

The Ellard Collection

Life after death

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'Life after death' is an essay by the late Dr John Ellard reproduced from the book *The Anatomy of Mirages: a Psychiatrist Reflects on Life and the Mind*.*

Dr Ellard, revered former Editor of *Modern Medicine of Australia* and *Medicine Today* and a distinguished psychiatrist, wrote many essays in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s on society's most controversial and vexing issues. These were published in various journals including *Modern Medicine of Australia*, and also collected together and published as books. The essay 'Life after death' originally appeared in the June 1985 issue of *Modern Medicine of Australia*.

For true Philosophers, who are perfectly in love with truth and wisdom, never find themselves so wise, or full of wisdom, or so abundantly satisfied in their own knowledge, but that they give place to truth whensoever, or from whosoever it comes.

William Harvey, *De Motu Cordis*,
translated by Sir Geoffrey Keynes

At a particular time in my life simple inspection revealed that I had survived middle age. Therefore, I was informed by that most accurate of mechanisms – hindsight – and, when asked, felt capable of writing about it. Then my acquaintance with old age became sufficient to enable me to write about that time of life. But if one can survive middle age, can one progress further? Can we survive old age? No one personally known to me seems to have done so, and as my shadow lengthens my confidence in my own immortality does not increase correspondingly. Nevertheless, the scientific attitude requires that once the question has been raised, it must be examined, and in any case I must give an answer to my colleague's question.

There are of course many opinions about life after death. A Gallup poll¹ conducted five years ago in the US suggested that about 100 million Americans over the age of eighteen years believe that it exists. That number represents about two-thirds of the population; only one quarter believed the contrary. While my lack of confidence in immortality would be unusual in that country, it might perhaps be more typical elsewhere. Some 60% of the US population believed in the existence of the devil (a proportion surpassed only by 67% of Greeks) but there was then a large gap to the 38% of Norwegians who held that belief, and the proportion declined to 21% in Great Britain and 17% in France. Rather similar figures were obtained for the existence of hell. Interestingly, the correlation between religious belief and belief in life after death is not as close as one might anticipate, for in the US 22% of the Protestants and 28% of Catholics did not believe in life after death. There is, then, no shortage of believers but, as we shall see, there is such a range of beliefs to be considered that not all their adherents can have found the 'truth'. These days, mercifully, those claiming 'enlightenment' are less inclined to burn each other as heretics.

There is another reason for rumination. Most of us have had patients who, having been near death and then retrieved, have reported unusual experiences. I know persons of unimpeachable integrity and intellect who have done likewise, although they are not inclined to talk about it. One of them is a scientist of note. To those personal communications one must add the 23 million US citizens who assert that they have had some sort of experience of this kind; 8 million of them described mystical elements as part of it. Even if it is all disordered biochemistry there are still some interesting questions about it.

Facing up to the question for the first time, I asked myself



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* Ellard J. The anatomy of mirages: a psychiatrist reflects on life and the mind. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press; 1994. p. 117-125.



where was the previous John Ellard? Introspection persuaded me that a search amongst the righteous might be unavailing, so I turned to the list of convicts transported hither by the First Fleet. I was five years out: John Ellard, aged 22 years, arrived in Sydney on 17 September 1793, in SS *Sugar Cane*, transported for seven years. I do not know what his crime was, but he was convicted in Dublin, a city which in the eighteenth century contained those of my forebears from whom my surname is derived, so perhaps we were – or is it, *are* – related. I have no recollection of the voyage, and my life has been long enough for any stirrings of immortality to have made themselves felt well before 1985. In any case unbridled narcissism has caused me to look myself up in the telephone books of many cities around the world, and there I am proud to be found contemporaneously, and unconnectedly.

If names are not enough, what of names *and* appearances? My father, Henry Temple Ellard, bore a remarkable resemblance to William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury. Throughout his life my father, taxed with the matter, denied that he was Archbishop of Canterbury, full-time, part-time, or any other time. I have always believed him. The Ellards then, are a dull lot, unable to communicate with the dead, and without a mystical experience between them. It is not therefore from personal conviction that I pursue the question of immortality, but because it is one which has occupied many minds over the millennia, because if it exists one would have to think further, and because it should be able to be investigated scientifically. And as we shall see, it is.

Back from the dead

Our distant ancestors probably had to incorporate two things into their thinking. Perhaps the oldest and most universal story

told by men is that of the hero or god who goes from earth into some magical place, there to be confronted by perils and adventures, but in the end to be delivered back to us, often with a special message or gift. Sometimes the path to the magical place is by death, and the place itself is where the dead go; the return is a resurrection. When that happens the gift is likely to be immortality, either on earth or in some special abode of the chosen. It is perhaps 3000 years since it was recorded how Gilgamesh in his search for the plant of immortality crossed the waters of death and stood face to face with Ut-Napishtum. He found it, but a serpent stole it from him; other serpents in other gardens were to deprive men of immortality on other occasions. The adventure ended obscurely, but since Gilgamesh was able to tell of his conversation with the shade of the friend whose death had sent him upon it, he must have come back. Much the same story can be found all over the world. Immortality was not always reserved for gods and heroes – our museums house Egyptians mummified thousands of years ago and still awaiting resurrection.

