A RATIONAL GUIDE TO THE BEST EVIDENCE OF POSTMORTEM SURVIVAL

Stephen E. Braude

Vital Preliminaries.

In order to evaluate the cases taken as evidence of postmortem survival, we must first be clear about what, exactly, we're considering or hoping to establish. Strictly speaking, we have no *proof* of survival. Nor can we. We know quite well what proof amounts to in formal systems such as logic and mathematics. But empirical claims never enjoy that degree of certitude, and yet we can still have good reasons for believing many things that nevertheless remain vulnerable to possible revision or subsequent rejection. So what participants in the survival debate need to consider is something more modest than a slam-dunk proof—namely, whether there's sufficient evidence for, and a rational basis for belief in, the survival of bodily death.

And that investigation immediately confronts an interesting challenge. On the surface, the inquiry into survival may seem to be straightforwardly empirical. But no study of ostensible survival cases can be entirely empirical. Every branch of science rests on numerous, typically unrecognized, abstract presuppositions, both metaphysical and methodological—for example, concerning the nature of observation, explanation, causality, or properties, or the appropriate investigative procedures for a given domain. It's all too easy for scientists to lose sight of these basic presuppositions, especially as a science becomes more developed. But if those assumptions are indefensible or otherwise questionable, that particular scientific enterprise has nothing firm to stand on, no matter how attractive or promising it might be initially, or on the surface. In fact, this is widely recognized in certain prominent areas of science — for example, in memory trace theory[1] and (for that matter) in many areas of so-called cognitive science—not to mention the perennial slugfest between competing grand theories in physics. And to complicate matters further, whereas mainstream scientists can do much of their normal business while keeping their basic assumptions safely in the background, in the case of survival research conceptual problems dominate the foreground. In more mainstream areas of science, scrutiny of underlying assumptions is likely to occur only during major

[1] See, e.g., Braude, 2014

challenges to the scientific consensus (or in Kuhnian terms, a challenge to the prevailing paradigm).[2]

Moreover, scientific pursuits aren't unique in relying on unexamined assumptions. In fact, abstract presuppositions undergird even our most ordinary and seemingly innocent observation-statements—the sorts of statements that form the background for every empirical inquiry. For example, when we say "the table is brown," we typically assume that color and other properties are stable and don't change upon being perceived. But that hasn't always been taken for granted. Indeed, it was rejected in antiquity and challenged notoriously by the late 20th-century's so-called New Riddle of Induction.[3] And even more recently, it's been occasionally challenged by those who argue—too often without understanding what they're really claiming—that consciousness is fundamental.

So an inquiry into survival is not simply a straightforward examination of evidence. We rely on philosophically debatable assumptions at every step along the way. That's not exactly an impediment to our inquiry—or at least it's not a unique impediment. But it does mean that we must be prepared to acknowledge our assumptions and examine them critically when challenged. And it's important to remember that our basic metaphysical presuppositions are usually invisible simply because they're ubiquitous. But without them, inquiry can't even *begin*.

Of course, many recognize that the evidence suggesting survival challenges widespread reductive physicalist views about the nature of mentality—and in particular, its apparent causal dependence on the body or the brain. But (as we'll see below), many additional and difficult questions need to be addressed before we can know what to say about the evidence for survival— for example, what we mean by calling some information *obscure,* whether we're entitled to impose any limits at all on the range of psychic functioning among the living, what it means to say that a person has a skill or ability, whether practice is essential for manifesting a skill, and whether (or to what extent) we can justifiably generalize across abilities. Those topics are still just the tip of the iceberg, and of course there's also the vexing and deep issue about the nature of personal identity and the extent to which identity is linked to physical continuity. Only

[2] See Kuhn, 1970.
[3] Goodman, 1983.

some of these topics can be pursued here, but we'll see clearly as we proceed why many of them are relevant.[4]

We should also observe that the type of survival at issue is more intimate and personal than the postmortem scenario envisioned by some Eastern religions, according to which we merge at death with the infinite or being-in-general. Granted, that might count as a kind of *life after death*, but that form of continuance would obliterate whatever is psychologically distinctive about us. By contrast, *survival* of death is usually understood to preserve personal *identity* between an ante-mortem individual and a postmortem individual. That's why those who wonder about survival also wonder (say) whether *they* will be able to reunite with their deceased relatives, communicate with (or harass) the still-living members of their families, or enjoy a postmortem existence in which they simply get their hair back.[5] In general, they wonder whether *they* will continue to exist in some form or another after bodily death. And they wonder whether the relationship of that future, postmortem individual to their present self is similar to the relationship between their present self and their physically and psychologically remote infant self. That's why those who consult mediums or study reincarnation cases look for evidence that some deceased person's knowledge, traits, or skills continue to manifest.

Explanatory Options and Challenges

Before we consider which bodies of evidence make the strongest case for postmortem survival, it would be prudent to survey some additional reasons for thinking that certitude on the matter will be an elusive goal. That will put us in a good position to assess the strengths of the cases I find most persuasive.

Although many cases (or bodies of evidence) at least superficially suggest postmortem survival, anti-survivalists have several principal counter-explanatory options which intellectually honest survivalists must strive to rule out, especially if they're maintaining that their interpretation of the strongest cases is *superior* to the non-survivalist alternatives. The first wave of non-survivalist explanations would be in terms of what I've called (in Braude, 2003) the "Usual Suspects"—namely, malobservation, misreporting, hidden memories (cryptomnesia), and (of course) fraud. Not surprisingly,

[4] For more thorough analysis of these various issues, see Braude, 2003, 2005a, 2014, 2020.
[5] Many years ago, the famous medium and healer, Olga Worrall, told me she saw my deceased maternal grandfather standing behind me, and she described him as having a beard. I told Olga that my grandfather never had a beard, and Olga replied, "He does now; he can have a beard if he wants."

these can be ruled out easily in the most interesting survival cases, and so the debate over the evidence naturally turns to the second wave of non-survivalist explanations, in terms of what I called the "Unusual Suspects"—namely, rare or abnormal processes, such as a combination of dissociation and latent creative capacities, or exceptional (e.g., "photographic") memory, or something analogous to extreme or rare forms of savantism, where we find remarkable skills existing alongside cognitive and physical deficits that ordinarily prevent the manifestation of those skills. Although once again the strongest cases seem to resist normal or abnormal explanation, the Unusual Suspects may be more difficult to reject than many writers on survival have appreciated. I'll mention some of the reasons for that below.

But even when the Unusual Suspects seem unable to account for the evidence, a more intractable non-survivalist explanation remains—what most misleadingly call "super psi" but which Michael Sudduth more accurately dubbed "living-agent psi" (hereafter, LAP).[6] It's easy to see why survivalists must take this seriously. Even when no one participating in a séance knows normally about the information apparently channeled by the medium (e.g., the existence of a hidden second will, concealed in a secret desk compartment), if that information can be verified when the séance is over, then it was there all along to be accessed by the medium's or sitters' ESP. Similarly, in reincarnation cases one can appeal to ESP on the part of either the subject or relevant interested parties (such as family members), or to the telepathic or psychokinetic influence they exert. Unfortunately, the challenge presented by the LAP hypothesis has generally been handled very badly in the literature on survival.

Consider: Some survivalists reject anti-survivalist appeals to living-agent psi because (they say) the LAP hypothesis posits an implausible degree of psychic functioning, and more than we have evidence for outside of survival cases.[7] However, that survivalist line of argument is deeply confused on two grounds: First, there's no clear standard for evaluating the magnitude, complexity, or sheer amazingness of psychic functioning. After all, boggle thresholds vary and what's impressive for one person may not be for another. And of course, there's no transcendentally objective rational umpire to adjudicate conflicting opinions.[8] And second (and most important), the argument overlooks a crucial and ironic logical entailment of the survivalist position—

[6] See Sudduth, 2009, 2014, 2016.
[7] See, e.g., Almeder, 1992; Fontana, 2005; Lund, 2009.
[8] For more details, see Braude, 2020, Chapter 6.

namely, that *survivalists must posit a great deal (if not a comparable level) of psi on the part of the deceased and the living, simply in order to explain how evidence suggesting survival was manifested in the first place.* We could call this the *Parity Problem*.

This is so easy to see, it's quite astonishing that many works on survival fail to acknowledge it. For example, suppose a medium reports, without prompting and without normal access to the information, the message "Uncle Harry knows you're seriously thinking about quitting your accounting job and becoming a lion tamer." The embarrassment for survivalists is that some kind of ESP must be posited here merely to explain (a) how the medium knows what deceased Uncle Harry is thinking, and (b) how deceased Uncle Harry knows what the sitter is thinking. In each case, those would be examples of direct mind-to-mind interaction—or, in other words, telepathy. The only difference between the survivalist appeal to ESP and that of LAP partisans is the former's enlarged ontology, something that would ordinarily place the survivalist position at a theoretical disadvantage compared to ontologically more parsimonious rivals. Or suppose the medium reports, "Uncle Harry says he's glad you're wearing the sweater he gave you." In this case, if the medium doesn't know normally who gifted the sweater, survivalists must posit psi involving deceased Uncle Harry to explain (a) how he can be aware clairvoyantly of what the sitter is wearing, and (b) how that information was exchanged telepathically between the medium and Uncle Harry.

