

Essay

The Mask of Eternity The Quest for Immortality and the Afterlife *

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“To himself everyone is immortal; he may know that he is going to die,
but he can never know that he is dead.” (Samuel Butler, 1835-1902)

“The idea of immortality, that like a sea has ebbed and flowed in the human heart, with its countless waves of hope and fear, beating against the shores and rocks of time and fate, was not born of any book, nor of any creed, nor of any religion. It was born of human affection, and it will continue to ebb and flow beneath the mists and clouds of doubt and darkness as long as love kisses the lips of death.

It is the rainbow — Hope, shining upon the tears of grief.”
(Robert G. Ingersoll, “The Ghosts”, 1876 Lecture)

Background

We tend to imagine that we emerge from and return to a non-existent Source. From the time of the Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon, notions of *living* ancestry and some sort of afterlife have permeated the psyche and culture of Homo sapiens. Research into cross-cultural burial practices and propitiatory rituals, including sacrificial death, has been interpreted to indicate beliefs in a netherworld existence, populated by nature spirits and ancestors.

Trance, hypnosis, and psychoactive plants can produce experiences of a plenum or void, interpreted as a separate reality with spiritual attributes. The nature and locale of such a netherworld and afterlife remains the object of speculation, despite ghostly phenomena. Each culture has had its answer throughout the ages. Such absolute space has been equated with the groundstate of primordial mind and virtual light beyond the phenomenal.

Altered states and dreams gave rise to the notion that the stone cold abyss is an underworld of the dead – or an Elysian field. Then, as now, mortuary rituals helped the living endure separation. The afterlife says more about our imaginal and conceptual ideas about it than its literal reality as a physical or transcendental realm.

We still speculate on *life that persists after death* and how or what that might mean, in

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spiritual, psychological, and scientific terms. This is not mere semantics or metaphysical narrative. A world seen through the lens of divine order is very different from one rooted in self-organizing chaos and complexity. Physical law and divine agency continue to quarrel in our unconscious minds, which retain archaic beliefs.

Even if “consciousness” persists as a category or property, which is doubtful, it is not *ours* in any sense, despite theories of panpsychism and panprotopsychism. Even if consciousness is a primordial feature of the universe, such proto-consciousness bears no resemblance to our individuality. So, our theoretical continuance remains moot, being a return to the profoundly undifferentiated state. The conundrum remains a labyrinth in which we battle with the mortality Minotaur.

Our unconscious psyche always retains these more primordial levels of belief. Marie-Louise von Franz (1987) notes, "It is in fact true, as Jung has emphasized, that the unconscious psyche pays very little attention to the abrupt end of bodily life and behaves as if the psychic life of the individual, that is, the individuation process, will simply continue. ... The unconscious ‘believes’ quite obviously in a life after death" (p. ix).

All speculation about after-death conditions remains more philosophical than scientific, even when mired in the philosophy of science or the psychology of scientists. We needn't be atheists, existentialists, or nihilists to notice the phenomenology where we find it. We must distinguish between an ontological afterlife and imaginal fantasies of an afterlife, and the epistemology of such metaphors.

A parade of historical afterlife beliefs demonstrates that old ideas of the hereafter or land of the dead do not die as easily as its presumed inhabitants. Not content with historical versions of such notions, pop culture continues to mash-up faddish ideas and concoct new notions. Such idiosyncratic ideas are infused with pop science often compounded from contradictory or misinterpreted physics theories.

Traditional and iconoclastic ideas clash. The dead in this way eternally haunt us as we contemplate our own unavoidable future. Some might say it scares the hell out of us, but it may also scare the “heaven” in. Even those in the rational professions are not exempt from irrational ideas. Claims of *proof* are premature at best, and spurious. But, as they say with reference to the creative power of fear: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” In this sense, we dig our own philosophical grave.

A plethora of theories from consciousness studies and transpersonal psychologies, rooted in eastern and western cultures has compounded the situation, which is not confined to the esoterics of theological discussion. As ever, we are left with more questions than answers, all of which are strongly rooted in worldview rather than hard facts. Self-indulgent hypotheses abound.

