

Survival of Bodily Death
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Personality and Identity: What is it that Survives?

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As a psychotherapist with extensive experience with multiple-personality disorder, Adam Crabtree is interested in the question of what human identity is and how it is possible for it to manifest in multiple forms. According to Crabtree, the field of survival studies is frequently unclear when it comes to the issue of what aspects of our human identity actually survive death. Thus, in his presentation Crabtree looked at this tricky issue more closely. But before doing that, he first grounded his discussion in a review of the history of the concepts involved.

Personality and the Problem of Superpsi

Crabtree began with a discussion of the origin of the superpsi theory of mediumistic communication, pointing out that it has two components: 1) Superpsi Component. The medium is believed to have the ability to exercise telepathy, clairvoyance, retrocognition, precognition, and psychokinesis to such an extent that any information that is needed can be obtained to produce an impersonation of a deceased individual that is indistinguishable from the deceased person him or herself. These abilities were gradually ceded to mediums over time as experimental and anecdotal confirmation of these faculties grew. 2) Superplasticity Component. The medium is believed to be capable of unconsciously integrating information about an individual in such a way as to convincingly impersonate that individual. This component is based on the belief that human beings have an unconscious tendency to create stories, fables, characterizations, and even well-rounded personalities and dramatize those creative fabrications to the public. This ability is characterized by playfulness, inventiveness and an urge to dramatize that remains wholly unconscious to the medium. Crabtree pointed out that the histories of these two components are intricately woven together.

Superplasticity

The birth of modern Spiritualism in 1848 brought the age-old question of the survival of death to the fore in a dramatic new way: the spirits of the dead were now believed to communicate directly with their loved ones through a special breed of people called mediums. With the rise of this movement, the question of survival, which, in the West, had been largely a theological-philosophical one, now became strikingly empirical.

As an empirical issue, the communication of departed spirits could, of course, be called into question on empirical grounds. While there could be no question that the communications at stake were produced by intelligent beings, one might well question what particular intelligence was involved. Are we communicating with a deceased person or with the unconscious mind of the medium?

Many began to believe it was the latter. In the 1880s, Pierre Janet formulated our modern notion of dissociated centers of consciousness that can exist side-by-side in the subconscious mind and which in their more extreme form can manifest as multiple personalities. He pointed out that these dissociated personalities are intelligent (capable of understanding facts and events and making judgments based on reasoning), reactive (aware of what is happening in the environment and capable of responding to those events), purposeful (able to pursue their own goals and take action based on their own criteria), and co-conscious (existing simultaneously with each other and with the ordinary consciousness of daily life). While Janet thought of these consciousnesses as a manifestation of hysteria, F. W. H. Myers, from his experimentation with automatic writing, insisted that they are characteristic of all people and are at work in our everyday lives. Further, Myers held that our deepest creativity and highest spiritual aspirations originate chiefly from subliminal, rather than supraliminal sources. Myers also believed that mediumistic messages, although they might be from the departed, could just as well be the product of the medium's own subliminal creativity.

William James noted the phenomena of unconscious impersonation in the maxim: "Thought tends to personal form" (James I, p. 225). But it was Myers's old friend and mountaineering comrade, Swiss psychologist Theodore Flournoy, who pushed the notion of mediumistic messages as playful, creative subliminal creativity to the utmost, stating that mediums could unconsciously use their telepathic and clairvoyant ability to create convincing but manufactured messages from the other side. This first true formulation of what we now call the "superpsi" explanation for mediumistic phenomena is found in Flournoy's book *Spiritism and Psychology* (1911). However, says Crabtree, since certain minor aspects were not yet articulated, we may for our purposes, call his formulation the "proto-superpsi" explanation, reserving the term "superpsi" or "super-ESP" to the formulations of Gardner Murphy, Hornell Hart, and more recently Alan Gauld and Stephen Braude.

Superpsi

Crabtree pointed out that the proto-superpsi theory formulated by Flournoy influenced subsequent discussions of the source of mediumistic communications. E. R. Dodds built on Flournoy's ideas, developing further the part played by telepathy in the process. Gardner Murphy then augmented Dodds' (telepathically oriented) proto-superpsi idea and moved us into the era of superpsi proper by adding two new supposed faculties used by the medium in unconscious personation: precognition and retrocognition.

It was Hornell Hart who, in 1959, first used the term "super-ESP," writing: "the dramatizing power of the unconscious, making use of a comprehensive form of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and retrocognition (which I shall call super-ESP) may create pseudo spirit personalities, which convince wishful believers, but which give no genuine evidence of survival beyond bodily death."