Although this is not a difficult point to grasp, prominent writers on survival seem curiously oblivious to it. So perhaps it will help to pursue the matter a bit further. Consider the fascinating Maróczy chess case, in which a deceased Hungarian grandmaster, Géza Maróczy, ostensibly played a very high-level game with the thoroughly alive Russian grandmaster, Victor Korchnoi, and apparently transmitted his moves through a medium.[9] Many cite this case as one of the most impressive of the last century, usually because (they rashly claim) LAP explanations are much more extravagant than the survivalist alternative.

For example, that was how Vernon Neppe argued against a living-agent psi interpretation of this case.[10] He claimed that survivalists tell a relatively straightforward causal story, positing nothing but interaction between a medium and a deceased

[9] Eisenbeiss & Hassler, 2006
[10] Neppe, 2007.

communicator retaining at least some of his former embodied faculties. By contrast, he argued,

> super-ESP... would require the repeated and active cogitation of a master chess player or players while alive, extended over a prolonged period of time with 47 different responses (47 moves in the game).[11]

This looks like a wholesome appeal to parsimony, and that's how Neppe presents it. But in fact, the survival hypothesis requires virtually the same degree of psychic functioning as is posited by the LAP alternative. After all, survivalists claim that the deceased communicator is causally responsible for the 47 chess moves in question. But for that to occur, the deceased would need repeated and accurate ESP (either telepathy with the medium or an onlooker, or else clairvoyance of the chess board) to know what the state of play is, and then ongoing and effective ESP (presumably telepathic influence on the medium) to convey the desired next move. *There is simply no antecedently credible and rational standard of complexity according to which that survivalist scenario is significantly simpler than that of the nonsurvivalist.*[12]

Perhaps also lurking behind Neppe's discussion, but certainly and explicitly part of many survivalist efforts to interpret drop-in mediumistic cases as evidential, is the idea that survivalists posit only straightforward interactions between medium and deceased about matters which the deceased presumably already knows. By contrast (so the argument goes), LAP-advocates must claim that the medium or sitters gained access to one or more obscure sources of information not already known to them normally. If so, the survivalist alternative would seem more parsimonious, at least for the superficially strongest cases, like that of "Runki's Leg."[13]

There's some merit to that position, and later we'll consider the issue of explanatory parsimony in more detail. Still, there remains an important and instructive problem with this strategy as it's usually presented—namely, a confusion over the concept of *obscure information*. Ordinarily, we understand (roughly at least) what it means to say that a piece of information is obscure. But that conception of obscurity applies only to *normal* methods of acquiring information. For example, we consider

---

[11] Neppe, 2007, p. 147.
[12] However, we'll see below, in the discussion of crippling complexity, that the LAP scenario might nevertheless be easier to undermine than that of the survivalist.
[13] Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975; and see Braude, 2003 for a detailed analysis and critique.

information to be obscure when it's not widely known and when it takes some work to uncover. And by saying that it takes work to uncover, I mean that the information is either outside our perceptual field or otherwise difficult to access physically (e.g., if it's behind layers of security or other barriers, or if it's remote geographically and not accessible electronically). Notice, though, that *all* information allegedly acquired psychically by the deceased in a mediumistic scenario, either about a living person's thoughts or about some present physical state of affairs, counts as obscure in this sense, just as it does for ESP on the part of the living. In both cases, there's no familiar *physical* access to the acquired information, and so both survivalist and LAP interpretations of mediumship require access to information considered obscure—and for the same reason. Thus, survivalists are in no position to claim that the normal obscurity of mediumistically conveyed information places LAP-advocates at an explanatory disadvantage.

Actually, the survivalist appeal to informational obscurity has an additional serious problem. We don't understand how *any* physically or perceptually remote information might be acquired by ESP, whether it's the carefully sealed picture on the table right in front of us or an object thousands of miles away. And although it's clear on some occasions what might "direct" the medium to psychically "look" in one place rather than another—for example, the presence of a sitter with telepathically accessible and urgent interests--in other cases, we have no idea what these "road signs" or triggers might be. But then we simply know too little. Apart from the most psychodynamically flagrant cases (and there aren't many of those),[14] it's merely a conceit to think we have a handle on why psi works when it does. Moreover, it's likely that the conditions we find psi-conducive vary idiosyncratically from person to person and occasion to occasion, just like our (often wildly distinct) responses to things that some consider erotic or humorous. If so, that can only frustrate the effort to generalize about conditions favorable (or unfavorable) to psychic functioning among the living.

So there seems to be no justification for insisting that normally obscure information is also psychically obscure. Indeed, good remote viewers remind us of this frequently, something survivalists should keep in mind when claiming that the mediumistic psi required for LAP explanations is antecedently implausible. Right from

[14] One example would be the case of the Gold Leaf Lady (Braude, 2007). We can make some very plausible conjectures about the psychogenesis of her phenomena generally, and the golden-colored foil in particular.

the start, then, it's a bad move to argue that normal forms of obscurity are barriers to the operation of living-agent ESP. Moreover (as we've seen), because the survivalist interpretation of mediumship requires the deceased to exercise ESP of some kind, the alleged difficulty of living-agent ESP poses a comparable problem for the survival hypothesis. And incidentally, we're also in no position to insist that the diffuseness of information gathered from more than one source is a barrier to successful ESP. As far as we know, psychically accessing multiple sources of normally obscure information is no more imposing than accessing one. And of course, as with most cognitive or other interesting human abilities (e.g., the ability to be witty, sensual, or courageous), straitjacketed laboratory manifestations of ESP are no guide to what one might be able to accomplish psychically in a real-life setting.

We must also note one additional, and very important, introductory point concerning the logic of explanation. Survivalists often maintain that the LAP explanation of cases compares unfavorably to that of the survivalist—usually for the reason that the survivalist explanation is simpler, or that it has greater explanatory power, or that it does a better job of predicting the data, than the LAP alternative, or else that the LAP explanation of the data is indefensibly ad hoc. But Sudduth, 2016 has correctly noted that this type of comparison of the LAP and survivalist hypotheses seems plausible only if one fails to notice that it rests on a sneaky dialectical maneuver (or logical sleight of hand).

Survivalists often claim that the survival hypothesis explains (or predicts) various strands of evidence. But such explanation or prediction is possible only if one makes a number of *auxiliary assumptions* about the nature and character of the afterlife. For example, we find that mediumistic communications are often trite, confused, or have a dreamy quality, while at other times they seem quite clear and coherent. And sometimes communicators will correctly describe features of the sitters or the séance room, but fail to note other nearby features that are at least as obvious. Moreover, we find that so-called "control" personalities in mediumistic cases are often flagrantly artificial.[15] Mediums have also been known to produce trance communications from the living as if those individuals were dead.[16] We also find that only some deceased people

[15] For good discussions of that, see Broad, 1962; Gauld, 1982.
[16] See, e.g., the controversial Gordon Davis case. See Gauld, 1982, pp. 137-138; Harris, 1986; Soal, 1925; West, 2000.

seem to communicate, and then only for a short time. So how do survivalists account for these and the many other observed features of mediumship?

On this issue, much of the literature on survival is once again discouragingly shabby. The only way to explain both why the evidence from mediumship has the features we find and why it lacks certain others is by making numerous, *independently unverified* assumptions about (say) whether deceased persons would want to (or be able to) communicate with the living, the means by which that communication is achieved, whether the deceased are likely to retain some or all of their memories and personality idiosyncrasies, and whether after-death communication is difficult or easy (e.g., whether there's "noise" in the "channel"). By contrast, a *simple* survival hypothesis—that is, a mere assertion that consciousness or personality can survive—can make no specific (much less fine-grained) predictions at all about what the data of survival should actually look like. For that, survivalists must make further controversial assumptions about the conditions allowing the evidence to take the forms noted in the literature. Of course, the same is true about the LAP hypothesis, which, in its more robust and sophisticated forms, makes numerous assumptions about (say) dissociative creativity, and the needs, motivations, and interests of the living, in order to explain why the evidence has certain characteristics rather than others.

However, as Sudduth, 2016, noted, when survivalists try to claim that the survival hypothesis explains (or predicts) the evidence *better* than the LAP hypothesis, they usually compare robust versions of LAP (allegedly laden with implausible assumptions) only to a *simple* survival hypothesis—minus the assumptions required for that hypothesis to do any explanatory work at all. The proper comparison, however, must be between *robust* survival and *robust* LAP hypotheses, where each is bulked up by assumptions that permit the prediction of the observed, fine-grained features of the data. But in that case, the empirical argument for survival may amount merely to a comparison of the auxiliary assumptions attaching to both the LAP and survivalist hypotheses.

Now that's not an easy task, and a shoot-out between competing sets of auxiliary assumptions is likely to lead nowhere, at least not conclusively. That's why many feel that an impressive *actual* (as opposed to theoretically ideal) case of survival will leave the survival vs LAP debate at a stand-off.[17] Nevertheless, good actual cases still provide

[17] But see below and in Braude, 2003, 2005b, for a discussion of the significance of ideal cases.

the raw material for getting clear on what kinds of auxiliary assumptions are needed (on either side of the debate) to accommodate the data.

So it may well turn out, especially in the absence of anything seriously approaching the ideal cases we can invent, that our conviction (or lack thereof) about the prospects of survival will rest on how personally compelling we find the evidence before us. An honest appraisal of the best cases requires that we be clear what we're assuming to be the case for the evidence to have taken the form(s) that it does, and how those assumptions fare against the most reasonable contrary assumptions of others. At that point, it may be that the best we can do is to make an educated guess and hope that we have a good "nose" or "eye" (choose your orifice) for what's plausible or true, just as some are particularly good at understanding the meaning *behind* others' words, or seem instinctively know when a person is lying or whether the person can be trusted with an intimacy.