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The second consideration would be derived from common observation. If you watch a corpse long enough, it is obvious that it is losing substance and that that loss is paralleled by the appearance of other living creatures – blowflies and worms, for example. It was once reasonable to believe that spontaneous generation of life had occurred and indeed there was the authority of Aristotle and Theophrastus to support such a conclusion. This belief remained a tenable hypothesis until Pasteur disposed of it in 1861; thus it represented orthodoxy for almost the whole of human existence. If humans turn into blowflies in front of our very eyes, then who can deny reincarnation? Further, the sun and the moon disappear, only to reappear; if Gilgamesh or another of a thousand gods or heroes can come back from the dead why cannot we do likewise?

There are, of course, some problems. From the point of view of a human being, reincarnation as a blowfly would seem to represent a drop in status. The opinions of blowflies are not easily obtained. One might suspect a cosmic justice: perhaps bad men would be reincarnated as blowflies, while particularly meritorious blowflies might be reincarnated as men. Perhaps, since time cycles endlessly, there are endless successions of rebirths, a terrible journey from which the Buddha showed us the means of escape. Some, like the Egyptians and Cretans, believed that deeds on earth largely determined one's elevation or descent, while others put their faith in ritual. This required the development of a group of intercedents with special powers – the priesthood – as in Babylon or Persia.

Varieties of souls

Other observers came to a different conclusion. If you see a man alive, and then dead, something has gone from him. This entity has been considered to have a number of forms. For example, Epicurus thought it to be material, and made of breath and heat: others were less imaginative and looked for an insect small enough to crawl out of a nostril. Another view, more widely held nowadays, is that the soul – for that is what we are discussing – is insubstantial and immortal. Further, one day there will be a resurrection of the body, so that it and its soul can be reunited, and live eternally. The nature of that eternal life is a matter of some anxiety, for the Christians, in taking up this position, added the uncharitable rider that they alone would go to Heaven, while all the heathens would spend eternity in torment. Dedicated cannibals present a complex problem, for their bodies are made of the substance of the bodies of others. One might have anticipated some acrimonious haggling on the Day of Judgment, as many lay claim to the same flesh, had not St Thomas Aquinas resolved the difficulty (at least to his own satisfaction) in *Summa contra Gentiles*.

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There are other possibilities. If there are indeed souls separable from bodies, then *a priori* there is no good reason why they cannot betimes go wandering about independently during life. Shamans claim adeptness at this activity, and also the ability to cause a transmigration of souls from one body to another. The Jains attribute souls to all objects, organic and inorganic, which considerably widens the range of imaginable possibilities.

Generally speaking, the peoples of the East believe that individuals are successfully reincarnated through different manifestations depending upon the merit attained in the previous existence, while those of the West look for a final day of resurrection involving not only the soul but also the substantial body. The innumerable permutations and combinations of both these systems of belief can be encountered, if not unravelled, in any comprehensive library of philosophy and theology. The ultimate necessity is faith.

Belief in some sort of immortality is, then, probably as old as man. More than that, it is the orthodoxy of the day – if numbers determine orthodoxy – and of great importance to multitudes of people. Indeed, if the nature of immortality and the rules to attain it were established beyond any doubt at all, then I venture to suggest that a number of us would change our ways significantly.

As ever it is best to stay with the null hypothesis that no person is immortal, or perhaps, in testable form that no individual has been reincarnated or, as yet, resurrected. What is to happen in

the future is a matter of conjecture and faith, so we cannot research that. There are also other hypotheses which are difficult to test; it is not easy to see how to enquire into the notion that particular souls become attached to some sort of universal immortal entity which is beyond our immediate perception.

The null hypothesis, as stated, is refutable. Produce but one individual, now living, formerly dead and alive before that, and we shall all have to think again. It would also be interesting and perhaps sufficient if some non-human entity were conjured up with most or nearly all of the attributes of a person who is unquestionably dead.

These are not new thoughts. Techniques for raising the dead exist in many cultures: it will suffice to say that the outcome of invoking them does not convince the sceptical observer. In the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century there was a great rise in the number of mediums claiming to speak to the dead, or able to assist the dead to manifest themselves. Some of them were proved to be charlatans, but others were quite certainly honourable people, endeavouring to research a difficult problem. Unhappily their work suggested that the dead spend their time at such pursuits as blowing trumpets, producing cold draughts and raising and lowering small tables: if indeed this is the case one wonders if the effort of communication was worth the trouble. I think it fair to say that the medium's activities – which continue still – have not been accepted as firm evidence by non-believers.

