

The Cult of Dionysos
And the Origins of Belief in Life After Death,
Implications for Survival Research

Michael Grosso

There are at least two experiential origins of the belief in life after death. The first, and probably the most widespread, involves a type of external observation, e.g., images of deceased persons "observed" in dreams, waking apparitions of the dead, mediumistic behaviors and reincarnation memories suggestive of survival. This class of phenomena constitutes the experiential basis for a conception of minimal and perhaps not very desirable survival, enshrined in the ancient notions of the Greek Hades, Hebrew Sheol, or Sumerian Kurnugia or land of no-return. Survival researchers have for the most part confined themselves to studying these irregular and elusive traces. The results have been suggestive, though ambiguous and inconclusive.

There is a second type of experiential origin of the belief in survival, in my opinion, unduly neglected. Here the observer observes something in himself, experiences an alteration in the boundaries and even the substance of his being. The second type of origin was sometimes the product of an organized experience, often involving specific group interactions. I want to call attention to this direct, state-specific, approach to the origin of the belief in survival.

Three principle examples from the ancient world illustrate the state-specific approach to survival, the visionary experience of the ageold Eleusinian Mysteries, the ekstasis and possession by the

god of indestructible life in the manic cult of Dionysos and lastly, the communal experience of primitive Christianity. Out of these primordial group interactions doctrine, symbol and argument evolved into art, philosophy and theology. Philosophy, however, as it developed along with science and theology, strayed from its experiential origins. Its abstractions became progressively alien^{and} incredible even to itself. For instance, what contemporary Anglo-American philosopher takes the traditional idea of the "soul" seriously? One of the uses of parapsychology may be to guide philosophy and religion back to the ground of their experiential origins. Fresh insight may follow upon reconnecting "outmoded" ideas with their genesis in experience.

It would be useful for survival researchers to attempt a reconstruction, first in thought, of the world where a state-specific approach to survival predominates. At best we may obtain hints for remodelling the paradigm of survival research. At the least it can help us to see why, by contrast, the climate of our contemporary thought-world is inhospitable to the idea of survival.

In this paper the cult of Dionysos will serve as an example. The Dionysos phenomenon is complex, its historical roots obscure, its significance controversial, and its content remote and outlandish to the rational temper. I will mention a few important details. Dionysos was not one of the Olympian gods. He comes as a stranger from the land of the Hyperboreans; from Thrace, Phrygia, Asia Minor. We catch a glimpse of him in Homer where he is cited as the "mad god." Vase-paintings, temples, sculpture, works of poetry and tragedy, inscriptions, histories portray his cult (Kerenyi, 1976).

The Dionysos ritual is an archetype of a recurrent group phenomenon, the ecstatic or trance dance. For our purpose the main point of the

Dionysos' experience was the ekstasis and possession it produced. The aim of this altered state was to achieve union with the god. The chief participants were women, (called maenads from a verb meaning "to be mad"). Led by a leader-priest of the cult, believed to be an epiphany of Dionysos, the band of revellers conducted their nocturnal rites on barren mountaintops. These rites, which no doubt began spontaneously, were later institutionalized. From Diodorus (4.3) we learn that "in many Greek states congregations (bacheia) of women assemble every second year, and the unmarried girls are allowed to carry the thyrsus and share the transports of the elders." The Greek verb is synenthusiazein--to be filled with the god together. In modern psychological talk, we can take this to signify an altered state.

Such an intimate interaction between man and god was altogether alien to the Homeric religion of Olympia. The Homeric religion was dualistic in the sense that it decreed an unbridgeable gap between man and god. As the great classical scholar, Irwin Rhode, said, "When a Greek says 'immortal' he says 'god'; they are interchangeable ideas" (1966) (p. 253). Thus to enter or be entered by the god meant becoming immortal, or at least in some sense temporarily gaining access to the experiential plane of immortality. John Burnet (1963) remarks in his introduction to Plato's Phaedo that the belief in immortality was a startling heresy for the Greeks.

