

The purpose(s) served by believing in life after death

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ABSTRACT

Across the world we are experiencing baffling instances which lead us to believe that there is life after death. There are events which lead to communications from dead ; people have seen apparitions resembling the lost ones; there have been occasions when someone comes in dream to tell that now you will not be seeing him/her and next day you hear the sad news of death; incarnation is surfacing from several parts of the world. Parapsychological researchers across the globe are collecting data on these phenomena and analyzing to explore whether there is life beyond death. However, from time immemorial, there has been belief that there is survival after death. This belief is serving many purposes in current life. This article tends to examine the same.

Keywords: Believing, Life After Death

“**A**ll the **w**orld's a **s**tage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”

The famous lines by Shakespeare give a traditional view of life and death; **entry** signifying **birth**, **playing part** means living one's life and the exit is **death**; the director being the Supreme GOD.

From time immemorial, mankind has been curious to know what happens after death. We are baffled by innumerable incidents which are reported across the world where deceased have made their presence felt to living people.

Krippner (2006), describes an incident when during his dream, his friend's wife “Spotted Fawn” says that she will not be seeing him anymore and next morning he hears news of her death.

There is a reincarnation case of Sharada (a Bengali lady), (Stevenson, 1984) who, is reborn in Maharashtra as Uttara. Uttara began to have apparent memories of an earlier life when she was in her thirties. These memories occurred during dramatic changes in personality, at which time she spoke, Bengali (Marathi was the only language she knew), which she apparently neither spoke nor understood in her normal state, and which, she apparently never had an opportunity to learn.

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The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

Grof (1988), tells about an incident in which Peter went on Scuba diving but did not return, his body was, also, not found. During a session with Grof, Penny (Peter's wife), reported an after-death communication (ADC experience) with Peter, who explained that he was, in fact, dead. Peter gave Penny specific instructions concerning each of their children and requested that she get on with her life. Peter, then, asked Penny to return a book that he had borrowed from a friend, giving Penny the friend's name, the title of the book, and the location of the book in their house. All of this information was correct.

These incidents are few of many across the world. These props up a question whether there is extension of life after death?

Belief of survival after death

In Indian Philosophy, it is believed that when a person dies, the soul (a subtle small invisible part in body) leaves the body and joins several such souls in universe. Soul is not destructible & there is no death. The soul does not die, rather soul changes its position from one body to another, in the way, a person changes clothes and wears new clothes.

Some of the souls attain salvation (Nirvana) which is the ultimate state when we become **God** when our souls merge with **Him**, the **Absolute**. It happens after attainment of a high standard of development in souls. It is believed that we keep taking births after deaths to raise the standard of development of soul, till the refinement process reaches the supreme state through deeds in the lives and realization of self. Till the stage of Nirvana (the ultimate state) comes, the souls keep wandering in universe in search of a body, enter one, live in the body till bodily death and then leave the body again in search of a new body. The Cycle of Birth and Death goes on, which keeps on changing the abode of soul till it reaches supreme state of development and then it gets merged into Divine God.

According to these Eastern philosophies, our belief in ourselves as a distinct individual is the result of ignorance on our part, and through a succession of lifetimes, we might become sufficiently enlightened that we recognise this. Once this recognition is attained, then the dissolution of the illusory individual is achieved, and the essential components of the true, inner self are revealed in a union with everything and everyone." (Moreman, 2006, p. 37)

Further, in India, there is a school of thought which believes that souls of people who die prematurely (before completing their cherished dreams or before fulfilling some strong wish during the life time), remains restless after bodily death and in attempting to try to fulfil the wish, tries to come in contact with the living world even before they get entry into a human body. It is in between this transference stage that we see the bunch of souls who are termed as "spirits or ghosts." They try to make contact with the living people. Such instances come to us as evidence of survival after death.

Religious books, Bible, Koran and the scriptures of Hindu, Buddhists, abound in ghostly tales i.e., dead return in form of ghosts to communicate with living (Crooke 1896/1968, Freed & Freed 1993). In the far east, contact with deceased ancestors has been a part of society for millennia (Cheu,1988; Emmon,1982).

The religions of different cultures have tried to deal with death--most have put forth a belief of continuation of life after death, e.g., Christian and Islam have developed a belief in Personal Resurrection in distant future (Moreman,2006). Greek pyramids are testimonials of belief that in future, dead will return to life and, hence, dead bodies are mummified.

