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THE A.I.P.R. NEWS

The Purposes Served by Believing in Life after Death *by Michael Barbato*

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The Purposes Served by Believing in Life after Death *by Michael Barbato* (pp. 1-3). *AIPR Advanced Certificate in Parapsychology* student Michael Barbato looks at a topic that occupies the attention of every one of us from time to time—life after death. He considers the reasons we believe in an afterlife, and to do that, he weighs up viewpoints from the world's oldest religions to modern scientific inquiry.

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Death is inescapable. This sentiment was expressed, somewhat tongue in cheek, by Woody Allen who is quoted as saying, "no one gets out of this world alive". Despite its inevitability, death is a taboo subject, to be avoided at all costs even by those at its threshold. Hendra described death somewhat metaphorically, likening it to a door that has always been there but never opened.¹ Toynbee suggests it may not be death that prevents us from looking, but what, if anything lies beyond.² What he is hinting at is our unconscious fear of oblivion. The thought of 'not being' is almost too surreal to contemplate; it is as incomprehensible as it is indescribable and, as Toynbee suggests, is more frightening than death itself. The French sociologist Philippe

Ariès re-sorted to analogy when describing this fear. "Men", he said, "are afraid of death the way children are afraid of the dark."³

While belief in a resurrection or rebirth was once widespread, the post-modern era has seen a dramatic fall in the number of believers, and with this comes an increasing horror of death. Try as we may our post-mortem destiny can never be known through reasoning, yet there is an enormous literature on the subject testifying both to the widespread interest and angst surrounding the subject. I will attempt to explore a small portion of this literature by addressing the following themes: (i) the purpose served by a belief in the afterlife; (ii) the nature of consciousness and the self; and (iii) the psychological and metaphysical conceptions concerning life after death.

According to Kellehear immortality is probably the oldest belief of humanity.⁴ He presents evidence to suggest that, as far back as the

early Stone Age, practices and rituals existed that indicated a belief in life after death. These include the burial of spears and food for the deceased to use in the afterlife and the building of shelters for souls awaiting rebirth. Clearly these beliefs did not arise from faith or doctrine, but through observing the cycle of nature and the experience of other-worldly existence through dreams, hallucinations or ritualistic practices, some of which has been depicted in cave drawings or passed down through oral history.^{5,6} According to Villiamy, "the ceremonial and burial rites of uncivilized man are the expression of what is, to him, the unquestionable and proven truth, that the souls of men are immortal".⁷

"In the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his/her immortality."

Thousands of years later mankind continues with practices and rituals not dissimilar to those of its ancestors. Most of these are found in funerary customs, but also include prayers for the deceased, and a set of practices (commandments) to ensure 'eternal life'. Despite the similarities there has, over the years, been one significant shift in man's understanding of life after death. Eternal life remains the hope of many, but there is, with the Christian and Moslem faiths at least, the belief that immortality consists of eternal bliss (Heaven) or eternal damnation (Hell). To some extent this system of reward or punishment also exists with spiritual traditions that teach rebirth. So, afterlife once seen as a "natural life transition",⁸ and as something to be embraced is now a potential source of torment that influences the way we lead our lives.

So, what purpose is served by a

belief in an afterlife, particularly when 'judgment' and the possibility of hell await us? Kellehear suggests that annihilation and loss of identity are our greatest fears, and that belief in an afterlife not only offers a 'life-line', but can also profoundly influence the way we live—"the values of altruism and sacrifice on the one hand and despair, hedonism and nihilism on the other".⁹ This view is supported by Boyd and Zimbardo whose research suggests that a belief in the afterlife is an "important psychological construct" that influences behavior and motivation.¹⁰ Put simply, belief in life after death has a profound influence on life before death. The belief in a transcendent future fills us with hope and fear; both strong motivational influences to accept mundane day-to-day hardships, abide by the law, and

to obey religious or spiritual teachings. On the down side, the same 'pie in the sky' bait has been misused by those advocating cultism, suicide bombings, religious wars and extreme forms of penance; all with disastrous consequences at a personal and societal level.

