

Survival of Consciousness

Bob Staretz

What if you slept, and what if in your sleep you dreamed?
and what if in your dream you went to heaven and there plucked a strange and beautiful flower,
and what if when you awoke you had the flower in your hand?
Ah, what then?
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Everyone will eventually face the one of the most profound mysteries of life: “what happens to our consciousness when our body dies?” People have been pondering this ultimate question for millennia. Until recently science has not dared to venture into this realm for a variety of reasons. However with recent technological advances and new understandings in subjects ranging from biology to quantum physics, science has begun to look more closely at the whole issue. There are now several prevailing variations on the survival hypothesis. A brief summary of the most important ones are summarized below:

1. The Materialist Position.

Consciousness is nothing more than an epiphenomena of the brain (e.g. an emergent process of brain functioning). It is inevitable as brain complexity increases beyond a certain point. Furthermore as brain complexity increases so does the consciousness of the organism. There are no non-spatial or non-temporal connections between individual physical brains. To the extent that we share common views of external reality, it is due to either the conscious and/or unconscious enculturation of the individual.

2. Consciousness Extends Beyond the Living Brain

Consciousness extends beyond the physical brain and influences physical matter or energy beyond the body. Furthermore its reach is non-local and extends beyond normal space / time. Everything is in some sense interconnected through these non-local connections. Its influence ends when the brain / body dies.

There is considerable evidence now appearing in the literature that this hypothesis can account for many phenomena in nature:

- How the mind-body connection can actually cause or heal physical illness
- How flocks of birds fly or schools of fish swim in synchronization
- How people with close emotional attachment know when their loved one has just had a traumatic experience across great distance by some non-local means
- How an observer can influence the outcome of various experiments in quantum physics
- How the mechanism for so-called psychic phenomena like telepathy, remote viewing or psychokinesis actually works

- How the mechanism for remote healing or prayer actually works

The case for the mechanism that enables consciousness to extend beyond the physical brain arises from the following considerations. At the quantum level any physicist would state that at this level all subatomic particles are entangled through quantum correlation and non-locality. This suggests a mechanism for a fundamental form of intrinsic awareness that coexists with the most basic aspects of matter and energy and that all three are built into and fundamental to the fabric of the universe. As complexity increases, this intrinsic awareness serves as the scaffolding for a more complex form of awareness that is found in single celled organisms and later in plants. At this level, it includes not just awareness but simple intentionality (moving towards a food source or away from danger).

At still greater levels of complexity, this awareness and intentionality, in turn, evolves into elementary consciousness in organisms with simple brains. At even higher levels, for more complex organisms, it evolves into higher level of consciousness in organisms with more complex brains and so on. The culmination is in organisms like humans that have a level of consciousness that not only includes self-awareness and intentionality but is also self-reflective and capable of abstract thinking. Underlying all of this complexity is the basis for an aspect of consciousness that extends beyond the brain that is built upon non-locality and quantum correlation. Perhaps this is what is meant by our sixth sense and that it should more aptly be named our first sense since its roots are so much more primitive. It may not only enabler of our ability to perceive information non-locally but also to project energy non-locally as well.

3. A Record of Consciousness Survives Death

Consciousness not only extends beyond the physical brain, but a record of an organism's and / or species' consciousness somehow survives indefinitely. Furthermore a group memory can be tapped into by individual members of the species. This would account for instinctual or learning behaviors for individual members within species as well as collective memories of the entire species. In ancient times these stored memories were referred to as the Akashic record, in modern times as Jung's Collective Unconscious or Sheldrake's Morphic Fields. Recently Mitchell and others have described a mechanism for this storage that is called the Quantum Hologram (QH). Recent work in fMRI and quantum physics is providing some evidence that supports this claim¹.

This postulate provides support for describing an alternative explanation to some additional and previously unexplained phenomena (beyond #2 above):

- It suggests how past life recall or the so called reincarnation phenomenon may actually occur. In other words, the living brain may, in some way that is not fully understood "tune" into or resonate with the memories of a deceased individual and assumes them as its own. The analogy would be tuning into the Akashic record (or QH field) of a deceased individual much like a radio is able to tune in to a station by changing the resonant frequency of the radio.
- It provides a mechanism for explaining how all or certain aspects of creation learns and evolves from the past experience.

¹ The Quantum Hologram and the Nature of Consciousness, Edgar D. Mitchell and Robert Staretz, Journal of Cosmology, 2011, Vol 14.