One final matter deserves clarification. I concluded my book *Immortal Remains* by asserting that the scales seemed to tilt in favor of survival. Nevertheless, many characterize me as a survival skeptic and supporter of the LAP analysis of survival cases. However, I've never claimed that the LAP approach was *superior* overall to that of the survivalist. What I *have* argued is that survivalists too often engage in straw-man reasoning by stating the LAP hypothesis in a weak or antecedently implausible form, and then—when they rule that out—claim to have made a case for survival. But of course, it's a hollow victory to defeat the LAP hypothesis in anything other than its strongest and most plausible form.

One example should make this clear, and then we'll be in a good position to see which cases seem most compelling. Clergyman and SPR member Drayton Thomas considered the LAP proposal that the medium Mrs. Leonard psychically "reached out" to search for appropriate information, and he claimed that this appeal to living-agent psi was difficult to square with the facts—specifically that Mrs. Leonard's results varied widely from complete failures to striking successes. He wrote,

> *If the medium's own activity obtained the information, it should have been more uniformly successful.* There were some complete failures just where success should, on this hypothesis, have been most likely, namely in those instances where I had interviewed the applicant shortly before the sitting. Such personal

> intercourse showed no superiority over the cases where no interview had taken place.[18]

In a similar vein, he continued,

> the medium's own faculty is not the factor to which we can attribute these proxy results. If my richly stored memory yielded so little when I was sitting in the medium's presence, is it likely that the minds of distant and unknown persons would yield as much? And yet one or two of the proxy cases have not only equalled, but have surpassed in evidential richness the majority of communications received from my own deceased acquaintances.[19]

These passages contain several errors and confusions. First, Thomas seems to confuse physical (and perhaps temporal) proximity with psychic closeness or intimacy, or at least he supposes that the two must be closely correlated. But that's no more plausible than supposing that people are most likely to succeed in telepathy experiments when their heads are touching. Second, Thomas seems to ignore the complex interpersonal and other contextual variables that presumably affect psychic functioning. It's no more plausible to think that a medium will automatically respond telepathically to a psychically primed sitter than it is to think that people will respond sexually just because their partner is "in the mood." Indeed, the history of psi research suggests strongly that psychic functioning, like most other human capacities, is highly situation-sensitive, context-dependent, and susceptible to an enormous range of positive and negative influences, including mood, belief system, interpersonal relations, and even geophysical and celestial variables (such as, respectively, earth's geomagnetic field and local sidereal time). And third, Thomas—like Neppe and others—apparently supposes that what's normally obscure will also be psychically obscure. But as we've seen, anyone who accepts the reality of ESP (and that includes Thomas!) must reject that.

At any rate, it's clear that we can have *defensible* grounds for believing many things that don't admit of compelling (much less, air-tight) scientific demonstration, and survival may turn out to be one of them. *Immortal Remains* documents in great detail why a careful survey of the evidence and relevant conceptual issues makes it difficult (though not impossible) to reach a rationally defensible decision on the matter. And in

---

[18] Thomas, 1932, p. 156, emphasis added.
[19] Ibid, pp. 157–158.

what follows, I'll offer my current take on which cases or varieties of evidence most strikingly support the survival hypothesis.

The Relevance of Ideal Cases

Many (if not all) students of the survival literature find that material rather frustrating in an important respect. Even the best cases have their shortcomings. Good mediumistic communications can be diluted by twaddle or outright "misses," or by "hits" that suggest psychic interaction with the living, or by trance impersonations that too dimly resemble the individuals they purport to be. Reincarnation cases all too often suffer from a paucity of *early-bird* testimony (that is, testimony collected before the previous personality was identified) or from a shortage of idiosyncratically specific "hits" or demonstrated skills uniquely linked to the previous personality. Moreover, they often fail to dig competently into the possible hidden agendas and concerns of the major figures in the case.[20] In fact, it seems clear that no actual survival case is as coercive as the ideal cases one can easily imagine.

Moreover, we can't properly evaluate even the seemingly best survival cases without addressing an imposing array of issues that survivalists typically ignore or else treat perfunctorily. To illustrate briefly how complex the issues can get, consider a few of the questions arising in connection just with the evidence for responsive xenoglossy (speaking responsively in an unlearned language). I can't go into detail here, but the relevance of the questions should be obvious:

1. To what extent can we develop skills unconsciously or through non-normal means (say, in hypnotic or other altered states)?

2. Are survivalists entitled (when rejecting the LAP hypothesis) to talk (as they do) of subjects *acquiring* skills rather than (as in cases of savantism) simply *manifesting* them?

3. To what extent is practice essential for the initial manifestations of a skill, never mind what's required later to refine or perfect the skill (the relevance again of prodigies and savants, and the linguistically gifted)?

[20] For details, see Braude, 2003.

4. To what extent can we generalize over skills or abilities (e.g., can we legitimately compare mastering a language to mastering other skills, such as bicycle riding or playing bridge)?

5. What counts as language-mastery (e.g., how fluent must one be, and are standards of fluency context-dependent)?

6. Which conditions facilitate, or impede, the mastery of a second language (e.g., when the second language is similar to, or quite different from, one's native tongue)?

These questions bear on crucial assumptions made by survivalists in their assessment of the evidence. And too often, writers make no effort to grapple with the reasons for doubting those assumptions. In fact, they typically fail to demonstrate even a passing familiarity with the relevant and extensive bodies of empirical and theoretical literature.[21] Nevertheless, even though these questions present serious challenges to the survivalist, it's important to remember that we *can* imagine cases so impressive that, if such cases actually occurred, we'd have to accept them as demonstrations of survival, even if we had no idea how to integrate that revelation into a coherent world-view. And that fact suggests that we should be cautious about giving great weight (as many do) to prior anti-survivalist metaphysical presuppositions. Practical considerations trump abstract philosophy every time. In fact, cherished metaphysical theories don't stand a chance against the exigencies of real life.[22]

So what makes a case Ideal? Presumably, it would be one for which appeals to the Usual and Unusual Suspects are clearly out of the question. It would also be one that, while perhaps not conclusively ruling out appeals to living-agent psychic functioning, nevertheless strains that hypothesis to the breaking point. That is, it would be a case where even people sympathetic to LAP conjectures would be inclined to throw in the towel. I doubt that we could compile an exhaustive list of essential characteristics of an ideal case. But we can at least note some that are obviously desirable.[23] A few of these apply more clearly to reincarnation and possession cases

[21] But see Braude, 2003 for detailed analyses of the relevant assumptions.
[22] See Braude, 2005a, 2005b.
[23] The list of criteria below is a modification of a list that appeared in Braude, 2003. The two ideal cases described thereafter are also taken from that work.

than to instances of mediumship. And most thwart what would be obvious (often depth-psychological) LAP counter-explanatory strategies.

(1) Our case would not have the etiological features found in cases of multiple personality/dissociative identity disorder (MPD/DID) or other psychological disorders. For example, mediums should not have a documented history of psychopathology. And in a reincarnation case the phenomena should not manifest after the subject experiences a traumatic childhood incident.

(2) The manifestations of a previous personality (or discarnate communicator) should not, in the light of *competent* depth-psychological probing,[24] serve any discernable psychological need of the living.

(3) Those manifestations should make most sense (or better, should only make sense) in terms of agendas or interests reasonably attributable to the deceased—e.g., as good drop-in cases suggest.

(4) The manifestations should begin, and should be documented, before the subject (or anyone in the subject's circle of acquaintances) has identified or researched the life of the deceased.

(5) The subject should supply many verifiable, intimate facts about the deceased's life.

(6) The history and behavior of the previous personality (or entranced medium ostensibly channeling the deceased) should be recognizable, in intimate detail, to several individuals, preferably on separate occasions.

(7) The subject should also be able to display some of the deceased's skills or traits—the more idiosyncratic the better.

(8) These skills or traits should be as foreign to the subject as possible—for example, from a significantly different culture to which the subject has had no exposure.

(9) Skills associated with the deceased should be of a kind or of a degree that generally require practice, and that are seldom (if ever) found in prodigies or savants.

[24] As opposed to what we often find in reincarnation case studies, including those of psychiatrist Ian Stevenson.

(10) In order for investigators to verify information communicated about the deceased's life, it should be necessary to access multiple, culturally and geographically remote, and otherwise normally obscure, sources.

(11) The manifestations of the deceased should continue to provide verifiable information and credible behavioral simulations for an extended period of time, demonstrating a degree of accuracy that seems difficult to explain in term of LAP (see the discussion of Crippling Complexity below).

To see how an apparently ideal case might develop, let's consider two hypothetical scenarios.

Case 1[25]

This case would presumably be considered to be one of ostensible reincarnation or possession. Suppose someone discovered a society of native Amazonians who had previously eluded all contact with other peoples. And suppose that the discoverer was someone who himself had little knowledge of other cultures, and certainly no knowledge of U.S. culture. Suppose, next, that one of the Amazonians spontaneously (and without prior trauma) goes into trance and begins speaking in a language the explorer doesn't know. So the explorer records the utterances, has them translated, finds that they're in English, and discovers that the Amazonian was claiming to be Knute Rockne, the famous football coach of Notre Dame University. (And of course, let's assume that we can rule out fraud and the other Usual Suspects.) At this point, English-speaking investigators interrogate the Amazonian, who answers them in English and responds in ways others recognize as idiosyncratically Rockne-esque.

