of verifying a person's identity. Abdallah died in about 1942; Suleyman was born in 1954 and visited Gharife for the first time when he was 13 years old in 1967. So 25 years had elapsed since Abdallah's death. The house had changed little in appearance, but Zehna had become wizened with old age. (I met her myself less than two years after Suleyman did.) This incident clearly shows the hazards of relying on one's physical body as evidence of one's identity. Let us imagine that, soon after Abdallah's death, some frightful epidemic killed all the other villagers of Gharife, except Zehna, who somehow managed to live on in Gharife, alone. Then let us imagine further that more than 25 years later children who claimed to have lived and died in Gharife, and been reborn, were brought back there for recognition tests. None of them, however, could recognize Zehna. Would that mean that she also had not survived the epidemic? This fantasy obviously resembles Washington Irving's tale of Rip van Winkle; but consid-

ering the troubles he had in establishing his identity among old friends after an absence of only 20 years in one life, we can see how much more difficult proving one's existence might be after a change of physical bodies, if we rely on them as indices of identity.

Grosso also implies (p. 370) that our sense of personal identity would crumble if it were not supported by our interactions with the external world; this idea, however, receives no substantiation from the remarks of those subjects of cases of the reincarnation type who have commented on the strangeness of the physical bodies in which they found themselves as young children. The children who do this leave no doubt that the memories they have of the previous life are just as much part of themselves as are the memories of events that happened after their birth in the present life; and therefore they have a conviction of an identity that has continued from one life to another. And yet they are aware, often painfully so, of a difference in the two physical bodies that they claim to have had. They often remark—and sometimes grumble—about the small bodies in which they feel confined. It is not uncommon for them to preface a remark about the previous life with the phrase: "When I was big." When I consider what this and some other features of these cases imply about post-mortem existence, I find myself thinking that death may be less of a shock to me than rebirth.

I wish to conclude by emphasizing that my concept of the personality that will survive death includes not only imaged memories, but conative aspects of personality as well. Some of our conations may persist unaltered after death, but others, as I pointed out some years ago, may change (Stevenson, 1965). I allowed for this in my recommendations for the combination lock test (Stevenson, 1968). Grosso refers to my suggestion of using a mnemonic (as an index to the combination for the lock) as a "relatively abstract type of memory-performance" (p. 375). This phrase misleadingly suggests that one's mnemonic for the combination might as well be nonsense syllables as any other word or phrase; but that is not what I said. I specifically recommended "selecting the phrase or word *first* and deriving the new combination from this rather than selecting the new numbers first and then finding a phrase or word to match these. The selected phrase would have special meaning for the subject and therefore be likely to remain longer in his memory" (p. 250).

I should add that Gaither Pratt disagreed with my recommendation; he reset his lock by first finding a new combination in a table of random numbers and then thinking up a mnemonic that fitted the letters corresponding to the numbers in the list of transpositions that I published in the article (p. 249). I still think that I am right in

this matter; but if enough people would set locks in both ways—some first choosing random numbers and some first choosing a meaningful mnemonic—our successors might eventually obtain with this test not only evidence of survival, but also evidence bearing on whether or not I am correct in believing that our stronger motives may persist after death long after we have lost our weaker ones.

*Part II. By Charles T. Tart*

I would like to amplify and reinforce some points in Michael Grosso's penetrating analyses of the possible nature of post-mortem states which appeared in the October, 1979, issue of the *Journal*.

The concept of *stable* personal identity has been implicit and central in many approaches to the survival question. Grosso is quite right in questioning this assumption. My own work with altered states of consciousness has led me to ask similar questions about the nature of personal identity in ordinary life. I now see our ordinary identity as being quite unstable when removed from its habitual patterning and stabilization processes. Some of these are: Feedback and stimulation by the same physical body, residing in and being stimulated by a familiar environment, and constant social reinforcement of our identity by familiar actions of others toward us. Further stabilization comes from the enormous degree of enculturation that controls our thoughts and behaviors so as to keep them within limited, familiar ranges. Altering these stabilization processes is an essential step in inducing altered states of consciousness (Tart, 1974).