- It provides a possible mechanism that augments the development of an organism from a fertilized egg to a mature organism by interaction with the species' morphic (QH) field along with information obtained from its environment. This idea has spawned a new field of study within biology called epigenetics (Lipton et al).
- It suggests an alternative mechanism and explanation for some STEs or related phenomena in whole or in part such as ADCs (After Death Communications), DBOs (Death Bed Observations), MCs (Mediumistic Communications), OBEs (Out of Body Experiences) or SDEs (Shared Death Experiences)

4. A Core Aspect of Consciousness Survives Death

For millennia enlightened individuals, mystics, sages, spiritual leaders and avatars have promoted the notion that a core aspect of consciousness survives bodily death. It accounts for the notion of the soul. (For the purposes of this paper we shy away from using that term because of the baggage and religious implications associated with it.) Recent advances in medicine have stimulated considerable interest in this aspect of the survival hypothesis because of the numerous credible reports on NDEs (Near-Death Experiences) that are now surfacing as a result of the resuscitation of patients who would have surely died without modern medical intervention.

To someone who has experienced one, these NDEs are so vivid and so profound that they defy explanation or understanding. The experiencer often reports visiting a realm that is beyond space and time. They often report encounters with divine entities, and may be exposed to a reality that is beyond the capabilities of the ordinary human mind to comprehend. They often meet deceased relatives or loved ones. They return with messages about the interconnectedness of all things, that consciousness is eternal, that love is a core aspect of existence, and with an intrinsic knowledge of reality. At the same time, in many cases, the experiencer often has miraculous and sometimes spontaneous healings for which modern medicine has no valid explanations. From the perspective of ordinary humans who have not had the privilege of such an experience, perhaps the most important aspects are the transformational shifts in consciousness upon return to this reality that embody some of those messages, or the spontaneous healings that occur.

Where Does Science Stand On These Issues?

Increasing, there are segments of the scientific community that are acknowledging that hypothesis #1 is no longer valid and are moving towards #2. A still smaller but increasingly vocal minority is moving to embrace hypothesis # 3 in addition to #2. After all, once it is acknowledged that an aspect of consciousness extends beyond the body, it is a relative small step to contemplate how a record of that consciousness may prevail indefinitely in a field of consciousness. The problem with # 4 is that, although there are now numerous credible and highly documented reports occurring all over the globe, science has no method of including the subjective experience into the scientific method of inquiry. Consequently there currently is no broadly acceptable or consistent way for science to investigate this phenomenon. This is not meant to imply that #4 is not an accurate description of reality, but rather it just simply means there is no current approach in science to validate it. Mounting circumstantial and other evidence from many STE experiences, recent research into the nature of consciousness and quantum physics have led some researchers to inferential conclusions that the survival hypothesis is the correct interpretation of the data.

Often used as an argument for the case against survival is that NDEs are "near" death experiences, not death experiences. Perhaps, detractors claim, there is something going on that is normally veiled by ordinary consciousness that shuts down during the NDE experience. The key question here is: "are these experiences indicative of or provide glimpses of a much larger reality, or are they crude explanations of some as yet unknown phenomena that are interpreted through the lens or filters of the human experience?" Anyone who has had a transformational experience would clearly respond with certainty that it was the former case and not the latter that they have experienced. If postulate #4 is eventually "objectively" validated, it would clearly obviate or complement some or all of the alternative explanations in postulates 2 and 3 above.

When we consider these issues with the fact that science does not even have a generally acceptable way to explain what consciousness actually is, much of the scientific community is currently at an impasse in accepting or even investigating these phenomena. At the moment perhaps our only options are to induce some type of NDE-like experience or to wait until our own transition occurs before we will know the answer to the survival question. In the interim we accept NDEs at face value while also pursuing the advancement of our understanding of them. In particular we study the transformative effects of these experiences and their implications for humanity. Perhaps in the end it will turn out that various aspects of #2 through #4 are all valid or, at the other extreme, that the ordinary human mind is not capable of fully comprehending all aspects of these issues.

The task at hand is to extend the scientific method of investigation to include the subjective experience, simultaneously to understand the nature and mechanisms of consciousness and also the nature and implications of the transformative experience. In the process it is our intention to increase public awareness of them along with their implications to humanity. Perhaps once we are successful at these tasks (or at least move further down the road with them) we will be in a much better position to provide further scientific validation to the survival hypothesis.