Based on these later interviews as well as the original recordings, we discover that the Amazonian displays a level of U.S. college football knowledge comparable to that of Knute Rockne, as well as extensive apparent memories that Knute Rockne would be expected to have. We also find that the Amazonian displays Rockne's distinctive mannerisms of speech, his customary posture, gait, gestures, facial expressions, and other physical characteristics, his apparently inspirational persona,

[25] I apologize for this example drawing on some idiosyncratic features of American college football. Although I recognize that the example may not travel well, the point and substance of the case should nevertheless be quite clear. The basic material of this excellent example originated with a former student, Amy Lynn Payne.

and his peculiar attitudes on and emotions about various subjects. The Amazonian's statements will thereby demonstrate a great deal of knowledge which neither he nor the investigators possessed beforehand—not just knowledge about Rockne himself, but also about his time and culture.

For example, suppose that the Amazonian Knute Rockne persona expresses political opinions about the current U.S. political scene and which are consistent with what is known about Rockne's earlier political views. And suppose the Amazonian displays a great and seasoned coach's grasp of the subtleties of college football, not simply outside the scope of those investigating the case, but also beyond that of even ardent fans of the game. Moreover, suppose the Amazonian seems to know matters which only Rockne should have known, or which only he and close associates might have known (and which certainly no investigator of the case knew prior to lengthy follow-up investigation).

For instance, Knute Rockne would have known about scandals on his team that were concealed from the press. He would have had memories of games that he coached, and specific memories of his players and their histories and skills. He would have had a vast reservoir of stories about specific plays in specific games, as well as stories about specific players. These would not simply be stories that could be substantiated; and indeed, the Amazonian offers an impressive quantity of stories, both substantiated and unsubstantiated. For example, Rockne was reportedly the only person who knew what "The Gipper" said upon his deathbed. Rockne told his team that the Gipper's last words were "Win one for the Gipper". But some think Rockne concocted the story to motivate his team after the Gipper's death. If the Amazonian native is really a reincarnation of (or medium for) Knute Rockne, then ideally he would be able to resolve the debate over this incident in a credible way.

Clearly, this case presents a number of features we would look for in an ideal case. Many of them result from the geographic and cultural distance between the subject and the deceased, something that distinguishes this case from the vast majority of survival cases. Here we find extensive responsive xenoglossy in a language quite different from that of the previous personality. We also find extensive and refined propositional (knowledge-*that*) appropriate to the previous personality but far outside the scope of the Amazonian's culture. Similarly, the case concerns a skill (coaching college football) that is culturally specific to the U.S.A. and which seems to require a considerable period of practice to be expressed at the advanced level of proficiency

manifested by the Amazonian. The native also displays a great array of behavioral and physical traits of the previous personality, as well as various motives, interests, and other attitudes idiosyncratically appropriate to that individual, but irrelevant to and far outside the culture of the Amazonian. And many of these features of the case were exhibited *before* the appearance of investigators who spoke English and who knew something about the previous personality's culture and history. So at least obvious forms of sitter-telepathy seem ruled out.

Case 2

The next case illustrates a kind of classic mediumistic ideal. Mrs. B is a gifted medium. Her formal education didn't extend beyond primary school, and her exposure to the world has been confined exclusively to her immediate small-town environment in the American Midwest. She never traveled beyond her hometown or expressed any interest in books, magazines, or TV shows about other locales. Similarly, she has had no exposure to the world of ideas, to literature (even in cinematic form), or to the arts. In fact, when she's not channeling communications or caring for her home and family, she devotes her time to prayer and developing her psychic sensitivity.

One day Mrs. B gives a sitting for Mr. X, who lives in Helsinki. The sitting is what's known as a *proxy* sitting, because the person interacting with the medium is substituting for someone who wants information from the medium. In the most interesting cases, proxy sitters have little or no information about the person they represent, and they know nothing about the individual the medium is supposed to contact. Clearly, then, good proxy cases help rule out some Usual Suspects, because we can't plausibly assert that the medium is simply extracting information from the sitter by means of leading questions, subtle bodily cues, and so on. In the present case, Mr. X (using a pseudonym) sends a watch, once owned by a dear friend, to the Rhine Research Center (RRC) in North Carolina, requesting that someone there present it to Mrs. B on his behalf. So no one at the RRC knows (at least by normal means) the identity either of Mr. X or the original owner of the watch.

When Mrs. B handles the watch, she goes into trance and, speaking English as if it were not her native tongue and with a clear Scandinavian accent, purports to be the surviving personality of the Finnish composer Joonas Kokkonen. She also speaks a language unknown to anyone at the séance, which the sitters record and which experts later identify as fluent Finnish. At subsequent sittings, native speakers of Finnish attend,

along with the proxy, and converse with Mrs. B in their language. All the while, Mrs. B continues to speak Finnish fluently, demonstrating an ability not only to utter, but also to understand, sentences in Finnish. In both Finnish and in accented English, Mrs. B provides detailed information about Kokkonen's life and his music, demonstrating in the process an intimate acquaintance with Finnish culture, a professional command of music generally, and a knowledge of Kokkonen's music in particular. For example, on one occasion she writes out the final bars to an uncompleted piano quintet and requests that they be given to Kokkonen's former colleague, Aulis Sallinen, who she claims correctly has possession of the original score, so that the quintet can be assembled into a performing edition. Investigation then reveals that Sallinen does in fact have the original score, in the condition described by the Kokkonen communicator.

These sittings cause a minor sensation in Finland and elsewhere, and before long many of Kokkonen's friends travel to have anonymous sittings with Mrs. B. Because Kokkonen was a major international musical figure and had friends and colleagues throughout the world, many of those friends are not Scandinavian. So at least those sitters provide no immediate linguistic clue as to whom they wish to contact. But in every case, Mrs. B's Kokkonen-persona recognizes the sitter and demonstrates an intimate knowledge of details specific to Kokkonen's friendship with the sitter. When speaking to Kokkonen's musician friends, the Kokkonen-persona discusses particular compositions, performances, or matters of professional musical gossip. For example, with one sitter, the Kokkonen-persona discusses the relative merits of the Finlandia and BIS recordings of his cello concerto (neither of which the sitter had heard), and then complains about the recording quality of the old Fuga recording of his third string quartet. With another sitter, the Kokkonen-persona gossips enthusiastically and knowledgeably about a famous conductor's body odor.

Moreover, when speaking to nonmusician friends, the trance-persona speaks in similar detail about matters of personal interest to the sitter. Some of these later sittings are themselves proxy sittings. For example, the composer Pehr Nordgren arranges, anonymously, to be represented by a Midwestern wheat farmer. Mrs. B goes into trance immediately, mentions a term of endearment by which Kokkonen used to address Nordgren, and begins relating a discussion the two composers once had about Nordgren's violin concerto. Communications of this quality continue, consistently, for more than a year.

As in case 1, the subject of this case displays an enormous wealth of knowledge about a culture quite foreign to her own, as well as vast knowledge-that and knowledge-how of musical matters well beyond her education and exposure. Moreover, the quality and quantity of "hits" continues unimpeded for a considerable period of time.

Now I agree with Robert Almeder[26] that if we actually encountered cases of this quality, it would be irrational (in some important sense) not to regard them as compelling evidence of survival. And that would be the case even if we didn't know how to make sense of the evidence theoretically, and (in the most extreme scenario) even if our prior underlying metaphysics was clearly uncongenial to the idea of postmortem existence. Moreover, if several cases of (or near) that quality appeared, they would have a cumulative force. They would obviously comprise precisely the kind of evidence that could lead us to revise, abandon, or at least seriously reconsider a conventionally materialist worldview. Contrary to what many anti-survivalists seem to believe, philosophical intransigence in the face of such cases would not demonstrate admirable tough-mindedness. Instead, it would betray indefensible intellectual rigidity.

Unfortunately, we simply don't encounter cases of this quality; even the best of them disappoint in some respects. Nevertheless, the very best cases are rich enough to give us pause—at least if we don't have a metaphysical axe to grind. So, one virtue of looking at hypothetically ideal cases is that they remind us that it's not an idle enterprise to consider less than-ideal cases, even if the evidence is consistently frustrating in one way or another. The quest isn't futile; the evidence *can* point persuasively (if mysteriously) to postmortem survival, at least in principle.

Let's consider, now, certain bodies of evidence that I find especially intriguing, despite various (and probably inevitable) shortcomings.