How did this startling, new belief in immortality arise? The reader will note, incidentally, that this question about origins is distinct from the question of justification. The answer is that certain types of unusual experiments in altered states of consciousness gave rise to the belief. Moreover, the belief in question, strictly speaking, was not a belief in life after death--this came as a corollary--it was


a belief about a quality inherent in the consciousness of the living. This is the way Rhode puts it:

There can be no doubt that the experiences and visions that their "ekstasis" gave them were regarded by them as the plainest and most literally real of facts. The belief in the existence and life of a second self distinct from the body and separable from it was already encouraged by the "experiences" of the separate existence and independent behavior of that self in dreams (the trace approach mentioned above) and fainting fits. How much more strongly and vividly must this belief have been confirmed for those who in the intoxication of those delirious dances had "experienced" for themselves how the soul, freed from the body, could participate in the joys and terrors of the divine existence. ^(p. 264)

*

Let me summarize some of the effective features of the induction process of the Dionysian ritual. First, there was the trance-dancing itself. The mind-altering potential of the dance is a topic that deserves being carefully studied. Whirling, running, tossing the head back and letting the hair blow wildly is a constant image in poetry and vase-painting. Music was a fundamental factor, rhythm and pulse of tympanum and Phrygian flute. Dionysos was a god of vegetation; the vine and other mind-altering plants were extensively used. Ancient Greek wines were quite potent and some of them had psychedelic properties (Ruck, 1978). Derepression of erotic energies was probably a crucial factor but exactly in what sense is not clear. This derepression--recall the restricted role of women in ancient Greece--may have been associated with a PK-releasing mechanism. There are many examples of

group-interactions devoted to producing a special "psycho-energetic" phenomenon variously dubbed shakti, holy spirit, orgone energy, chi, animal magnetism, etc. Finally, as an item in the induction process--one we usually find in most ostensibly psi-conducive group-interactions--there is the shared imagery, or myth, in this case, the myth of Dionysos.

Let us next list some of the unusual, abnormal and possibly paranormal, aspects of the rites of Dionysos. The frenzy and madness associated with  Dionysos was not an expression of magnified emotion but of a type of dissociation or ekstasis--literally, "standing outside" oneself--or what we might call having an out-of-body experience. In a passage in Plato's Ion, Socrates speaks both of the bacchant, the ritual reveller, and the poet as being entheos, possessed by the god, ekphron, literally, out of the prudent mind, and indeed of his mind no longer residing within him (ho nous ouketi en auto enestin, 534b). The ordinary mind must "go out" of the body in order that the god "enter in." Once this radical step was achieved--by means of the dance, music, psychoactive drugs, shared imagery, etc.--the participant was free to be possessed (katochis) by the god. Possession and ecstasy seem here to be functionally interchangeable concepts; they both involve radical alterations in the sense of self-identity. In the dissociated state, two phenomena were often observed, anesthesia and immunity to fire. Berthold Schwarz (1980), a psychiatrist and parapsychologist, has provided an impressive eye-witness account of modern parallels of some of these phenomena in his study of the Free Pentecostal Holiness Church.

In association with the cult of Dionysos there were also reports of healing and prophetic phenomena. In addition the maenads were said

to be inspired by visions--for instance, of milk and honey flowing in the mountain streams. The world, in this state of enthusiasm, was transfigured; all of nature became aglow with the vegetative life force of the god. The lure of the Dionysan rite is obvious. It meant escape from the bonds of the private personality, suspended the normal limitations of the body, and transformed the vision of earthly existence.

Out of the psychic matrix of the Dionysan experience came the tradition of Bakids and Sybils, supposedly able to divine the future through contact with the god and having the healing and exorcising faculties of the shaman. Similar phenomena have been reported in connection with dance epidemics of the middle ages, the dervish movement of Mevlani, ritual dances of the American Indian, and in fact, in countless places and contexts the world over. In regard to the healing and purgative function of the rites of Dionysos, we should note another historic example of its offspring, Greek tragedy, which in part was a psycho-ritual of purgation. Finally, stemming from this Asian tradition of trance-dance and ecstatic worship we must cite the age of wise men--pre-philosophic wizard-shamans such as Aristeas, Abyrys, Epimenides and the like, noted for their prodigious feats of fasting, their magical power, and superhuman out-of-body flights.


We should now say a word about the social consequences of the Dionysan-ecstatic phenomenon. Dionysos is at odds with Hera, the patron goddess of marriage. The Dionysan impulse is a menace to the nuclear family and the patriarchal order. No wonder the horned god was assimilated to the figure of Satan in Christianity.