What we do know is that humans engage in a wide variety of self-soothing activities to stave off pain, fear, and insanity. Participation mystique, mystical fusion, is projected beyond death, as well as a living process that is a primitive relic of the original

undifferentiated state. It can be an unwitting identification with the idea of a thing – in this case, the afterlife.

Naturally, there are all sorts of sociopolitical, power, and authority reasons to promote specific ideas and requirements for admission to the hypothetical afterlife. The afterlife gets wielded as a weapon and reward or commodity in the war for social control, as a mythic not literal reality.

Methods of persuasion range from religion to torture. Paradigm shift is related to worldview warfare. Myth is about the past, things supposed to have happened beyond historical time, but science tries to predict the future based on the past. History is often confounded with mythology, as are the wellsprings of human behavior and fundamentals of our psychology.

Cross-cultural Descriptions

The east has its ancestor worship, karma and reincarnation, as well as Chinese alchemy of immortality in some hypostasized state, recounted in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Special priests and sacred texts like the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* describe the nature of the imaginal journey. Qabalah describes the emanation of all and everything from the “Three Veils of Negative Existence”: *Ain*, *Ain Soph*, and *Ain Soph Aur*. The Vedas are perhaps the oldest extant cosmological model.

Such descriptions don't match cross-culturally. We can imagine ancient shamans venturing into the heights and depths of human experience. Drugs, sickness, or trauma ignited the near-death experience from which legends and beliefs grew. Shamans became the mediators of such non-ordinary states, and later were replaced by priesthoods who controlled the narratives on the nature of reality, from the Dark Night of the Soul to Enlightenment.

The ancient Greeks imagined the underworld as cold and windy. Gods and heroes made descents into hell and returned with paradigmatic boons. The Christians imagined hell as unbearably hot and hellish, while heaven was idealized. The imagery is culturally conditioned as near-death experiences show. For example, Hindus are unlikely to meet Jesus in their tunnel of light. But that does not make such visionary states literal reality or more than a metaphor.

Artifacts of out of body experience and the human death process can be misinterpreted and/or idealized. Such disembodied experience can be heavenly or hellish. Todd Murphy (2015) describes the role of brain areas in such crises. This glimpse of an afterlife in either a positive or negative light actually says more about their own psyche and cultural conditioning than a netherworld. The limbic system can produce strongly euphoric or dysphoric affective and cognitive states, both verbal and non-verbal.

Murphy (1999) suggests that "the reason why some NDEs are hellish is that the positive affect that usually accompanies NDEs, out of the right temporal neocortex together with

the left amygdala, is replaced by negative affect out of the left temporal neocortex together with the right amygdala. If this were so, then it might explain how an NDE can be unpleasant, but not why it is so." He notes, such non-ordinary states can also be healing, mentally and physically.

Anything seemed preferable to consignment to oblivion (aside from eternal punishment). The Egyptians and medieval Christians sought to buy their way into heaven by virtuous or ethical behavior, which always remains culturally relative. The Jews, having endured the immortality obsessions of the Egyptians, still tend to leave questions of the afterlife (Olam haBa) to G-d. The Torah contains no clear references to it. Eschatological ideas only arose later, perhaps through syncretism.

Cathar heretics sought the afterlife through Gnostic notions of purification, perfection, and denial of *evil* physical materialism. The alchemists engaged vigorously in a psychophysical process of transfiguration to elevate themselves and matter. All suggest our aversion to the nothingness of nonexistence and yearning for redemption and escaping judgment. Maybe the whole point of such practice is facing our own death and darkness directly, to "die before dying," as Plato purportedly said.

Quantum Physics of the Afterlife

Science is the new religion. Some physicists first claimed that life goes on in the quantum state, and then others changed the narrative to the more fundamental domain of the virtual vacuum or pre-spacetime. But if death is an illusion, it remains the most persistent one. Scientists seek less disreputable theories of forms of persistence, but we must not attribute real identity to a concept, even when couched as hypothesis or theory.

Professor Fred Alan Wolf unpacked quantum physics for an afterlife in vaguely mystical terms. Such works popularized these notions with the public, whether they actually grasped the science behind them, or not. Their appeal was largely emotional – a validation of felt-sense and new age intuition. It produced "good parrots" rather than good science.