Survival and Continuity

Crabtree then raised the question of how we can talk meaningfully about all these issues. Specifically, what would it actually mean to survive death. We must each ask: What would my experience after the death of my body have to be in order for me to have a sense that I survived death, that what I knew as myself before death I still know as myself afterwards. How am I to understand my identity and the identity of my surviving self?

This raises another crucial question: If somehow I survived death but never knew that I did so and never knew that I have lived, could I in any sense consider that my identity survived death? The reality of surviving must involve a continuity. If I survive death but never have a sense of continuity with myself before death, no memory of it, then is it meaningful to say that I survived death? Is there is true continuity between myself in my life here and some form of myself after death, if I am not aware of that fact? Some might say that my knowing of the continuity is not necessary for there to be an actual continuity. They would say that if I had no direct memory of myself existing in this world, I would nonetheless be a continuation of that individual who lived here and my survival of the death of my body would be a reality. Others do not see it that way. They object that to be a continuously existing individual who never has any sense of that continuance, for all practical purposes does not involve continuance at all. As a thinking being I must not only have continued existence, I must also have an awareness that continuity is it to have a real meaning for me.

This brings us to the question of what we mean when we say "I." Crabtree suggested that we can see something about this by examining our personal experience. He presented his own analysis in this way:

My life is made up of episodes. Situations come and go. Experience follows experience. In the process I change and grow. It is my "I" that remains constant as episodes occur. That "I" would be there no matter what the episodes. The experiences could be anything. No matter what I go through, something stands constant and unchanging throughout. That is the irreducible experiencer itself—the "I". Throughout these changes, throughout all the doubts, failures and successes, there is an "I" who has persevered. It makes no difference what my life has been, it has been mine and mine alone. "I," who was born into the world, am still here. That "I" is not the product of this life, but a centre of subjective existence that makes the notion of "a life" possible. From all of this it became clear to me that this "I" of mine cannot be assigned qualities, such as strong or weak or fearful or brave or adventurous or anything else. These qualities may belong to me, it is true, but whether they are absent or present, I still remain this irreducible "I". This made clear to me that the "I" that I am is indescribable. It is a pure subject and can never be the object of observation. Even I cannot observe my "I". I can only know it subjectively, as a subject. If I think I know it as an object, I am mistaken, for when I examine any quality that I attribute to it as an object, I realize that I am not describing anything of its essence. I am merely describing some aspect of my personality, not my "I". This final subject, this unobservable "I", is what I call the Ultimate Self. The Ultimate Self is my centre of knowledge, will and action. It is also the source of all that I am, including my physical/organic/emotional being. All of these things belong to my Ultimate Self, but are not part of it. Perhaps the best way to put it would be to say that all of these things are expressions or utterances of my Ultimate Self.

Implications for Research

Crabtree pointed out that in much of what he was saying, he was speaking from a philosophical/psychological point of view. He nevertheless believes that the issues raised are crucial not only for philosophers or philosophical psychologists, but also for empirical researchers. He points out that when researchers into survival communicate about their work, they are up against the problem of language. In reading the research literature it is often not clear that different investigators mean the same thing when they talk about a "surviving identity." For that reason, tackling the philosophical problem must be seen not merely as an intellectual exercise, but as a part of establishing the possibility of meaningful empirical statements about survival. Not that there must be philosophical agreement before experiments can be done, but that players in the investigation must at least have a clear idea of what the other players mean when they say "personal identity," "personal essence," "soul," "spirit," "surviving consciousness," "surviving self," "surviving mind," "ultimate self," etc.

Response and Conclusion In response to Crabtree's presentation, Richard Baker Roshi noted that from the Buddhist perspective what survives death is not our personality, nor our essential self, but our karmic intentions. Baker placed an emphasis on the intention and care that go into our actions as being central to the survival question. Baker believes that one's identity is rooted in the continuity of intention. On a different note, Charles Tart mentioned in response to Crabtree that it is important that we develop a scientific method for investigating the inside of human consciousness. How can we study people's interior states and experiences? John Cleese added that scientific respectability serves an important role because it acts as a cultural validation of people's interior experiences. In other words, we can take those experiences seriously if our culture values and validates them. In conclusion, although he advocates for the continued accumulation of empirical evidence for survival, Crabtree emphasized that current survival research should also focus on increasing people's experience of their ultimate self. When we tap into experiences of this kind, empirical research into paranormal evidence serves a different function in our thinking about survival.

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[Reincarnation and Survival](#) | [Non-Local Mind and Survival](#) | [Near Death Experiences as Evidence for Survival of Bodily Death](#) | [The Buddhist Perspective on Survival and Reincarnation](#) |

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