If belief in an afterlife offers hope and gives purpose and meaning to life, what about the increasing number of those whose leanings are more secular? Are they more nihilistic, hedonistic, materialistic, directionless, less law abiding and do they contribute less to society? If the answer to this question is 'No', then the contention that belief in an afterlife influences the way we live needs to be re-evaluated. Freud offers a possible lead. He states, "In the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his/her immortality. . . . [O]ur unconscious then, does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal"¹¹ If Freud is correct,

At My Desk

In this issue I'm going to devote my column space to making a special announcement on behalf of the AIPR, which has just launched its first monograph in a planned series. Monograph No. 1 goes by the title "Shamanism and Psi", which I have co-authored with Dr. Adam Rock of the Phoenix Institute in Melbourne. The AIPR now opens the doors to other contributors, and welcomes scholarly historical, theoretical, or experimental submissions on parapsychological topics. AIPR's basic aim is to present monographs that are accessible to the intelligent layperson. To make the editors' task easier, it is requested that contributions be made in the same style and format as "Shamanism and Psi", which is being sent to many parapsychologists worldwide free-of-charge. In particular, manuscripts should be between 20,000 and 25,000 words. AIPR asks that you pay attention to the citation and referencing style (i.e., APA style). Initially, please include a contents page, a sample chapter, a description of the work, and the reasons why your manuscript would make a contribution to knowledge. Manuscripts are peer-reviewed so authors must be prepared to address comments and make required changes to their manuscripts. Once the manuscript is accepted for publication, authors will be notified of a likely publication date. Copy-editing of style and content may be necessary. A contract will need to be signed by authors before publication of the manuscript. The authors will hold copyright on the manuscript, and will receive royalty payments for copies sold.

* * *

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—Lance Storm

The Purposes Served by Believing in Life after Death (cont'd from page 1)

then belief in the afterlife may be so deep-seated it influences and directs our lives irrespective of our stated beliefs.

For those who believe in life after death, the question that hangs in the air is, What survives death? Could it be consciousness? As vital as this latter question may be, there are more immediate and fundamental questions that need to be addressed before an answer can be given. They are, what is consciousness and how does it arise?

The difficulty in unravelling the mystery of consciousness was clearly emphasized by Susan Blackmore who said, "none of us can expect thoroughly to understand consciousness".¹² According to Humphrey, consciousness will require nothing less than a miracle of science or reason to explain. "How" he asks, "is the water of the physical brain turned into the wine of consciousness?"¹³

David Chalmers has divided the problems of consciousness into easy and hard.^{14,15} In the hard category he includes the *experience* (his emphasis) of consciousness—an aspect of consciousness he says will require a kind of theory that is still out of our reach.¹⁴ Chalmers uses the experience of intense emotion or something as simple as the smell of coffee to illustrate the hard problem.¹⁵

The difficulties in attempting to resolve these aspects of consciousness have been endlessly detailed by Chalmers,^{15,16} Damasio,¹⁷ Stokes,¹⁸ and others. Rather than deter researchers, however, the challenge has instead brought forward numerous hypotheses that are as mind boggling as they are diverse. Damasio says the real issue is not with the "seen" or the "thought" (the easy problems) but with the "seer" and the "thinker".¹⁹ He goes on to hypothesize that the sense of self is a by-product of consciousness, "a special kind of feeling [that] happens in an organism in the act of interpreting an object".²⁰ This interpretation accords well with the views of Ramachandran, and both authors, like many others, conclude that consciousness, in all its manifestations ceases to exist with death of the physical body.²¹

The teaching of Buddhism and Hinduism, while complex and confusing, maintain that the sense of self—the subjective nature of consciousness—is an illusion and, along with its contents, does not survive death. Pure consciousness—defined in Hinduism as "identical with all consciousness, including that of the world soul or Brahman"—is, however, said to survive.²² Because of its ethereal nature, descriptors like "formless" and "unknowable",²³ "present and aware but devoid of content",²⁴ have been used to describe pure consciousness.