Mrs. Piper and Crippling Complexity

What impresses many about the best cases of mental mediumship is the degree to which mediums *consistently* provide accurate information unknown normally to those attending the sitting. However (and perhaps unexpectedly), it's no easy matter to explain *why* this consistency is impressive. As we've seen, both survivalists and LAP-proponents must posit a great deal of effective ESP to explain how the living or

[26] Almeder, 1992

deceased manage to convey accurate information both frequently and over extended periods of time. And that raises an issue I've called Crippling Complexity.[27]

Probably no case of mediumship is stronger or more thoroughly documented than that of Mrs. Leonora E. Piper (1857-1950). And in fact, it's the case that most strongly influences me to be survival-sympathetic. Apparently, Mrs. Piper's first mediumistic stirrings occurred in childhood. At the age of eight, she had a veridical vision concerning the demise of her Aunt Sara, who (it was later discovered) had died at that time. Mrs. Piper's mediumistic career began in 1884, shortly after she married William Piper, who worked in a large store in Boston. In the hope of relieving the lingering effects of an accident years earlier (a collision with an ice sled), she paid a visit to a blind medium and healer named J. R. Cocke. On her first visit, Mrs. Piper fell into a short trance. And after falling into a trance again on her second visit, she rose from her chair, picked up a pencil and paper, and wrote down a short message for another of the persons present, Judge Frost from Cambridge, Massachusetts. The message purportedly came from the judge's deceased son, and although Frost had been investigating spiritualism for more than thirty years, it impressed him more than any he had previously received. After that, word of Mrs. Piper spread quickly, and before long she came to the attention of William James.

After her experiences with Mr. Cocke, Mrs. Piper began holding regular séances in her home. In those early days, several different controls or spirit-guides took charge of the séances, and all were somewhat incredible as actual surviving personalities—for example, a Native American girl called "Chlorine." Eventually, Mrs. Piper's early controls yielded to a vivid personality called Dr. Phinuit, who claimed to be a French physician, and who in most respects was no more believable than his predecessors. Phinuit's importance, like that of most controls, concerned the information he provided about other ostensible communicators.

In the early days of her mediumship, with Phinuit as principal control, Mrs. Piper communicated by voice rather than by writing. Most of the time, Phinuit spoke through Mrs. Piper on behalf of other communicators, but sometimes other communicators appeared to use the medium's organism on their own. However, toward the end of Phinuit's reign as principal control, Mrs. Piper communicated increasingly through automatic writing rather than through speech. The reason given for this change was that

[27] Braude, 2003.

communication by voice was considerably more fatiguing to the medium. During that transition period, Phinuit would sometimes communicate by voice while another personality communicated through writing.

In 1892, a new communicator appeared and gradually displaced Phinuit as Mrs. Piper's primary control.[28] This personality, "G. P.," purported to be George Pellew (usually referred to under the pseudonym "Pelham"), an acquaintance of SPR investigator Richard Hodgson. Pellew, who in life had been keenly interested in literature and philosophy, had died accidently several weeks earlier. Interestingly, he'd attended one of Mrs. Piper's séances five years before, but he'd been introduced under a pseudonym, and it's virtually certain that Mrs. Piper never knew who he was. G. P. manifested in automatic writing, and Phinuit occasionally (and sometimes simultaneously) continued to communicate by speech until his manifestations ended almost completely.

The period marked by G. P.'s reign as principal control lasted until 1897, at which time Mrs. Piper came under the regular control of a band of "high spirits," who assumed imposing names such as "Rector" and "Doctor" to disguise their real identities, and whose leader was a personality called "Imperator." Under their direction, the content of séances shifted away somewhat from evidential communications to lofty and often pretentious teachings, as well as occasional forays into pseudo-scientific speculation. But when Hodgson died in 1905, a Hodgson communicator manifested frequently as one of Mrs. Piper's controls, and sittings once again provided large amounts of ostensibly evidential material. Beginning around 1909, the medium's ability to enter into trance declined noticeably, and it ceased altogether in 1911.

It was William James who first brought Mrs. Piper to the attention of the parapsychological community. After a dozen sittings with her, he was sufficiently impressed to conduct a follow-up investigation in which he sent twenty-five sitters to Mrs. Piper under pseudonyms. Although this investigation didn't convince James of the reality of survival, he concluded that Mrs. Piper at least possessed an unexplained power. She "showed a most startling intimacy" with sitters' family affairs, "talking of many matters known to no one outside, and which *gossip* could not possibly have conveyed to her ears."[29]

---

[28] For the full story, see Hodgson, 1898, pp. 295ff.
[29] James, 1886, pp. 15–16.

James reported the results of his investigations to the leaders of the SPR, and as a result, Richard Hodgson moved to Boston in 1887 and took charge of the case. Hodgson had earned a reputation as a careful and skeptical investigator of psychic phenomena and as an expert in the detection of fraud. He scheduled séances without revealing the identity of the prospective sitters, and then he introduced them to Mrs. Piper either anonymously or under the pseudonym "Smith." He also paid particular attention to first sittings, when the medium's knowledge of her clients would be at a minimum. Hodgson realized that with each successive séance, Mrs. Piper would have additional opportunities to learn about her clients and their lives—for example, from the sitters' inadvertent revelations. Moreover, to ensure that Mrs. Piper wasn't surreptitiously acquiring information about her sitters through outside sources, Hodgson employed detectives for several weeks to shadow the medium and her husband. That investigation confirmed that Mrs. Piper wasn't gathering data normally about current or prospective sitters. Despite these and other precautions, Mrs. Piper's séances continued to be very impressive. Hodgson concluded,

> after allowing the widest possible margin for information obtainable...by ordinary means, for chance coincidence and remarkable guessing, aided by clues given consciously and unconsciously by the sitters, and helped out by supposed hyperaesthesia on the part of Mrs. Piper,—there remained a large residuum of knowledge displayed in her trance state, which could not be accounted for except on the hypothesis that she had some supernormal power.[30]

Mrs. Piper was then brought to England, because she had only "a very slender knowledge of English affairs and English people,"[31] and because other members of the SPR could then supervise séances and examine her trance-phenomena for themselves. In many cases, sitters just happened to be passing through Cambridge at the time and were certainly unknown to Mrs. Piper. As usual, investigators introduced most sitters under false names and kept detailed records. And as before, Mrs. Piper produced a great deal of impressive material.

Without question, Mrs. Piper's 25-year mediumistic career provides the best example of impressive mediumistic "hits" over an extended period, despite undoubted stretches of rubbish or inaccurate information. The question we must confront in such a case is: What degree of consistency can we reasonably expect? And here, we find that

---

[30] Hodgson, 1898, p. 285.
[31] Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James, 1889, p. 438.

survivalists and LAP-proponents seem to rely on the sorts of auxiliary assumptions I discussed earlier. Otherwise, they can have nothing to say about why the cases under consideration have the features we find. So is there any way to prevent a stalemate between their conflicting auxiliary assumptions? I think so.

To see why, we must first examine an illuminating parallel with psychic virtuosity or omniscience. It's related to the troubling question of whether psi in everyday life might sometimes be malevolent or lethal—what might otherwise be called examples of hexing or the evil eye. Skeptics sometimes wonder why, if thoughts can kill or maim, so many of us are still alive and intact?

Fortunately, there's a persuasive answer to this. As I've noted elsewhere,[32] even if psychic functioning is theoretically unlimited in refinement or magnitude, it might be severely curtailed in practice. For one thing, most (if not all) of our abilities or capacities are situation-sensitive; how and to what degree we express them depends on many contextual factors. Consider, for example, our capacity to circulate blood, focus our eyes, digest food, discuss intimate details of our lives, show compassion, display our wit or patience, or remember what we've read. These capacities, and probably all others, are neither constant nor uniform. They vary with our mood, health, age, time of day, level of stress, etc., and in general they can be diminished or enhanced in many ways. Even virtuosic abilities are vulnerable to numerous influences. For example, the performance of a great athlete can be impaired by injury, illness, temporary loss of confidence, preoccupation with personal problems, great opponents, or even weak opponents having a great day. Similarly, a musical virtuoso's ability to perform can be undermined, countered, or neutralized in various ways and to varying degrees.

It's reasonable to think, then, that psychic capacities are at least broadly continuous with all our other human capacities and that they would also exhibit various vulnerabilities. And not surprisingly, the evidence indeed suggests strongly that psychic functioning is, in fact, highly situation-sensitive and susceptible to numerous forms of interference. So it seems reasonable to suppose that no matter how extensive, refined, or virtuosic our psychic capacities might be, like our other capacities they will also be subject to actual case-by-case limitations.

But then, even if hostile psi is unlimited in scope or refinement, it's unlimited only in principle. It would still be subject to numerous actual constraints, just like normal

[32] Braude, 1997.

forms of hostility. It would be embedded within an enormously complex web of interactions, psi and nonpsi, overt and covert, local and global, and it would be vulnerable to various interferences or checks and balances (including psychic defenses) within that network. This conjecture strikes me as uncontroversial, commonsensical, and also unavoidable. Once we assume or grant that psychic interactions occur, then we must take a very liberal view of how our attempted psychic efforts (intentional and inadvertent) might be thwarted, even during periods of maximum fluency or potency. We must admit the possibility that *any exercise of psi* occurs within an enormously dense surrounding *causal nexus*, containing (among other things) an extensive range of potential obstacles or checks and balances. And that range must include both ongoing normal *and paranormal* phenomena—for example, psychic counterparts to more normal forms of interference. Of course, we might still be defeated by guilt, incompetence, and carelessness, just as we are in everyday cases. We might also be defeated by our intended victim's adequate defenses (which now must include psychic defenses). But perhaps most important, we might also be "caught in the crossfire" (so to speak) of processes otherwise unrelated to our interests.