The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

In 1882, the Society for Psychical research was founded in London, basically to explore the possibility that the human personality survives death and can communicate with living humans.

Subsequent surveys conducted involving thousands of Americans (associated press ,1982) and western Europeans (Goldman 1993) indicate that majority of them expressed their belief in life after death.

There is abundant literature in support of survival after death theory. Eastern religion believes in collective existence after death (Braude,2003) whereas western philosophy maintains individuality in after life. James (2002) talks about Mystical states where individuality is lost and we become one with **Absolute** and we become aware of oneness --- this resembles the Indian school of thought discussed above.

The survival theory suggests (Krippner 2000) that the communications with deceased happen through direct experience, or through mediums, who demonstrate their ability of calling spirits and communicating with them and, lastly, through memories of past life; i.e., reincarnation.

After death communication (ADC), the term coined by Guggenheim and Guggenheim (1995), means any contact between a living person and the conscious spirit or soul of dead. LaGrand (1999) referred ADC as spontaneously experienced contact with a deceased loved one.

ADC incidents are reported in surveys across the world; Grimby (1993) interviewed 14 widowers and 36 widows in Sweden and 82% of them reported experience of “Hallucination” concerning dead spouses within a month after death. Marris (1958) surveyed 72 widows in London and 50% sensed presence of dead and so on.

Krippner (2006) while discussing on “Getting through grief”, examines After Death Communication (ADC) from different perspectives. He is first amongst many, to study effect of ADC on experiments.

The survival theory captures beliefs of “survival after death”, however, it does not attempt to represent any research to find out whether, in reality, we continue our existence after death or not and their causal reasons. I have, still, not come across such research material and I am not aware whether it is being attempted. What is being attempted is trying to establish survival theory by summarizing findings from several surveys of survival incidents and also through philosophical thinking over this subject. Researchers are, also, giving arguments in support of survival theory or putting forward alternate theories viz super psi theory, Braude (2003), and Radical Survival theory, Storm (2006). I shall not dwell on them because they are not relevant to the topic because we are not debating the merit or credibility of survival theory vis-à-vis alternate theories but are discussing merits of belief in survival theory.

Does this survival belief serve any purpose(s) to our contemporary world? What psychological impact does this belief have on bereaved persons? Does it affect societies and people by and large?

EFFECT OF BELIEF OF SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH ON OUR LIVES

Let us first see how belief (on any aspect) impacts our lives--

The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

Impact of belief on mankind

We see and witness great impact of religious beliefs on people of different cultures. Muslims leave all work five times a day and face Mecca to pray; Americans make weekly pilgrimage to church.

Sentiments of people get hurt and cause violent aggression if something derogatory is hurled on their religious belief.

Look at mental thought process of a suicide bomber terrorist or a soldier who is willing to sacrifice his life for a belief. (Milgram (1974); Ross & Nisbett 1991).

Zimbardo (1969), suggests “Social psychology has shown that a strong belief of some reality motivates a person to do extraordinary things.” For example- to the extent of sacrificing his own life.

The point I wish to make, is that the beliefs do have tremendous impact on contemporary lives, not only, on the believer, but also, on others, who get affected by actions of the believer. Belief systems regulate our thought process and actions.

Impact of belief on survival theory

We shall, now, look at the impact of belief in, “life after death”, on people and shall discover purpose(s) served by belief in survival after death. Before we attempt this, let us shuffle through research, which puts some light on believers of survival theory; i.e., which individual or group of individuals can be considered as having a belief about life after death and how deeply they believe about it.

Degree of Belief (Transcendental scales)

(Boyd & Zimbardo, 1997) discuss Transcendental-future time scale. A set of four alternatives were put to a respondent and he was asked to relate to each of above alternatives viz:-

1) Only my physical body will die 2) My body is just a very temporary home for me 3) death is just a new beginning 4) I believe in miracles.

The respondent got score,

1. If his answer is that it is very uncharacteristic of me.
2. If his answer is that it is uncharacteristic of me.
3. If his answer is I am neutral about it.
4. If answer is that it is characteristic of me.
5. If answer is that it is very characteristic of me.

Thus, the score will vary between 4 and 20.

Evidently, the lowest score on the transcendental score would mean that the respondent is firmly against the belief of survival after death; and as score goes up, he goes to become neutral to the belief (i.e score 12, scoring 3 for each question) and then the rising scores indicate his growing belief in survival theory –score 20 meaning that he is staunch believer in survival theory.