The necessary evidence

This brings us to the question of where and how one would look for evidence. Remember that in much of the world one is searching for what is regarded as self-evident. Every religious Tibetan knows that each Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of the preceding one and that they are all manifestations of Avalokitesvara in any case. Who needs proof?

It might seem expedient to start with the most frequently reported experiences: those recounted by the individuals who have died briefly, or who have been close to death, and come back. There is not only an enormous number of such reports, but classification of the data presented has produced findings of some interest. The difficulty is that at best the descriptions remain anecdotes – interesting, curiously alike anecdotes, but anecdotes nonetheless. If the travellers were to return accompanied by a celestial being, or with a miraculous object never seen before, we might sit up and take notice. No one has. Objecting that the experience is totally spiritual also ensures that it is totally unverifiable.

The investigation of mediums has already been mentioned. Intricate procedures have been devised to rule out not only the possibility of fraud but also the possibility of multiple personality and telepathy. Eminent personages, now dead, have left behind sealed messages so that their shades would be able to communicate them to us in some way or another. There are some curious and unexplained phenomena but there is insufficient evidence to satisfy most of us.

What then would be sufficient? Imagine that you have lived

in a remote country town all your life, and that you have grown up there with your spouse. The town is insulated from the world by distance and by the modesty of its attractions – no one would find a reason for going there. At the age of three years, your first child, a son, begins to speak a language unknown to you and to all the other people in the town – all of whom, in turn, are known to you. Tape-recordings dispatched to experts reveal that it is the Japanese of a particular region of Japan. As he grows older he describes that region in some detail and does the same for the family of which he was formerly a member. Uninstructed he begins to play the piano, a skill he attributes to previous tuition in that former existence. Disinterested scholars, despatched to Japan, verify all that he has said; the Japanese family identifies the tunes that he plays. They explain that the person in question died a little while before your son was born; there was a shooting accident. Your son has a large and complex mole at the site of the wound and as he grows up he develops a phobia of firearms. This is curious because you, your spouse and your son's companions are ardent shooters. As time passes, the details of his former existence become shadowy and unclear, as your recollections of your own childhood have done. Apart from the phobia, he has no sign of neurosis nor of psychosis.

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What now?

Needless to say there are countless cases like this. Most of them are due to faulty recollection, deliberate falsification, wish-fulfilment, multiple personality, psychotic distortion, the enthusiasm of journalists or some similar mechanism. Others could be attributed to telepathy, were one to accept the existence of such a process. Some are not readily explained, and a few approach, but do not achieve, the strength of the example presented above.

The problems of investigation

The difficulties in the way of the investigator are formidable. He or she is engaged in testing a hypothesis which many other scientific workers will reject without examination, on the basis that such things are intrinsically impossible. Their attitude is, of course, religious and not scientific, since it is a product of belief and not of observation. Cases occur all over the world and the investigator cannot be everywhere at once. In the East no one thinks of reporting them, for there is nothing unusual to report, while in the West many will keep quiet about such things in case they are thought to be mad or attention-seeking. The topic is a painful one, deeply embedded in people's needs and wishes and entangled with cultural and religious beliefs. Few

can be objective about it. The investigator may not hear about a case until the family has done its own exploration, and the data will be hopelessly compromised. The child's family may have searched for the family described by the child, found it and then there is no prospect of distinguishing fact from fiction. There are another thousand reasons why one might choose to research something else and almost every potential researcher is so persuaded.

We are fortunate then in that Professor Ian Stevenson, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville has spent some years in the careful exploration of this difficult field. His methods are the ordinary methods of science, his standing amongst his colleagues is unquestioned and he publishes in conservative and orthodox journals.²⁻⁴

So far he and his colleagues have studied some 2000 cases from 10 cultures. Some of them are trivial, some persuasive. Professor Stevenson's view is that of all the hypotheses which can be constructed to account for some of the data, that of some sort of survival after death is 'the most likely'. You will need to read his presentation of his own work, and come to your conclusion.

He points out that the specific hypothesis of reincarnation – with which he is concerned – does not stand alone.⁴ Were it to be accepted it would throw light upon such things as some puzzling phobias found in children, differences between monozygotic twins, the firm conviction that one is of the opposite gender, and other things besides.

Conclusion

There we must leave it. I do not know whether or not my colleague will receive my paper, nor how I shall communicate it to her if she is to do so. She is younger than I am, so we shall have to see. I remain sceptical but I shall not join those who refused to put their eye to Galileo's telescope in case it looked out upon some unforeseen and disturbing firmament.

None of the foregoing presents a problem to those committed to a particular system of belief, but what can the uncertain do while we await enlightenment? I have always been attracted to the story of the 500 white bats who lived in a cave at the time of Kassapa Buddha and who, uncomprehendingly, were caused to listen to two priests who occupied the same cave reciting 'Teachings of the Buddha'. Although they did not understand a word of it they acquired great merit and were reborn first as devas, and subsequently as priests. Now, perhaps a prayer wheel or two, driven by the wind ...

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