Such models are often based on state of the art concepts or technology of a society, which are employed as metaphorical structures for conceptual or spiritual understanding, rather than actual physical laws or ontological realities. The afterlife is one such boundary.

We cannot see beyond that threshold of death, but speculate in modern terms. The story changes as we push on the cognitive boundary digging down into finer realms of nature, but the *undiscovered country* remains the same. The map is not the territory. The non-material realm of existence becomes the quantum or sub-quantal domain. Wolf, in an interview with Rosen, (1998) states:

I believe that the findings of quantum physics increasingly support Plato [who taught that there is a more perfect, non-material realm of existence]. There is credible scientific evidence that suggests the existence of a non-material, non-

physical universe that has a reality even though it might not as yet be clearly perceptible to our senses and scientific instrumentation. And when we consider out-of-body experiences, shamanic journeys and lucid dream states – though they cannot be replicated in the true scientific sense – they also point to the existence of non-material dimensions of reality. (p. 246)

The “Open Sesame” of Subspace

Tom Bearden was among the first to suggest the threshold of death is some sort of return to the sub-quantum vacuum or scalar field of virtual vacuum fluctuation, from which we have never really been separate. We can see no deeper into nature than fluctuating fields of energy, which constitute the constant background motion. All that is, is in motion. But it is sustained by the ground state or *cosmic zero*.

Elsewhere I’ve written, “Passage of an electromagnetic wave through the vacuum leaves an invisible trace. The vacuum ‘imprints’ everything that happens in it. This imprint is electrogravitational; i.e., the imprinting process structures the substructure of vacuum spacetime [the artificial potential of vacuum].” Presumably this *imprint* constitutes the blueprint of our afterlife “existence”, which is non-existence, that is, fusion with the ground state.

Such arguments for continuance in the virtual states and hyperspaces are supported with notions of EM fields and negentropy, as well as reversal of the process of how nothing becomes something in a 4-D scalar domain. Notions of *zero-point* were popularized into ideas of a Source Field, from which we arise and to which we return. The empty space, absolute space, was again filled with imagination.

The Heart Sutra aphorism summed it up: *Form does not differ from the void*. Buckminster Fuller espoused a similar zero-point philosophy in his geometric model of the Vector Equilibrium Matrix. But such zero-point is not an inhabitable space in any sense we can imagine, though it models the dynamic transforms of matter and energy.

We seem to divinize the boundaries of our consciousness as we push them back from causal, to quantal, to sub-quantal domains. We use the technical discoveries of hydraulics, computers, or holography to amplify such notions. We can be pretty sure, at some level, that the divine is in no way limited to the latest discoveries.

Related ideas such as the energy body, field body, and holographic concepts of reality have been grabbed up by new age amateurs and conflated beyond recognition as cultish fantasies of Ascension, rooted in pseudoscience.

Mortality is possibly the hardest fact of all. Are such theories just another ritual of expiation for the inconvenient truth that we simply don’t and cannot know? Is knowledge of immanent death or preparation through meditation or other methods actually relevant or merely consoling in the veil of suffering we call life? We seem to die a more painful death than non-reflective animals. But even animals mourn.

Does nature recognize death as loss or merely compost? Even stars live finite lives and die. Much depends on our notions of linear and cyclic time, binding, and its transcendence. So obviously, the afterlife may remain more a comfort to the private grief of the living than any *reality* for the dead and their regrettable demise. We attempt to magically banish our fear and pain of not knowing.

Thus, we have a potpourri of ideas to accept or reject, none of which can ever be proven but may be re-contextualized or falsified as supporting theories fail. The human mind continues to rebel against the nihilistic notion that physiological arrest is a *fade to black* demise. It is our final condition, despite the facts of energy conservation. The body ceases to be animated by any “vital principle.”

Death enters the world with birth, surrounded from pre-history with taboos and fears. In ethno-medicine, retention of seed was one route to immortality. Many paths devised a non-material body as a vehicle for consciousness beyond the grave. Violent, premature, or accidental death is perhaps even harder to accept than a terminal illness or old age. When the vital breath leaves does a great spiritual force break open the skull to another domain of existence?