The ultimate fate of pure consciousness differs slightly from one Eastern tradition to another, but Buddhism and Hinduism both teach that pure consciousness passes through successive rebirths until Nirvana, or its equivalent, is attained.²⁵ Ramachandrin,²⁶ Damasio,²⁷ Blackmore,²⁸ and Dennett (see Schneider)²⁹ all reject this possibility. Stokes, however, favours the existence of a non-physical, non-reflective self that survives death and partakes in re-birth.³⁰ The problem he goes on to explore is whether each of us is endowed with not one pure consciousness, but many.

Using the examples of multiple personality disorder, blind sight, split brain and even dolphins, Stokes proposes multiple selves each occupying different regions of the brain.³¹ He

"NDEs, OBE's, deathbed visions, and after-death communication are considered by some as proof of life after death"

goes on to say these 'selves' may or may not interact with each other and may not occupy just one site during the life time of the individual. The question he poses, is which one (or more) of these selves survives death? Storm (2006) resorts to the following pun in order to describe this surreal concept, "[Stokes] presents a mind-field of selves, or do I mean mine-field?"³²

Christianity and Islam have not explored the nature and fate of consciousness to the same degree as the East, and their beliefs are still embedded in archaic belief systems.³³ The Christian stance is best summarized by McDannell and Lang who state, "There is no basic Christian teaching, but an unlimited amount of speculation".³⁴ The same appears to be true of Islam.³⁵

A cardinal tenet of the Christian faith is a belief in the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. Resurrection is said to take place at the last judgment when the body of the deceased will, in some unspecified way, be united with its immortal soul. The exact nature of soul and its fate between the time of death and resurrection is not clear, but is explored in some detail by Gowan.³⁶ While much of the present Christian teaching about the soul continues to have a fundamental flavour, mysticism has not been entirely forgotten and terms like "silent emptiness" now find their way into post-modern theology.³⁷ The similarity between this and, "divine emptiness" and infinite nothingness" used by the Zen Buddhist teacher Adayashanti to describe *self* suggests there may be a coming together of Eastern and Western minds with the

promise of a new and more contemporary approach to the mystery of consciousness and the afterlife.³⁸

Interest in the afterlife has been 'kept alive' over the centuries by way of stories, myths, psychological research and mysticism.³⁹ It was not until 1975 that Moody detailed the experiences of many survivors of life-threatening situations.⁴⁰ Their stories rekindled the hopes of believers and non-believers that there may be 'light at the end of the tunnel'. There has since been a flurry of stories, publications and ongoing research embracing paranormal phenomena, such as near-death experience (NDE), out-of-body experience (OBE), deathbed visions (DBV) and after-death communication (ADC). These are considered by some as proof of life after death, but they do not give any hint as to what nature and form this after-life takes.⁴¹

Based on descriptions given by those who have had NDEs or OBEs, Moreman proposes that "the weight of evidence suggests there is something strange going on".⁴² He believes the most likely possibility is a form of disembodied existence where the 'spirit' lives on after the death of the body. He hastens to point out, however, that it is not the self or personality that survives, but the "true essence of the self".⁴³ This view is consistent with Eastern teachings, but is somewhat foreign to many in the West. William James comes to the rescue of those that hope for a continuation of individual consciousness by proposing a theory that allows for individuality in the afterlife while not altogether dismissing the Eastern concept of pure consciousness.⁴⁴

The difficulty in interpreting psychological research is apparent when equally eminent scientists, unravelling the same data, draw quite different conclusions. Irwin, for example, says, "The validity of the survival hypothesis has yet to be established beyond reasonable doubt".⁴⁵ Using the example of an OBE he points out that a disembodied experience during life does not prove disembodied experiences after death. Irwin goes on to say that most psychologists, psychiatrists and many parapsychologists believe that an OBE is nothing more than a hallucination and, in support of this, cites the failure of research to actually prove the validity of out-of-body experiences. But how does one explain paranormal phenomenon such as near-death and deathbed experiences? Concerning the latter, psychological and medical causes are considered the more plausible, while the alternative—a mystical or metaphysical experience—has all but been relegated to the 'wishful thinking' basket. Ross