But the ancient Greeks were none too happy with him either. Euripides' Bacchae is classic testimony to the conflict between patriarchal repression and the ^ereleased state of divine mania. No doubt uncanny danger lurks in this yearning for sacred euphoria; the climax, some said, of the ritual was the rending and eating raw of live animals--sparagmos. In Euripides' drama, Pentheus, the intruder and repressor of the mysteries is mistaken for the sacrificial animal. He falls victim to psychic contagion and is torn to pieces. One senses in the Dionysan dance-ekstasis a disruptive, even a revolutionary force. Later, these crude but certainly effective mysteries will in part be sublimated into Platonic philosophy. For instance, the cultivation of a type of ekstasis was central to Plato's view of the nature of philosophy as expressed in the Phaedo (Grosso, 1975). Both in the primitive ritual and the refined philosophy, the metaphysical thrust is toward desertion of the established world-order, psychically and politically.

On the other hand, something in the new philosophical temper was deeply at odds with the spirit of Dionysos. In the Birth of Tragedy Frederick Nietzsche, the philosopher who fancied himself a disciple of Dionysos, claimed that Socrates, the archetype of theoretical man, was a new kind of culture-hero who spelled the death of Greek tragedy. For the theoretical--and thus critical--attitude blocked one from participating in the Dionysan-born tragic experience. One had to let go of the critical attitude and enter ek-statically into the peculiar group-dynamics of the tragic festival. This poses an analogous problem for investigators of psi--and for survival researchers. For as in the tragic festival (and no less the Dionysan rite itself),

so in the group-interaction called psychical research, the critical and theoretical attitude may be inhibiting, in ways we can scarcely imagine, the full potential of the process. The dilemma has to be faced: how to reconcile the calculator with the thyrsus?

*

How does all this bear on survival research? The trace-approach to survival research has led to a stalemate. Those who seriously try to deal with the evidence--the names of William James, C.D. Broad and Gardner Murphy spring to mind--often end in a suspension of judgment, an inability to say "yea" or "nay." There is sufficient evidence for those who  desire to take a leap of faith based upon some respectable empirical data. On the other hand, one can (like the late professor Dodds) construct arguments to dispose of the data as not at all supporting the survival hypothesis.

Part of the cause of this ambiguous situation is that the belief-systems traditionally associated with the acceptance of survival no longer dominate the mass of educated people. Thus, though there be good prima facie evidence for survival, a priori considerations weigh heavily against the belief. In my view these a priori arguments are less compelling than many suppose; the existence of psi in nature, in fact, takes the wind out of most of their sails. But that is not what I wish to address here but another consideration related to the origins of the belief in survival in contrast to its justification.

My point, in brief, is that we live in the kind of world whose mental, social, economic, etc., structures militate against the belief that the conscious self survives the death of the body. What we can believe is not determined solely by rational considerations but by a

host of extraneous cultural variables. In order to break out of the confines of the stalemate in the controversy over survival there are two steps we can take. First, we can attempt critically to lay bare the complex of cultural variables that dispose us against the belief in survival--as we have described above how cultural variables (in the example of the cult of Dionysos) disposed experients favorably toward the belief in survival. We moderns are fond of demonstrating how culture-bound is the thinking of other barbarians. Yet it may be useful to question the extent to which our belief or nonbelief in survival (and hence our conception of what it is to be a human being) is the product of historical contingencies.

We would begin by classifying factors relevant to disposing for or against the belief in survival. (Again, to repeat, these are factors exclusive of and extraneous to purely scientific and philosophical types of backing for the survival hypothesis--though in practice the "external" cultural factors operate significantly upon the "internal" (rational and scientific) procedures.) Some general areas that call for investigation concern self-concept, ethnoepistemology (see, e.g., Locke and Kelly, 1980), political and economic outlook, social realities, psychological habits, existential styles. The leading, connecting idea is this: It will be an impediment to accept survival of bodily death if my global mode of being in the world is guided by a tendency to exclusively identify myself with my body. But the wider my range of experiential identifications, the more organically and sympathetically I feel myself extended in the world, the less drastic it will be to conceive of myself as existing independently of my body.