That is the question. Much depends on what we mean by simple words, such as *is* or *be*, much less questions of damnation, elevation, transmogrification, transmigration, or recycling. It begs the question, what if anything is reborn if ego is one sort of experience and soul another not always included in traditional reincarnation theories? Is it just another egoic control fantasy or palliative?

When it comes to the human psyche, we want to believe and such ideas have driven much of world history and the history of religions. A glorious afterlife has been offered up as a consolation for war and the vagaries of fate and destiny.

Is there such a thing as a “good death” or a “bad death,” and who makes that valuation (because it is certainly not the departed)? But is a *good death* really voluntarily offering our selves up to the gods, even when conceived as an act of regeneration? If death regenerates life, does regeneration cause death?

Neurological Models

Many phenomena arise as the brain and body die, as shown in reports of near-death experiencers who claim their consciousness persisted beyond their clinical expiration. They say, “I was THERE.” That is, they describe their disembodied consciousness as their experiential reality. Reports have been interpreted, measured, and evaluated from religions such as Tibetan Buddhism to sciences such as neurology and neurotheology.

Michael Persinger's experiments applying magnetic fields to the brain have produced classical alternate states, such as sense of Presence, suspension of time and spatial awareness, hauntings, even alien abduction. Such controlled modulation indicates the

mechanisms underlying many *spiritual* experiences. Temporal lobe epilepsy can also mimic such states as the brain misfires in a transient storm of stimulation.

A whole spectrum of non-ordinary experience arises in states of hyper- and hypo-arousal. They were described in the 1970s by Roland Fischer in a taxonomy. Stanislov Grof and John Curtis Gowan also produced such taxonomies, many of which have reinforced ancient and modern cultural beliefs in the hereafter.

Laurence O. McKinney (1994) suggests that many religious experiences are actually neurologically based and that death itself as described variously in many religions is a peaceful slow fade of consciousness as the mind unwinds – whatever *consciousness* is. He suggests we *experience* eternity in the last ten seconds of life (ironic as experiencing eternity in measurable seconds may be), due to anoxia and molecules such as endorphins that shape our reality.

He claims: “A major insight was that, in normal brain death, the chronology-creating pre-frontals fail first, pitching our last dream into timelessness while the steady return to near fetal consciousness as the brain dies cell by cell will dissolve us into a comforting forever, suggesting why heaven is so similar in all religions. Whether by the laws of God or the laws of cognitive neuroscience, we'll still end up in eternity so why fight about it? God's plan or good luck, it makes no difference.”

Is the dying brain in a heightened or merely altered state, downloading the detritus or débris of fragmenting memory? Such reality is based in the mind itself, a regression to a primal epoch of collective unconsciousness – the ouroboric fusion of undifferentiated infancy, described by Erich Neumann (1983) as pre-egoic wholeness. The cyclic serpent biting its own tail is a *feedback process*, a primordial symbol of immortality – the zero that is One.

Short of clinical death, death imagery mimics the therapeutic process of trauma healing. Trauma locks up energies in the body, and the self-image can become *frozen* and inhibit growth of the personality. This image can be deconstructed or liquefied, eliminating the old holographic pattern and returning all elements to a chaotic state. From this chaos, the new image automatically emerges in regenerated form. This death/rebirth cycle is healing, and may be the mechanism of the placebo effect.

But who can explain the unexplainable with either traditional or contemporary terms? Jung attempted to re-contextualize arguments of the soul by de-literalizing the religious notion and recognizing the middle ground of the imaginal psyche – a non-religious concept of soul as the animating principle.

A religious or hallucinatory experience at near-death is arguably no assurance of noncorporeal persistence upon demise. Not all NDEs have a positive valence, and negative stories tend to be under-reported in self-validating theories. Such reports tend to become more elaborate over time. That is, the imaginal psyche tends to embroider them

to suit our beliefs. In the gray zone, death isn't necessarily permanent, and life can be hard to define.

Psychedelics have been used to assuage fear of death. They demonstrate that imaginal death is really the discorporation of the personality – ego death. Yet *ego* is another mental construct. Such positive or negative experience is strongly correlated with “set and setting,” not to mention personal psychology.