The Purposes Served by Believing in Life after Death (cont'd from page 2)

and Joshi propose a form of dissociation as the most likely cause,⁴⁶ but neuroscientists present evidence that suggests much of the deathbed phenomenology may be due to neurological changes associated with dying—this phenomenology is sometimes described as the last agonal throws of a dying brain.⁴⁷

Even as the evidence mounts, proponents of the metaphysical cause continue to state their case, both in the popular,⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ and medical press.⁵¹⁻⁵³ Their voices may be softer than those of their opponents, but many in the West prefer to listen to them, for what they have to say is much more appealing and satisfies this largely unconscious fear of oblivion. Based on current knowledge, the possibility of life after death is at best, unknown, and at worst, a myth. When one Zen Master was asked what happens when you die, he replied, "I don't know." Stunned, the questioner continued, "But aren't you a Zen Master?", to which the Master responded, "Yes, but not a dead one".⁵⁴ Perhaps death and the afterlife are beyond our 'understanding'. If this is the case (as it seems to be) answers may only come when we abandon the Western paradigm of thinking in favour of a

more Eastern approach. Ψ

Notes:

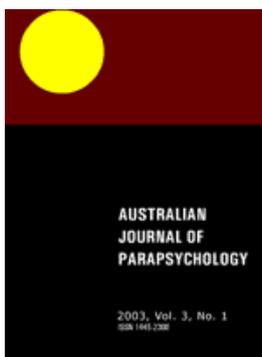
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(see page 4)

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- To collect, assess and disseminate factual information about claims of psychic (paranormal) phenomena.
- To support and encourage parapsychology (the scientific study of paranormal phenomena).
- To undertake or promote activities (e.g., fundraising, social activities, etc.) in support of the above.

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The Weird and the Wonderful by Hannah Jenkins

Keeping it Unreal: I applaud the fact that, unlike academia, film and TV industries don't shy away from paranormal themes. Neither do I, and unlike the academic reading and writing I do, I am completely undiscerning. I'll watch anything with even the vaguest paranormal tinge regardless of production values. In fact, when it comes to documentaries, it is often a case of the cheesier the better. A case in point—*Enemies of Reason vs. Weird or What?* The former is a high quality BBC production hosted by an eminent scientist. With all the expertise of a BBC production team behind it, you'd expect it to be an informed, balanced look at the paranormal topics covered right? But it leaves the viewer with a distorted view of the paranormal. Watch as the straw man arguments are built up yet again to be knocked down by the bemused host, Richard Dawkins (the anointed God of the uber-skeptics). Just look at all those crazy New-Agers/psychics/dowsers/astrologers, Ho, Ho, Ho! It is purely and simply a high quality debunking exercise masquerading as a reasonable documentary.

In sharp contrast the American series *Weird or What?* takes the viewer through a full gamut of Fortean delights without fear or favour: psychic plants, UFOs, reincarnation, ghosts, Bermuda triangle, fire-walkers—no topic is too arcane for this show. It is cheekily and cheerily hosted by William Shatner, once a Sci-Fi star and now known for his roles in various American comedy series, and apparently filmed on the cheap in empty suburban homes. Regardless, it is packed with curious characters and investigators, well researched, and thoughtfully written to provide a variety of possible explanations. Most important of all it doesn't poke fun at paranormal practitioners (easy targets for ruthless producers—see the dowsing episode of *Enemies of Reason* for a teeth gritting example). Even if William Shatner

plays on the title to camp comedic effect. *Weird or What* is a great example of paranormal-themed magazine style TV that has a long tradition stretching back to a show from the 1970s *In Search Of...* (also hosted by an ex Star Trek actor, Leonard Nimoy).