In postulating my theory of Emergent-Interactionism (Tart, 1979), these considerations were implicit, although not explicitly applied to the survival question. I argued that the "non-physical" aspect of a person, the M/L (mind/life) system, interacts with the B (body/brain) system via psi in ways which change its "ordinary" style of being. What we think of as our personal consciousness is not an awareness of "mind" per se, but a systems-emergent of the M/L and B systems interacting. Our sense of personal identity, having been developed and maintained in ordinary consciousness, is thus heavily dependent on ordinary consciousness, ordinary B and M/L system interaction.

Some of the unusual experiences associated with altered states of consciousness may thus be experiences of "natural" characteristics of the M/L system in greater (but not total) isolation from the B system, as well as stemming from changes in the B system per se. Obviously, the permanent removal of the B system (and, via sensory input, the environment) as a patterning and stabilizing

influence on the M/L system could allow the surviving M/L system to change in drastic ways, and ordinary personal identity could disappear. Dying is thus analogous to the induction of an altered state of consciousness.

As Grosso notes, this creates enormous difficulties in trying to verify the survival of a particular person, for, in a very real sense, that *person* may no longer be there, but only some sub- or trans-personal fragments of the person. These fragments, in turn, are themselves in an (unstable) altered state, or perhaps in no stable state at all—but in continuous transition.

While these considerations might apply to most people experiencing death, there are two broad categories of people who might survive that transition in a more intact manner, and so be able to generate better evidence of personal survival. One would be people who have already “survived” (maintained personal identity during) a number of drastic changes in their lives, such as having experienced many altered states of consciousness, marked changes in environment, etc. They would have, as it were, “practiced” for the shock of death, and so be less likely to be completely “fragmented” by it. They may have formed more patterning and stabilization subsystems within the M/L system itself that create personal identity, rather than personal identity being exclusively patterned and stabilized by B system factors and influences. The other category of likely survivors would be fanatics, people who were rigid and monomaniacal in life. By virtue of having ignored much of life, having been unresponsive to the influences of the ordinary world around them, their monomania might protect them from the shock of death. They would not be very shocked by the lack of input they had usually ignored anyway. If one could somehow enter their narrow round of thought and feeling during life and persuade them that it was important to communicate after death, some interesting results might follow. In terms of research applications, having this kind of data about the pre-mortem personality might account for some of the variance in the quality of evidence of survival provided by the ostensibly surviving communicators.

*Part III. By Michael Grosso*

I wish to thank Ian Stevenson and Charles Tart for their comments and criticisms of my paper on survival. Stevenson’s remarks are primarily critical; let me begin by stating where we are in agreement. First, I agree that speculation should remain anchored in empirical data. Unfortunately, survival data are far from unambiguous and we are driven to speculate—sometimes I admit rather wildly—in an effort to make sense of them. Hopefully, speculation

will somehow lead to the formation of testable hypotheses. I believe my emphasis on possible nonpersonal aspects of survival sheds light on some of the puzzling inconsistencies of survival data; I also think—in line with some of Tart's suggestions—it can help to give rise to testable hypotheses. More on this presently.

Secondly, I agree that philosophers nowadays rely heavily on bodily criteria to make sense of the concept of personal identity. These philosophers—and they are by no means in harmony among themselves on many issues—seem to associate the parasitic relation of personal identity on bodily criteria with the logical incoherence of the survival hypothesis. I think that Stevenson and I are in accord in rejecting this popular view. I am unable to see how difficulties in the idea of disembodied personal identity argue against the survival of consciousness.