Theories of mind and death proliferate. One of the most well-known is Tipler's *Physics of Immortality* (1994), with its Omega Point cosmology of singularity, derived from Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy. Parapsychologists including William Teller and Dean Radin (1997, 2007, 2008) have contributed throughout the years with various theories rooted in yet other theories of consciousness suggested by interpretations of physics.

Really, one must begin by stating the theoretical basis, whether the Standard Model, QFT, Many Worlds, String theory, M-theory, Holographic, Parallel Worlds, transactional, quantum cosmology, pre-spacetime physics, or other theoretical roots. Ontology, epistemology, and percepts remain relevant to those arguments and must be defined, including the human or physical basis of phenomenology experienced by humans.

Most theories are incompatible with one another, and some have proven to relate only to mathematical realities and imaginal dimensions that don't map onto ordinary reality. And we have to keep theoretical operators, such as scalars, dark matter and energy, within their own hypothetical realms.

This proliferation of theories about the immaterial within our own observable reality demonstrates that even physics is on shaky ground. We still aim to suspend time in an eternal state in our minds where death has no sting. But science reports that time processing is an artifact of the parietal lobe, which can go offline under certain EM effects, trance, or deep meditation, yielding a sensation of timelessness.

Tibetan leader, Dudjom Rinpoche has said, “Death: the mingling of the mother luminosity and the child luminosity: When the path luminosity mingles with the ground luminosity itself, at that instant one can free oneself into the absolute clarity. ... Great yogis allow the luminosities to arise and mingle in that space, bypassing Bardo projections. They become the light of life itself.” (source unavailable, from my notes)

Anesthesiologist Stuart Hameroff alleges, “Pure Consciousness is included in fundamental space-time geometry along with the precursors of spin, mass, charge. In fact, everything we see in our real world stems from patterns in the most fundamental level that percolate up to our level which is many, many magnitudes of order higher.” (source unavailable, from my notes)

We are left to draw our own highly conditioned abstractions and self-serving conclusions. Of one thing we remain certain: life after death remains the great Mystery, the Magnum

Mysterium, and a matter if not of personal discovery, of self-revelation, should any mote remain to acknowledge the subjective condition of non-existence.

We might concur with Jung (1955): "But when we penetrate the depths of the soul and when we try to understand its mysterious life, we shall discern that death is not a meaningless end, the mere vanishing into nothingness—it is an accomplishment, a ripe fruit on the tree of life" (p. 27).

Summary

Jung (1959) himself felt, "What comes after death is something of an indescribable splendor so that our imagination and our sensibility could not conceive even approximately ... Sooner or later, the dead will become one with us; but, in actual fact, we know little or nothing of that way of being. What do we know of this land, after death? The dissolution of our temporary form in eternity does not involve a loss of meaning: rather, we will all feel members of a single body."

When we are gone, only the ultimate question remains. Evidence that consciousness survives death remains elusive. With or without warm, welcoming smiles from relatives we may have loathed in life, it remains our obsession to know what happens when our screen-reality stops, and fades to black. Conscious immortality remains questionable. This writer remains firmly agnostic but enjoys entertaining wishful thinking.

Death is the greatest mystery of life. Buddha rejected the question as useless, according to Jung. Throughout history, it remains a source of wonder, fear, hopefulness, and puzzlement. We seek compassionate ways of dealing with this uncertainty that no discussion of entanglement or holographic memory can assuage.

There is little wonder we tend to fall back on traditional attitudes informed by simplicity, meaningful ceremony, and acceptance. It is something we cannot grasp at all, despite our conceptions of time and space and what might lie beyond them, even if some of our psychic experience seems unbound by spacetime. There is NoWhere to go and we are all going to get there.

As Jung (1958) said, "We are not in a position to prove that anything of us is necessarily preserved for eternity. But we can assume with great probability that something of our psyche goes on existing. Whether this part is in itself conscious, we don't know either. ...The concept of immortality tells us nothing about the related idea of rebirth or metempsychosis."

Even if mankind has fantasized about it for two million years, it is not self-evident. We can recognize our own existential finitude and may not benefit by shrinking away from the void of death. Thus, death may be the secret of life.

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