But there are even more 'budget' shows that focus on specific paranormal themes, and these can also be a source of great entertainment and elucidation. They come from some unlikely sources: *The Haunted* (produced by cable TV channel Animal Planet) or *Psychic Detectives* (made for CourtTV—usually the reserve of live homicide trial coverage!); a show in which both police officers and psychics are interviewed as they try to solve the same crime (shown in Australia as a summer fill-in for the science show *Quantum* much to the annoyance of the skeptic brigade—the manager in charge of programming received a Bent Spoon award from them for her troubles). The show itself won The Truly Terrible Television Award. In both of these shows, if you can look past the flashbacks to moonlit graveyard scenes or the sketchy recreations, you are likely to be pleasantly delighted at the plethora of stories of the unexplained that people continue to report and investigate. The stories are fascinating, and in some strange way reassuring. I am glad someone is allowing people to share their stories and attempt to find explanations for some of the weirder events in our communities.

When it comes to big-screen fiction there's another tension at play altogether. In this genre it is often the worst production values that provide the most distorted view of the paranormal. An example—the *Paranormal Activity* movies filmed using deliberately amateur looking film footage à la Blair-Witch-Project style. The movies start off fine—a perfectly normal take on families experiencing the unexplained movement of objects, closing of doors,

bumps in the night, etc. The first thing they do? Wire up the house with a security camera system (the footage then used to create the impression the movie is a documentary of a real event). But they quickly resort to the B-grade poltergeist movie antics of extreme PK (all the drawers and cupboards opening at once), and hints at demonic possession, a curse, as well as completely over-the-top and unrealistic interaction between the 'demon' and members of the family (including a scene where someone is dragged kicking and screaming down the stairs). By the end of the movie you are left in no doubt that the producers have gone for maximum scare value and minimum realistic representation of paranormal phenomena.

Why does this worry me? It's just a movie to watch on a Friday evening with a bunch of friends, get temporarily freaked out, and then forget. Isn't it good that the movie-going public supports such movies? Aren't these films an easy money-making enterprise, which in turn ensures more paranormal-themed features will continue to be made by the big studios? May be. Does it matter if they are fiction presented as *faux* fact? Well, maybe not. But I do think movies like this continue to feed the mainstream perception that paranormal events are unreal. And that's a real image problem which does a disservice to those who genuinely experience unexplained events, and those who investigate them and try to find out what is actually happening.

Which brings me to an even scarier aspect of fictionalized paranormal films—the representation of the parapsychologist. Starting off with *Ghostbusters* way back in 1984, films which feature parapsychologists usually portray them as eccentric misfits. Perhaps because it was made prior to the *Ghostbuster* franchise, there is at least one exception to this rule, *Altered States*, a movie starring William Hurt, directed by

Ken Russell, and based on Paddy Chayevsky's book. The book is fiction, but inspired by real research (John C. Lilly's sensory deprivation research and the use of hallucinogens to produce psi-conducive states), so it stems the brief era when it seemed the popular and academic interest in parapsychology was high. In this film William Hurt plays a jaded academic Eddie Jessup with an interest in parapsychology. Aided by his best friend Arthur Rosenberg (Bob Balaban), they set up a series of sensory deprivation tank experiments. Jessup's interest in psi leads him to Mexico where he eats psychedelic mushrooms, and later starts a series of flotation tank sessions where he experiences extreme psychological and physical transformations. Well, then the plot goes completely over the top and into the realms of pure fiction (he ends up turning into one of our ancient ancestors Darwin would approve of). It is a great movie though which leaves you sympathetic to the parapsychologists, and provides a realistic representation of some of the more classic psi experiments. Though fictionalized, the bits that could be real are similar to the reality of a period of psi research.

In more recent times, however, it seems the kooky parapsychologist legacy of *Ghostbusters* still looms large. Take, for instance, *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, a relatively recent movie partially based on real events surrounding remote viewing (RV), but re-situated, reconstituted and conflated to such a degree as to be an unfair and unrealistic representation of the real events. George Clooney plays a likeable RV'er, but he has a kooky persona that the movie-going public expects in a big-screen parapsychologist. Thankfully though, no matter what is happening in Hollywood or in the BBC cutting room, the people who do actual paranormal research kick on—keeping the unreal real. ♣



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