Survey was done for 1235 respondents in which apart from above 4 questions, the respondents were asked to respond to other questions related to the personality traits, demographic details, their socio-religious beliefs and other values (they were asked to rank 14 instrumental and 14 terminal values.)

The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

The analysis of data indicated that persons scoring high on the above scale constituted youngsters below age of 20 or elders above age of 50 and women were found to score higher than men when measured on this scale. The study also throws light on how the belief of survival impacts people's lives.

Influences of belief in survival theory on people

Important influences which appeared coming from belief of survival theory (i.e from responses of who scored above 12 in the scale) were as follows:-

1. The belief serves as positive reinforcement in current life-Nirvanic beliefs about transcendental-future makes present inequities less painful.
2. Irrational acts viz cult members irrationally follow their leader and embrace death, they may not be ending life but may be, rationally, moving towards their transcendental -future goals.
3. Suicide bombers are not sacrificing their lives for a cause but for a selfish motive of seeking personal gain in after life ---here I want to recall a television interview, where a child aged 9-10 years of age, undergoing training in a terrorist training camp, is asked what great work he is going to do when he grows up. He replies that he is going to bombard a crowd and kill people. When asked what purpose will it serve --his answer is that it will lead him to a blissful / meaningful next life which will be full of enjoyment. Child's mind is tender and can be easily molded to any belief system. The belief of survival had influenced him so greatly on transcendental scale that he was willing to forego all material gains in current worldly life, and looked forward to eternally soothing life beyond survival. I do not advocate that intentions were good, but only, want to bring home the point that survival theory did have deep impact on the mind of child and he found a purpose in life which turned out to be destructive.

Next few paragraphs reveal some more purposes served by survival belief.

Survival theory concerning communication between deceased persons and living people i.e., After Death Communication (ADC), has had deep impacts on the lives of people who underwent the experience of after death communication.

Krippner (2000) narrates Surveys that indicate positive effect of ADC on experients of ADC after connecting with the deceased loved ones. Devers (1994) in his study, claimed that pain of loss of dear ones was greatly reduced with belief of survival after ADC.

Berger (1995) found that the experiments, who believed in survival could easily come to terms with loss of deceased and return to normalized routines. Drewery (2003) found from 40 ADC reports that experiments reported relief, comfort, hope, encouragement, forgiveness, love and joy when bereaved completed unfinished business left by deceased.

ADC experiences and adaptive grief outcomes were investigated by Parker (2004) who interviewed 12 people, bereaved for less than one year. As was the case with most of the other investigators, she screened out psychiatric patients and those with obvious mental illness. Of the research participants, 11 experienced positive changes such as personal and/or spiritual growth. Their ADC experiences appeared to have played specific roles and to have fulfilled specific needs within the context of bereavement, especially when they were considered to be veridical in nature. Parker concluded that ADC experiences were not a sign of psychopathology, but, part of human experience.

The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

Few counsellors, psychiatrists, and psychological therapists have used ADCs, in one form or another, as part of what has become known as “bereavement therapy” or “grief therapy” (e.g., Kastenbaum, 1978). For example, a procedure inducing “visitation” dreams has been developed by a well-known dreamworker, Robert Moss (2005). His approach purports to enable bereaved people to dream about departed loved ones, attaining a closure that was not possible while they were alive.

Arcangel’s (2005) collection of “afterlife encounters” was written to assist hospice workers, families in mourning, and other groups who had unanswered questions about the possibility of life after death.

Wright (2002) has provided a practical guide for people who are puzzled or even terrified by ADCs; some of her case studies involve an “emotional resolution” to those people harmed while the deceased was alive (Wright, 2005, p. 7).

It is found that after death communication instils a belief in survival and this belief in survival serves following purposes in the life of experiments: -

1. ADC gives comfort and reassurance that relationship continues even after death.
2. The experiments feel that they get protected from oncoming dangers because deceased could pre-warn them about the same.
3. ADC provided them a sense of life purpose and meaning.
4. ADC confirmed the hope that there is life after death; e.g., self is immortal and removed the fear of death.
5. Sometimes ADC helped completing unfinished business giving great relief.
6. ADC changed way of looking at life through reduced anger, guilt and / or anxiety against the deceased.
7. The belief of survival gave a good feeling that the deceased loved him/ her and had not forgotten even when passed away.
8. ADC provided information hitherto unknown.
9. Helped survivor to make his /her own exit from the world easier and less painful.