The following example should make this clear. Suppose I hire one of the world's greatest corporate spies to steal a promising new formula from my business competitor, Gustav. No matter how skilled this spy is, his efforts could be frustrated in a number of ways. Of course, Gustav could make the spy's task more difficult by adding extra layers of security or otherwise enhancing his counter-espionage program. But more relevantly, other people will all the while be going about their own business, oblivious to the spy's mission, and some of their actions may inadvertently get in the way. The attempted corporate theft could be thwarted, *fortuitously*, by a vast range of countervailing factors and ongoing processes, probably most of which have nothing to do with the spy's particular assignment. Consider, for example, how the spy's plan of action could be frustrated by traffic jams, a flat tire, faulty telephone, airport weather delays, lost luggage, icy roads, elevator malfunction, a migraine headache, upset stomach, allergic reaction, an attack of the flu, or even a mugger. Although great spies might cope successfully with at least some of these unexpected developments, they can't anticipate or prevent every potential source of interference, no matter how skillful they are. So these remaining vulnerabilities don't indicate a lapse in the spy's virtuosity. They're simply vulnerabilities to annoyances and obstacles which *anyone* might have to confront.

Now the difference between this relatively normal case and that of sneaky, naughty, or otherwise wide-ranging psi is that in the latter the opportunities for causal preemption seem to increase dramatically. Once we allow psi interactions to be part of the overall causal picture, we need to entertain an immense range of potentially countervailing factors—in particular, the full spectrum of under-the-surface psychic activity. After all, both experimental and anecdotal evidence—not to mention common sense—suggest that psychic processes can be triggered unconsciously, presumably to serve various deep and genuinely motivating needs and interests. For example, that might be one way people ordinarily and subconsciously orchestrate their lives to either frustrate or promote their avowed interests. But in that case, *every person* could be making multiple attempts throughout the day to influence the world psychically or scan for desired information. Unless we think in these terms, we won't be taking seriously the possibility of psi and its role in nature. But once we do allow for this vast reservoir of potentially interfering factors, we might reasonably expect few (if any) of our psychic "efforts" to succeed, no matter how unlimited or powerful psi might be in principle. It may not be miraculous when one of those efforts successfully navigates the dense web of hindrances confronting it. But it might be more remarkable for it to succeed than for it to fail.

So when we turn back to the topic of survival, we find that mediumistic communication raises a parallel set of issues, for both survivalists and partisans of LAP. According to the LAP scenario, a medium must rely on ongoing or repeated ESP to be consistently successful throughout a séance and from one sitter to the next, especially over the course of a long career. And for the survivalist, long-lasting and genuinely discarnate communication requires consistent psychic interaction between the medium and the deceased, or between the deceased and the physical world. Presumably, then, that degree of reliability requires circumventing, for an extended period, potential obstacles from the surrounding causal nexus that could conceivably interfere with attempted psychic influence or information-gathering. Indeed, both LAP and survivalist explanations of mediumship seem to presuppose a formidably complex network of covert psychic activity, of which the mediums' psychic efforts are only a very small part.

But that's the problem. The more complex and extensive we allow the underlying network of psychic activities to be, the more potential obstacles there should be for any particular psychic inquiry or effort to navigate. Moreover, the possibility of psychic interference is especially acute if paranormal causality needn't be limited by physical distance—a position many psi researchers would accept. So just as a spy can be

caught in the crossfire of others' ongoing (but unrelated) activities, mediums could be thwarted by others' psychic activities, even when those activities are unrelated to their own interests, and possibly even when the interfering agents are located far away. Analogies are easy to come by—for example, slow searches on clogged internet channels, trying to hear someone speaking from across a busy and very noisy street, and threading one's way through an oppressive crowd of shoppers to find a salesperson. As the sets of competing activities in these scenarios become more dense or chaotic, the probability that any given effort will succeed would seem to decrease. But that can only make Mrs. Piper's continued successes seem more impressive.

Perhaps it will help to consider the above line of argument more systematically. My argument about Crippling Complexity can be presented stepwise, as follows.

(1) Most (if not all) of our abilities or capacities are situation-sensitive–including ordinarily subconscious and involuntary capacities and even virtuosic abilities.

(2) *Therefore*, it's reasonable to think that the manifestation of psychic capacities would also be situation-sensitive.

(3) The parapsychological evidence supports that conjecture.

(4) *Therefore*, it's reasonable to think that no matter how extensive, refined, or virtuosic psychic capacities might be, like other capacities they will also be subject to actual case-by-case limitations.

(5) The hypothesis that humans have psychic capacities presupposes a vast underlying network of both normal causality and (typically covert) psi-processes initiated both consciously and unconsciously.

(6) The denser and more extensive that network is, the more obstacles any particular psychic inquiry or effort must navigate in order to succeed (e.g., the more likely it is that an effort will be caught in the crossfire of underlying, and possibly unrelated, causal activity.)

(7) *Therefore*, the greater the range, pervasiveness, and refinement of psychic functioning (i.e., the more "super" we take it to be), the more vulnerable one's psychic efforts will be to paranormal interference from within the surrounding causal nexus, and the less likely it becomes that any given psychic effort will succeed, much less that a series of such efforts will succeed.

(8) *Therefore*, the more potentially wide-ranging and virtuosic we take psi to be, the less likely it becomes that a person's psi could produce an extended and accurate trance persona, or provide all the detailed, intimate information found in the most astonishing survival cases—and even more so, to do these things consistently.

In this light, Mrs. Piper's career looks particularly (and perhaps uniquely) impressive. But once again, we confront nagging complications. Although I'm about to do so, it's always a bit risky to argue for a position on grounds of simplicity or parsimony. After all, scientific simplicity can be understood in various ways. For example, a scientific theory can be simpler ontologically than its rivals, in virtue of positing fewer entities. Or it can be simpler in the sense that it explains the data with the fewest proposed first principles.[33] And unfortunately, there's no privileged standard of simplicity that trumps all others irrespective of some particular context of inquiry. Ultimately, our choice of one theory over another rests on a combination of pragmatic and aesthetic criteria, and an instinct for what's likely to be true.[34] Moreover, a theory or hypothesis can be relatively simple in one respect and relatively complex in another. In fact, as studies of formal systems in (say) logic and mathematics have demonstrated clearly, one kind of simplicity may actually *require* another kind of complexity. For example, systems of logic with few initial axioms and primitive connectives invariably have complex formulae and proofs, whereas systems with many initial axioms and connectives can boast quite simple formulae and proofs. But in that case, the formal system itself can't be regarded as straightforwardly either simple or complex.

Now as I've been arguing, success at a psi task apparently requires avoiding or neutralizing a potentially huge array of deliberate and adventitious obstacles from the surrounding causal nexus. So mediumistic success (and psychic success generally) might be analogous to walking carefully through a minefield while also managing to avoid the crossfire of continuing hostilities. And of course, obstacles from the causal nexus can interfere with both living-agent and survival psi. Nevertheless, there may be

[33] A useful and accessible summary of relevant issues is Fitzpatrick, 2013.

[34] This was a recurring theme in the works of the founder of American Pragmatism, C.S. Peirce. See, e.g., Braude, 2020 , Chapter 10. There are always an infinite number of hypotheses that in their own way can accommodate our data. But of course, scientists never examine all those hypotheses. Rather, they tend to home in on the most likely candidates. This happens, Peirce argued, because humans have a distinctive faculty for understanding things, and although it sometimes leads us astray, it eventually gets us back on track. In fact, Peirce thought that this faculty accounts largely for the continued advance of science.

reasonable grounds for concluding that the scenarios envisioned by LAP-partisans are more vulnerable to interference than the scenario posited by survivalists.

Notice that this is not a point about the amount or degree *of psi* required by LAP and survivalist accounts. As we saw earlier, both survivalist and LAP explanations of mediumship require plenty of ongoing psi, either between the medium and the deceased (or the deceased and the physical world), or between medium and sitters (or medium and the physical world). And we noted as well that there's no privileged standard according to which one instance of psi can be conclusively regarded as more amazing than another. Besides, we simply know too little about how or why psi works to say confidently that one psi achievement is more remarkable than another. So *psychic* impressiveness is not the issue here. Rather, the argument above concerns a kind of *explanatory* complexity—specifically, the number of *distinct causal chains* required by the LAP and survivalist hypotheses.

We see, then, that survivalists can explain Mrs. Piper's channeling of accurate and meaningful information about the deceased simply by positing the integrity of a channel of communication between the medium and the deceased, possibly supplemented by the deceased's telepathic or clairvoyant access to states of the world. But the LAP alternative requires at least that much. Of course, in some cases it may require no more than a successful mediumistic connection to the sitter's memories of Mr. X. But in the better cases (the ones that matter), mediums produce subsequently verified information about the deceased *not* known normally to the sitter, and therefore out of the medium's telepathic "reach." Thus, an appeal to living-agent psi would require positing additional telepathic or clairvoyant links between the medium and the world outside the séance room. Granted, this difference won't give the survivalist hypothesis a conclusive explanatory advantage over the LAP rival, but an appeal to explanatory parsimony is a familiar and generally defensible reason to prefer one scientific hypothesis over another when both seem to accommodate the same data.

Before leaving the subject of Mrs. Piper's mediumship and my argument about explanatory complexity, we must acknowledge another annoying background issue—in fact, an assumption that may have no rational justification. We need to consider why *Nature* would privilege the seemingly more causally streamlined survivalist scenario over that of LAP. There's no doubt that many people instinctively find the survival hypothesis to be attractively simple by comparison. But why should *Nature* privilege what appeals to our notion of simplicity? And what defensible reason do we have for

thinking that simpler theories are more likely to be true? Indeed, many would argue that advances in science have actually affirmed that Nature is more complex than we appreciated previously. Of course, this is a very deep topic, discussed at great length by philosophers of science, and we can't do it justice here. Still, it would be prudent not to forget it.