Where Stevenson and I differ is that he emphasizes the *importance* of personal identity, whereas I wish to call attention to its *fragility*. Stevenson exaggerates my claim. Nowhere do I say that the absence of a body “will *necessarily* entail the dissolution of our nuclear personalities” (p. 414, my italics). What I say is “that the nature of the ‘next’ world would make it extremely difficult to maintain the familiar pre-mortem personal consciousness” (p. 376). Stevenson admits that disembodied experience would involve radical change, but stresses the idea that “an essential sameness of me will persist” (p. 415). In place of a persisting “essential sameness,” it makes more sense to me to speak of a continuum of transformations of personal identity. Nor do I think this contrast of emphasis can be resolved into a verbal dispute, for at one end of the continuum I can envisage a drastic erosion of personal identity. At the other end complete transcendence seems to me conceivable.

Stevenson contends that the two cases of the reincarnation type I obliquely alluded to (pp. 377–378) do not readily support the hypothesis that personalities may “merge” in a post-mortem state. Since my paper addresses itself to the possibility of *mind-dependent* survival—relying heavily on the analogy with dreams—and not survival in the form of reincarnation, I really had no business citing Stevenson's cases as support for my thesis. Having made this concession, survival in the form of reincarnation nevertheless seems a poor candidate for the preservation of personal identity. Suppose, as Stevenson's work suggests is sometimes the case, that a person A has verifiable memories which apparently belonged to a previous incarnate personality B. Does this entitle us to say that A and B are the “essentially same” person? Suppose, for example, I have veridical memories suggesting I am the reincarnation of a former Jersey City mayor—a notorious embezzler of

public funds. Does it follow I am responsible for his crimes and deserve to be placed in jail to finish serving his sentence? (Assume the mayor expired before his term was up.) For if I am essentially the same person as the mayor, doesn't it follow that I am responsible for the acts he/I performed?

Stevenson says: "When I shave in the morning and look at my face in the mirror, I do not say to myself—even casually—'Here I am still'" (p. 413). Nonetheless, I can make up a story (one that is apposite to the problem of reincarnation) where I can imagine cause for genuine puzzlement in Stevenson's mirror example. Imagine, for example, that I wake up one morning, go to the mirror to shave, and see the body of punk rock star, Blondie. (A mad neurosurgeon is on the loose who likes to transplant the brains of metaphysicians.) Having recovered from the shock, I remain poised and insist to myself that I know who I am. When, however, I stroll into my morning class and begin to discourse on the meaning of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, I find I produce a most disconcerting hubbub. Later in the day I am forcibly swept into a limousine by Blondie's irate and befuddled agent. We could pursue this fantasy in numerous directions. It would be difficult, in any event, to maintain unbroken personal identity. Of course there would be continuity, but the transformations would be no less catastrophic. At some point the essential sameness of me would begin to acquire a deeply altered complexion. By what criteria would I decide who I "really" was? How much of the decision would be arbitrary?

According to Stevenson, memory (and conation) determine the continuity of personal identity. Does it follow then (focusing upon the memory criterion) that I remain the essential me only as long as, or during the time that, I have memories of some aspect of myself? In that case only a few children survive through reincarnation—unless you want to posit nonconscious memories that somehow constitute our identity. Moreover, when the memories fade—and apparently they do not usually last very long—survival is at an end. My own feeling is that the process of reincarnation would tend to obscure the continuity of personal identity—as a result of being immersed in a new bodily organism. One might be tempted to say that reincarnation necessitates this oblivion to previous personal identity. This may indeed be what is behind the Platonic myth of the reborn soul having first to be washed in the river of Lethe or Forgetfulness. In both Eastern and Platonic thought one maintains Identity of Self by avoiding reincarnation and with it bondage to lower forms of personal identity.