Furthermore, the most important purpose of belief in survival is therapeutic application of the belief.

LaGrand (1999) presented several ways, by which, ADC experience could be used in grief counselling. He emphasized that the critical view is not whether ADC can be confirmed or refuted but how this belief can be used to help people deal with the loss. Therapeutic approach, “Induced after-death communication”, is developed by Botkin with Hogan (2005). They advocated “Inducing” ADCs with the Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing Modality (EMDR), a therapeutic modality, often used to treat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Let us now look at another aspect from survival theory which influences our lives greatly. Freud (1915/1962) says, “In the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his /her immortality. Our unconscious does not believe in its own death, it believes as if it is immortal.” Indian Philosophy also talks about the inner self “soul” being immortal. Concept of “Immortality of self” emerging out from theory of survival has brought peace in the minds of people. We all know that fear of any kind makes us highly uncomfortable and the feeling makes us shiver. Fear is having stunning impact because we are anticipating something ghastly to happen which is not known to us. Once we become aware of the unknown, the fear

The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

loses its impact. The concept of immortality brings this awareness, thus, reducing the impact of fear and making us live life normally.

Mythological narratives typically address existential human issues and have consequences for behavior; they may be cultural, institutional, ethnic, familial, and/or personal in nature. Myth-making played such a key role in human development that Donald (1991) has called “scenario-building” the primary function of the human mind. Until science develops the technology to confirm or falsify the “survival hypothesis,” it is up to the experiments to dismiss them as “exceptional experiences” that are curious but unimportant anomalies, or to construct them into “exceptional human experiences” and revel in their transformative power.

As for the mythological narratives---the great purpose served by believing in after life, mythologically, is available in Indian Holy Book, “Bhagavad Gita”, which has become base of Indian Philosophy.

In ancient epic battle of Mahabharata, King Arjuna, seeing his own cousins and uncles in the enemy army, felt sad and disheartened and was not the usual brave self, because, he did not see any meaning in winning back his kingdom, if he has to kill his own relatives for that. He put down his arrow and bows and declared to Lord Krishna that he won't fight the battle, because, he won't be able to enjoy the victory over dead bodies of his own cousins and uncles.

Here came the preaching of Lord Krishna to Arjuna which is captured in form of verses in the holy book “Bhagavad Gita” and has become the heart and soul of Indian Philosophy. Gita has been interpreted differently by writers all over the world and people are greatly influenced by the philosophical interpretation of the verses. Each couplet has embedded philosophy and gives meaning to our life and death and registers our belief in life after death. Impact of this belief is great!

Essence of His preaching, which are pertinent to this article is summarized –

He preaches to Arjuna on meaning of death and life and cycles of life-death and death-life. He explains to Arjuna the meaning of death by saying, “Do not be deterred by fear of death of relatives because in reality there is no “death”. We are indestructible, our physical body perishes but not we. We just change into another body on bodily death in the same way as we, in our current life, change our clothes.”

He exhorts Arjuna to behave like a warrior (Kshtriya) and do his duty as a warrior. Everything is pre-destined, you have to do only your duty and not to bother about results or consequences because these are not in your hands. The fruits of your actions will come automatically and there is no use about worrying about the fruits of your deeds since you can't help it.”

The divine words on belief of “survival after death”, had great impact on Arjuna who is enlightened with survival belief which removes shock of thought of death from his mind and removes his guilt as he is not the doer of any act because nothing is in his hands and his life is only for doing his duty and not for looking for fruits of his doings .

The survival belief does serve the purpose and the Warrior Arjuna goes into the battle and proves to the world, the universal truth that there is always victory of good over evil.

CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the discussions, the belief in life after death does serve many purposes, some of which, concern the bereaved persons who get comfort by overcoming grief of loss of dear ones and continue their normal life. The belief overcomes the fear of oncoming death through awareness of immortality of self, thereby, makes way for peaceful exit during bodily death. The belief instils sense of purpose in life, gives comfort and reassurance that relationship continues even after death. Not only that this belief can be put to therapeutic use to alleviate sufferings of people from traumatic illnesses. It impacts large number of people and even impact various cultures, because the belief is a strong motivator for our actions and behavior. Last but not the least, impact of survival belief goes on to affect people en-masse through establishment of philosophies viz-Indian Philosophy.

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The Purpose(s) Served by Believing in Life After Death

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Conflict of Interest

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