Thus, my—still tentative—conclusion is that the consistency of Mrs. Piper's successes poses a significant challenge to the non-survivalist. Granted, the evidence doesn't carry the coercive weight of the hypothetically ideal cases I sketched earlier, and it offers no escape from relying on controversial metaphysical assumptions. But it would be a rationally defensible basis for concluding that Mrs. Piper's case is genuine evidence of survival. Indeed, I consider it the strongest case we have for survival, and I'd say no other body of evidence comes close.

CORT Investigations: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

I realize, of course, that many have considered some cases of the reincarnation type (CORT) to be more persuasive still. In fact, in Braude, 2003 I flirted with that position myself. However, these days I'm less enthusiastic. For one thing, some of the cases seem vulnerable to the charge of biased and sloppy investigation. For example, some reputedly good cases were investigated considerably after the fact, when the subject was no longer showing many (or any) signs of reincarnation, when ostensible memories of the key players are likely to have faded, and when the parents' original notes (if any) may have been destroyed. That's one of several conspicuous flaws in the recent and oft-cited James Leininger case,[35] and in fact there are good reasons for thinking that the two principal accounts by Leininger and Tucker are riddled with falsehoods and confusions.[36]

---

[35] Leininger & Leininger, 2009; Tucker, 2013.

[36] Regrettably, I can't provide more details here. Michael Sudduth has explored this case in depth, and I expect to publish his report in the near future. In the meantime, Sudduth has provided me with the following abstract.

> Jim Tucker's published analysis of the James Leininger case depends heavily on the testimony of James's parents, Bruce and Andrea Leininger, but their account of events is inconsistent and involves several significant factual errors that bear directly on the plausibility of their reincarnation story. Not only has Tucker not acknowledged these inconsistencies and errors - he's actually repeated some of them - he's failed to look into several aspects of the case which provide a very plausible normal explanation of James's behavior and claims. Consequently, Tucker prematurely and without justification dismisses alternative explanations of the data, and just as hastily concludes that reincarnation is the obvious explanation, when it is nothing of the sort.

However, other weaknesses of the CORT material are even more glaring and more pervasive. First, a solid majority of the investigations betray a lamentable and often surprising psychological superficiality—treating the subject and relevant others as mere psychological stick figures, rather than the real-life steaming, stinky caldrons of issues, fears, and hidden agendas that deeply influence human behavior.[37] But in that case, the investigators will have failed to consider the strongest and most relevant motivated LAP alternative explanations. Second, the case studies too often provide only shallow treatment of key topics having their own extensive and obviously pertinent literatures—for example, on the nature of language mastery, and the mysteries of savants, prodigies, and dissociative creativity. But then they will have failed to consider seriously how the Unusual Suspects can account for the anomalous abilities of some subjects in CORT and mediumship cases (e.g., the alleged musical abilities of Bishen Chand,[38] or the literary prowess of Pearl Curran, the medium for Patience Worth[39]). In fact, CORT investigations routinely display serious confusions about the nature of abilities and skills generally.[40]

Moreover, in most good reincarnation cases, subjects provide a striking number of detailed and subsequently verified statements about the life and location of the previous personality. However, many of those statements are elicited from the subjects through direct questions—for example, of the form “Do you know who this is?” or “What was the name of [the previous personality’s] uncle?” We can have good reason to be impressed when subjects successfully answer many of these questions. Nevertheless, there’s a problem assessing the information provided under direct questioning.

Once we grant the possibility of telepathy, and also the relevance of motivations among the living for specific outcomes, these scenarios present a clear context for telepathic success, even if they provide no guarantee. Moreover, explicit requests for information aren’t the only contexts pregnant with hope or expectation for verifiable statements. Suppose subjects visit the previous personality’s house or village and spontaneously identify faces in the crowd (or mention obscure details about the location). If witnesses verify these statements on the spot, then someone present knew the information already and quite possibly hoped that the subject would volunteer that sort of—and perhaps even that specific—information. But then a subject’s achievement

[37] See, e.g., my discussion of the Sharada case: Braude, 2003, Chapter 4.
[38] Sahay, 1927; Stevenson, 1972, 1975.
[39] Braude, 2003; Prince, 1927/1964.
[40] A topic dealt with more thoroughly in Braude, 2014.

under these conditions seems no more remarkable, and no more indicative of survival, than the relatively frequent instances in which Mrs. Piper's or Mrs. Leonard's communicators provided *recent* information about the living—that is, facts to which deceased communicators would have no privileged or private access.[41]

Granted, some features of CORT cases seem especially striking. As I noted in Braude, 2003, I'm intrigued by the apparent sincerity and intensity of the emotions of the child subject when confronted with friends or family members of the previous personality. (I'm assuming, of course, that the reports can be trusted and observers weren't simply projecting their hopes or expectations onto the child's behavior.) For example, when he saw the decrepit condition of the home of the previous personality's mistress, young Bishen Chand reportedly wept bitterly and lamented that no one had maintained the place after his death. Now granted, one must be careful about accepting such reports at face value. They can too easily reflect the hopes or beliefs of those issuing the reports. But if Bishen Chand really wept *bitterly* upon seeing Laxmi Narain's former home, that reaction is very interesting. Weeping bitterly is probably difficult to describe precisely, but it's clearly distinguishable from a child's crying in pain or distress. The two types of crying have a different feel and presentation; only one of them seems appropriate to an adult; and it's unclear how a child would know how to simulate such an adult reaction. Bitterness is a state of mind that presupposes considerable maturity and profound disappointment (and possibly a hefty amount of weltschmerz)—not something we expect children to experience and understand.

However, I can't review further, here, my detailed criticisms (in Braude, 2003) of CORT evidence and the familiar challenges posed by the Unusual Suspects or LAP. Rather, I prefer to address another apparent vulnerability in CORT studies, one that bothers me more now than it did previously, and which also highlights the distinctive virtues of the cases I find even stronger. That will allow us shortly to consider a seemingly related and very intriguing body of cases not open to that concern.

So let's consider what we could call the *Problem of Investigative Intricacy.* Exploring a CORT case is typically a complicated and messy business. Investigators must interview the subject, family members, and (when possible) crucial figures in the life of the previous personality. In fact, it typically requires considerable detective and interpretive work merely to identify the previous personality from the often vague or

[41] See Braude, 2003, Chapter 3.

ambiguous behaviors and statements of the subject. And then, investigators must still obtain testimony from the remaining living persons (if any) who knew the apparent previous personality, simply to establish that the subject's apparent recollections about the previous personality are reliable. Moreover, the interview process can be muddied by the fallibility of memory, and by conscious or subconscious motives either to please (or frustrate) the interlocutor or simply to confirm a deep wish for the case to be a genuine instance of reincarnation. And of course, many cases also require the services of translators whose own biases, inadequacies, and needs might influence the direction or accuracy of the testimony obtained. So a great deal of work is required to obtain clear and reliable early-bird testimony, establish a strong link between that testimony (or the subject's behavior) and a previous personality, and to ensure the accuracy of the information obtained from interviews. In short, CORT investigations require a great deal of work simply to establish the reliable and relevant facts of the case.

The problem here is that other bodies of evidence don't require such a complex process either to identify the deceased or to establish a clear link between the living and the deceased. In Mrs. Piper's case we have many interactions between the medium and sitters who knew the deceased well. So when Mrs. Piper channeled a message having intimate relevance to the sitter (e.g., an affectionate and private nickname), we know immediately who the deceased seems to be. That link is clear even in proxy cases, where the person desiring the communication with the deceased anonymously appoints a proxy to attend the sitting, thereby seeming to rule out telepathic leakage from the sitter. The remaining challenge, then, is to decide between LAP and survivalist explanations of the ostensible communication. Moreover, it's not just cases of mediumship that boast such a clear connection to the deceased. Shortly, we'll examine another body of evidence where that link is transparent right from the start.

The problem of investigative intricacy resembles a problem with the so-called *Cross-Correspondences*, a vast collection of allegedly linked mediumistic messages that began in 1901 and lasted for thirty-one years. The initial and principal participants on "the other side" were prominent founders of the SPR: Edmund Gurney, Henry Sidgwick, and F. W. H. Myers, who had died (respectively) in 1888, 1900, and 1901. And the principal investigators of the scripts were several leading members of the SPR: Alice Johnson, J. G. Piddington, G. W. Balfour, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Mrs. E. M. Sidgwick. The idea for these communications ostensibly originated with the communicators.

The communications in question were fragmentary messages, sprinkled liberally with Greek and Latin phrases, as well as many classical and literary allusions. Ordinarily, that would seem to detract from their value, but in fact the disjointed nature of the communications was a vital part of the alleged underlying plan. The messages were *supposed* to be apparently meaningless when considered by themselves, and they were also supposed to have no personal significance to the medium. But they were supposed to show *design* and hang together when deciphered by investigators familiar with the personalities and interests of the ostensible communicators.

Naturally, some suspected that the alleged coherence of the fragmentary scripts simply reflected the imagination and educational breadth of the those examining the scripts. Moreover, it could also reflect the fact that similarly educated mediums, and telepathically active or accessible sitters, are likely to share a broad background of knowledge and reservoir of allusions.