The dominant trends of modern thought scarcely enhance such a sense of organic relatedness between persons and the world. The lead-

ing metaphors of modern thinkers characterizing the human condition suggest an altogether different outlook: man is said to be alone, cast adrift in the world, alienated, absurd, abandoned, atomized, acosmic, traditionless, aimless, the product of chance, a stranger, a victim, a narcissist, an individual, and so forth. The last example is important. In the modern world the individual reigns supreme over all social units. Much less the individual "resonates" with or obtains his sense of self-identity from earth, family, tribe, city, church, or tradition. Rather, the sense of who or what I am tends to be built up from the atoms of immediacy, the stream of private sensory impressions: I am this feel of Corvette-driven power, I am this look of Jordache jeans,^{etc.} One could argue that technological man comes to experience himself in a progressively impoverished "lived-world." One's sense of substance and continuity--instead of being mediated, as with the Dionysan celebrant, by contact with earth, sky, vegetation, tide and season, by cyclic and renewable processes--are mediated by one's automobile, by Con Edison, by manmade realities subject to break-downs, price fluctuations, human error and mechanical fallibility. ~~Capitalism~~ ^{Capitalism} fosters the illusion that reality and survival are positively correlated with productivity. Consumerism, a byproduct of capitalism, and the religion of modern industrial man, subtly redefines reality in terms of object-incorporation. The Shopping-Mall becomes the source of periodic release from anxiety, existential isolation and stagnation. Contrast this with the periodic state-specific rituals of the ancient Greek women of the cult of Dionysos; here instead of supporting a tendency to self-arming we find behaviors which favor a self-dissolving process, a widening of ^{the} boundaries of

1974-1975
1976-1977
1978-1979
1980-1981
1982-1983
1984-1985
1986-1987
1988-1989
1990-1991
1992-1993
1994-1995
1996-1997
1998-1999
2000-2001
2002-2003
2004-2005
2006-2007
2008-2009
2010-2011
2012-2013
2014-2015
2016-2017
2018-2019
2020-2021
2022-2023
2024-2025

self-identity. Instead of buying one's way into a pseudo-secure sense of personal identity based on fashion with its absurdly high mortality rate, we observe a process tending toward the transformation of personal identity, toward identification with a source of indestructible reality, i.e., Dionysos.

I think the more we examined the conditions of modern life-styles, the lived realities of mechano-capitalist societies, the easier it would be to see that there is a complex ensemble of extrascientific factors which predispose us to construct a world-view which is inconsonant with the belief in life after death. If the current existential paradigm is hostile to the belief in life after death, we should at least try to become conscious of the fact. For as the neurotic, under the sway of unconscious ideas, has a distorted perception of things, so whole cultures, in the grips of unconscious biases, may be blind or insensitive to particular domains of fact.

That's second ^{step} in breaking the state mate
may have direct bearing on survival research. As a complement to the trace-approach, survival researchers may profit by attempting to generate state-specific experimental hypotheses. (I am not recommending that we go to the drastic lengths of the cult of Dionysos; it would not help the cause of parapsychologists to eat skeptics raw.) There are three possible models of state-specific approaches to survival research: they would consist of studying near-death, out-of-body, and field (or mystical) states of consciousness.

First, this type of experience gives rise to interesting epistemic situations. Typically, the experient claims to "know" that there is another world, life after death, and so forth. These claims constitute a little explored region of state-specific epistemology.

Secondly, models can be constructed to test such state-specific claims. For instance, suppose the claimant asserts--as is so often the case--that as a result of his state-specific encounter with X he has changed his outlook, habits, morals, life-style. Follow-up studies could confirm or falsify such claims. Thirdly, there is the possibility of monitoring the psychophysiological variables related to these states (Kelly and Klein, 1980). Very little is known about the psychophysiology of altered states and even less about their relation to the survival hypothesis.

Finally, research so oriented toward state-specificity may help to create a more favorable climate of understanding--the fringe variables that dispose us toward obtaining the tacit insight which otherwise might escape us.

References

- Burnet, J. Plato's Phaedo. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Grosso, M. Plato and out-of-the body experiences. Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, 1978, 72, 61-74.
- Kerenyi, C. Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- Klein, F. and Kelly, E. Personal communication, 1980.
- Locke, R. and Kelly, E. Cross-Cultural Analysis of Psi and Altered States of Awareness. Unpublished study, 1980.
- Rhode, I. Psyche, Vol. II. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966.
- Ruck, C.A.P. Solving the eleusinian mystery. In The Road to Eleusis by Wasson, R. G., Ruck, Carl A.P., Albert Hofmann. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978, 35-50.
- Schwarz, B. Psychic Nexus. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980, 3-24.