Stevenson suggests he has a wider view of his nuclear personality than I do of mine. For instance, he sees the "connections"

between his dreaming and waking life, and adds this interesting line: "Plato said that good men dream of doing the things that bad men do." But in a mind-dependent world, the distinction between dreaming and doing would dissolve, and thus good men would become the bad men they latently are. If this sort of dialectic were operative in post-mortem existence, I cannot help feeling that by contrast my present personality structure is at best a biologically convenient but in the end transient construct. The slippery boundaries of personal identity that I envisage in a mind-dependent post-mortem world are related to the difficulty of locating the source of psi in most this-worldly experiences. In part the disagreement with Stevenson is a matter of emphasis and phrasing. Stevenson defines the nuclear personality more elastically than I do.

What I want to stress is that survival need not be an all-or-nothing affair in terms of the familiar personality structure of everyday life. Conditions may vary, allowing for greater degrees of persistence of different aspects of that structure. At one end of the continuum it seems plausible to suppose that consciousness survives with the barest minimum, or even no trace whatsoever, of the former personality. This radical transformation is indeed what some Eastern traditions claim is the goal of spiritual disciplines: the "drop" of personality merging in the "shining sea" of consciousness. Western religions, on the other hand, tend to stress the uniqueness of the created soul. In the long run—if it is true that all things converge at the summit—I doubt if these views need be seen as discordant. I incline toward the Eastern view of Self which puts an accent on the impermanence of things, including the glories and foibles of our earthbound personalities. Permanent structures seem to me the constructs of anxiety-ridden intellect. To paraphrase Cervantes: the road, and not the inn, is reality. Notwithstanding all this, Stevenson has a point: will we still possess the thread of Ariadne as we wander through post-mortem labyrinths of transformation? Will we at points in our post-mortem journey be able to look back and laugh at the follies of the terrestrial phase of our existence?

My comments were not meant to imply that Stevenson's combination lock test might not yield evidence for survival. My reservations boil down to the feeling that I would not be surprised if the results of the test were poor, especially for the "untrained" subject. I think we have to look more closely into the conditions that would facilitate this possible interaction. In the future, more care might be taken in trying to set up *dispositions* to have the desired type of other-worldly interaction that yields significant data, *but during the lifetime of participants in the experiment*. We know next to nothing of what those dispositions are. But I think it is plain

that for the unprepared person, altered states—for instance, death—might wreak havoc on certain higher functions of the personality such as memory and the will. Stevenson's idea that the lock number be encoded in a phrase rich with personal associations might work; yet without some special preparation, I remain skeptical of the ability to retain even the most intimate memories, especially if they are verbally encoded. Consider the case of Imad Elawar that Stevenson cites above. Imad seems to have recalled details of the previous life of Ibrahim Bouhamzy. But Imad failed to recall what would have been his own first name, "Ibrahim," nor did he, when confronted with her in Khriby, recognize the mother of Ibrahim—his own mother in the alleged previous incarnation. Now it is true that these memory losses were sustained as a result (let us assume) not only of the shock of death, but of the shock of being reborn. Nonetheless, the facts scarcely support the idea of the nuclear personality surviving intact.

With these difficulties in mind, however, we might be able to predict more accurately the better sources of survival evidence. As Tart suggests, we can form predictions of personality-types most likely to give the strongest evidence for survival—for instance, cases where the shock of death does not disintegrate the personality. A possible example would be the person practiced at undergoing altered states. In fact, there are eye-witness reports of Zen masters and yogis who apparently predict the exact time of their death and who, after due ritual ablutions, enter voluntarily into an altered state and make their quiet exits from this world. Such well-rehearsed, smooth transitions would minimize the shock and thus allow continuing memories and conations to function efficiently in the after-death state. I think we could predict that individuals practiced in the art of altered states would perform better at the combination lock test—that is, provided we could get them to commit themselves to the experiment. Reports of near-death experience indicate that death may be conducive to loss of interest in this-worldly matters. For the average subject the novelty of release, the new-found euphoria, would appear to be impediments to functioning with concern for the living. We might expect more efficient cooperation from individuals who are experienced travelers in the hinterlands of altered states. In this way, I might add, survival research could provide an exciting avenue to the interface between parapsychology and transpersonal psychology.

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