

December 1971

The Parapsychological Approach to Immortality

W. G. Roll

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Roll, W. G. (1971) "The Parapsychological Approach to Immortality," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 8: No. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol8/iss3/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

The Parapsychological Approach to Immortality

W. G. Roll

As other parapsychological occurrences, those suggestive of survival fall into ESP- and PK-types of phenomena. ESP deals with transmission of information while PK (psychokinesis) consists of action on the physical environment. Thus, ostensible communication with deceased personalities through a medium would involve ESP and physical events coincident with or following a death, such as the stopping of a clock at the owner's death, would involve PK.

Usually, the parapsychologist is concerned with the question whether there is continuity after death for some period of time, and not forever as the word "immortality" implies. The phrase "survival after death" is therefore preferred to "immortality."

In parapsychology, the traditional approach to the survival question is to study apparent ESP and PK effects related to deceased personalities. This approach has been called the "postmortem method," in contrast to the "antemortem method" which seeks evidence in living persons of some aspect of the self which, on logical grounds, can be supposed to survive death. The postmortem approach includes attempts to communicate with discarnate personalities through mediums, the study of ostensible memories of previous lives in reincarnation investigations, and investigations of so-called haunted houses in which it is believed that a deceased personality has remained at or returned to his earthly habitat.

Most expressions of the survival hypothesis entail the supposition that whatever survives death is a property of or is in some way connected with the living organism. Consequently it may be possible to learn something about survival by studies of living people. In the antemortem approach, two areas appear particularly promising, namely studies of out-of-the-body experiences and studies of expansion of consciousness. Cases of OOB, also known as ESP projection and travelling clairvoyance, involve the apparent separation of consciousness from the living organism and the experience of occupying a different location in space from which events distant from the body may be observed. OOB phenomena, if genuine, may be relevant to the survival question because they too involve separation from the body of consciousness and perceptual abilities. Studies of expansion of consciousness are relevant for a similar reason. In such experiences, as induced by meditation, drugs and in other ways, consciousness is no longer identified with the organism but seems to merge with the environment. Such experiences reportedly result in increased ESP and PK interaction with the social and physical environment (ESP and PK phenomena occurring at such times may therefore be regarded as empirical evidence of expansion of the self). Experiences of this type sometime carry the conviction that these levels of the self represent its immortal core which reaches beyond death as well as into space and time.

In both postmortem and antemortem research on the survival question, the demonstration of ESP or PK phenomena form a necessary (but not sufficient) part of the evidence for survival. Most parapsychologists when confronted with material suggestive of survival after death therefore consider it their first task to determine whether or not there are genuine ESP or PK phenomena. For instance, if a medium appears to communicate with a deceased personality but if all the information obtained by the medium is available in ordinary ways, it is obviously unnecessary to postulate either survival or ESP. Similarly with regard to physical disturbances in a supposedly haunted house. If these can be attributed to settling of the house, rodents, etc., there is obviously no need to look further. The same applies to occurrences in the antemortem category. If a person has the experience of leaving his body but can obtain no verifiable information that he occupies a different position in space, there is no need to suppose that he in fact does so.

So far, empirical work on the survival questions has mostly focused on the preliminary question whether ostensible evidence for survival (or for separation of consciousness in the living organism) includes verifiable ESP and PK occurrences.

In the paper I will discuss the experiments and observations which suggest that genuine ESP and PK phenomena sometimes occur in situations suggestive of survival. This raises the second main question: are such cases of ESP or PK best explained in terms of the survival hypothesis? Since other branches of parapsychology have provided evidence to the effect that ESP and PK capacities are sometimes possessed by living human being (and other animals) the question arises whether ostensible survival phenomena can be similarly explained. For instance, in the case of a medium who is able to supply verifiable information about a deceased person, the question must be asked whether this information is obtained by means of the ESP abilities of the medium without any "outside" help. Similarly with regard to PK phenomena consisting of the movement of objects coincident with or following a death, the question must be faced whether these could be attributed to the PK powers of living persons. With regard to the antemortem method, there are similar counter-hypotheses. For instance, in the case of OOB experiences, the impression of having left the body may be illusory so that the phenomenon reduces to ordinary ESP.

Definite scientific evidence pertaining to the survival hypothesis, therefore seems to depend upon finding the limitations of "ordinary" ESP and PK.

There is no clear-cut evidence indicating the nature and limitations of ESP and PK. However, a few patterns in the data are beginning to emerge which suggest that they follow lawful rules and do not represent diffuse omniscient or omnipotent capacities.

In the opinion of most parapsychologists, there is now strong evidence for the reality of ESP and PK (the evidence for PK, however, being weaker than that for ESP). Also in the opinion of most parapsychologists, there is presently no clear evidence regarding the nature of these capacities and, consequently, it is not possible at the present to devise a scientific test which could clearly prove or

disprove the existence of discarnate personalities. However, there are certain lines of research which might prove fruitful. For instance, it appears that ESP responses are associated with the predominance of a certain brain wave (the alpha wave). Research is currently being planned in which mediums will be tested for brain waves when they appear to use their ESP in responding to living minds versus condition when they feel that they are communicating with discarnate persons. If the brain wave patterns or other psychophysiological measurements should differ under the two conditions, this might suggest a basic difference in process and would more strongly raise the possibility of communication.

Finally, I shall ask the question: if sometime in the future the data which are suggestive of survival will in fact be interpreted in terms of survival, what do these data suggest about the surviving self and the world in which it exists? It is generally assumed that if survival takes place, the surviving self will retain its memories and personality traits and it will exist in a world other than the known physical world. The data suggestive of survival challenge these suppositions.