I don't want to dismiss this body of material. For example, it's interesting when a communicator claims to have just completed a cross-correspondence and gives clues as to the links between scripts. Considering the lack of normal communication between the various mediums who channeled the scripts, this suggests that something psychic was going on—quite possibly just among the living. But we're considering what the *best* evidence of survival might be, and from that perspective, the cross-correspondences have an ineliminable and troubling feature. Much of the voluminous commentary on the cross-correspondence material is devoted to detailed and seemingly inconclusive debates over the proper translation, interpretation, and significance of its obscure allusions and quotations. But clearly, mediumistic material is evidentially weak if it consistently provokes these sorts of apparently unresolvable debates, even among readers sympathetic to parapsychological data. Of course, all the survival material is controversial to some extent, even within parapsychology. But the debates over the cross-correspondences seem particularly extensive and fundamental. Unlike the case of Mrs. Piper, and even unlike good CORT and possession cases, the cross-correspondences generate substantive concerns about their *prima facie* evidentiality, and also their paranormality. No wonder Thouless commented,

> The cross-correspondence technique was too elaborate. It seems to be the products of minds who realized the necessity for evidence but not the equal necessity for the value of evidence being easily assessed. (Thouless, 1959)

So the cross-correspondences have a feature, a kind of gratuitous intricacy, that seems especially difficult to swallow. According to the customary survivalist interpretation of these cases, several deceased individuals orchestrate an elaborate cross-correspondence among different mediums over an extended period, drawing on obscure but allegedly idiosyncratic classical and literary references and allusions. However, one has to wonder: If these deceased collaborators could pull that off, couldn't they more easily (or just as easily) have provided a single medium with evidence that's not so perplexingly indirect—for example, incontrovertibly convincing and detailed straightforward manifestations of their surviving memories, personalities, interests, and activities? A cross-correspondence simply multiplies obscurities and adds an interpretive challenge thankfully missing from (say) Mrs. Piper's G. P. or Hodgson manifestations.[42] And, along with Thouless, I find it hard to believe that Sidgwick, Gurney, and Myers, who were so consistently perspicacious during embodiment, would in the next life fail to grasp this relatively simple point about evidential strength—especially if they were still cognitively sophisticated enough to assemble the more elaborate and erudite cross-correspondences.

CORT cases, then, exhibit a kind of intricacy not found in the best cases of mental mediumship. And both the cross-correspondences and CORT investigations rely on evidence that's dauntingly difficult to investigate and evaluate. We can now throw these shortcomings into sharper relief by considering a refreshingly more straightforward body of evidence.

Transplant Cases and Lingering Spirits:

One reason good mediumship cases command our attention is that they seem to reveal the deceased actively attempting to make themselves known, discuss their histories, and express their needs and interests. By contrast, other bodies of evidence (perhaps most notably, haunting cases) suggest that the deceased or remnants of personality merely *attach* to things, without attempted self-identification and without the conversational and behavioral self-expression displayed in most cases of mediumship, reincarnation, and possession.

[42] Moreover (and ironically), survivalists who consider the cross-correspondences to be good evidence are in a uniquely bad position to reject LAP conjectures on grounds of parsimony.

It's not surprising to find these latter cases. In some ways they seem to be stripped-down variants of what we find in mediumship. After all, in mediumship (and also in cases of apparent possession), the deceased seem to do two things. First, they apparently attach to or connect psychically with people. And second, they apparently try to identify themselves and communicate. But why should the second of these always accompany the first? If one's personality can survive bodily death, it seems reasonable to think that the deceased might do no more than hover or linger. Of course, here, as always, we're forced to rely on auxiliary assumptions, none of which are independently verifiable and no one of which enjoys obvious superiority over rival assumptions. So we have no clear way to assess confidently how reasonable it is to assume that the deceased might be content not to communicate with the living, but simply to observe or psychically harass them.

At any rate, if the deceased might do no more than hover, we might still expect to find traces or remnants of their activity. Like more ordinary corporeal loiterers and hangers-on who simply won't go away or who have trouble letting go, they might make their "presence" felt without actively trying to communicate. Moreover, if the deceased can attach to (or hover around) people, or locations (as in haunting cases), then presumably they can attach to other things as well.

Among cases suggesting the activity or presence of lingering spirits, organ transplant cases are particularly intriguing. For one thing, they constitute a significant body of *new* evidence. And for another, transplant cases reinforce the impression, easily gained from cases of mediumship, reincarnation, and possession, that the *form* of survival evidence reflects surrounding cultural and social forces. Mediumship is tied to spiritistic beliefs of some sort, and reincarnation and possession cases are most prevalent in communities whose belief systems readily accommodate the phenomena. Of course, that doesn't show that the phenomena are nothing but social constructs. But it suggests that survival evidence varies in its *symptom language*, like the differing and culturally specific forms of dissociative disorders.[43] Not surprisingly, the evidence from transplant cases seems distinctively restricted to more technologically developed and affluent parts of the world, where transplant operations are accessible and affordable.

[43] For example, many have suggested that cases of apparent demonic possession express the same underlying process as contemporary cases of multiple personality/dissociative identity disorder (see Braude, 1995).

Moreover, transplant cases apparently introduce evidence of a new *type*. They expand the empirical horizon in our search for evidence of survival, and they present us with a distinctive network of needs and interests which we can try to accommodate with the LAP and survival hypotheses. When we think along survivalist lines, it's easy to imagine why, after their tragic and premature deaths, organ donors might cling to their earthly connections. Of course, advocates of LAP would emphasize a different set of causally relevant motives. Donors would not be the only individuals with apparently burning needs. Organ recipients and the families of both donor and recipient will also have deep concerns, and they must be addressed as well. For example, we need to consider not simply how much the recipient and recipient's family knew about the donor, but how much they *wanted* to know. Similarly, we need to consider whether members of the donor's family urgently seek evidence of the donor's survival. And of course, organ recipients tend to feel a deep bond with their donor, and that bond may be expressed in a variety of ways, both flagrant and subtle.

Some try explaining transplant cases in terms of cellular memory.[44] But that approach is deeply flawed (in fact, incoherent). Space prohibits a critical discussion of the problems with the hypothesis of cellular memory. For now, it's enough to note that it seems to face the same fatal difficulties confronting all trace theories of memory.[45] But more important, and contrary to what proponents seem to believe, appealing to cellular memory actually *harms* the case for survival. It's an attempt to *explain away* the evidence for postmortem survival by (a) recasting it in what its proponents erroneously believe are scientifically credible terms, and (b) linking personality (or at least a limited set of dispositions) to cells of *still-functioning body parts*. Thus, explanations in terms of cellular memory treat transplant cases as *limiting cases* (given today's technology) of *antemortem* survival. So long as (at least certain?) organs continue to function, total bodily death hasn't occurred, although of course bodily integrity has been seriously compromised.

Good transplant cases are profoundly intriguing, and some in particular provide tantalizing clues as to why appeals to living-agent psi might not satisfactorily handle the phenomena. Of course, here (as always), we have no choice but to make some undefended assumptions along the way. But that's only an impediment to certitude. One

[44] E.g., Liester, 2020; Pearsall, Schwartz, & Russek, 1999, 2002.
[45] Braude, 2014; Bursen, 1978; Heil, 1978.

can still appeal to (and argue about) what's *reasonable* to believe, given our various options.

Public awareness of transplant evidence probably began with the publication of *A Change of Heart* in 1997 (Sylvia, 1997). In this book, Claire Sylvia described the personality shifts she experienced after her heart and lung transplant in 1988. She noted these changes before meeting her donor's family and learning about his character. For example, she found herself craving food she had previously disliked, but which her donor, Tim, had enjoyed. Among these were beer (which Claire felt like drinking shortly after her surgery), green peppers, and Kentucky Fried Chicken nuggets. The last of these seemed particularly odd, considering that Claire was a dancer and choreographer who had always been very careful about her diet. Moreover, KFC nuggets were found in Tim's jacket when he was killed. Claire's color preferences and level of aggressiveness also changed in ways that seemed more Tim-like.

Claire's changes were accompanied by some interesting dreams during the first few months after her surgery. In one dream, she met a man named Tim L, who (it turned out) resembled her donor, and at the end of the dream she kissed and inhaled Tim into her. In another dream she changed from a woman to a man, and then back to a woman.

But Claire's experiences aren't unique, and other cases seem even more remarkable. Consider the following case summaries, taken from a review of ten similar cases involving heart or heart-lung recipients (Pearsall et al., 1999).

Case 1

> The donor was a 17-year-old black male student victim of a drive-by shooting. The recipient was a 47-year-old white male foundry worker diagnosed with aortic stenosis.
>
> The donor's mother reported:
>
> "Our son was walking to violin class when he was hit. Nobody knows where the bullet came from, but it just hit him and he fell. He died right there on the street hugging his violin case. He loved music and his teachers said he had a real thing for it. He would listen to music and play along with it. I think he would

have been at Carnegie Hall someday, but the other kids always made fun of the music he liked."

The recipient reported:

"I'm real sad and all for the guy who died and gave me his heart, but I really have trouble with the fact that he was black. I'm not a racist, mind you, not at all. Most of my friends at the plant are black guys. But the idea that there is a black heart in a white body seems really...well, I don't know. I told my wife I thought my penis might grow to a black man's size. They say black men have larger penises, but I don't know for sure. After we have sex, I sometimes feel guilty because a black man made love to my wife, but I don't really think that seriously. I can tell you one thing, though: I used to hate classical music, but now I love it. So I know it's not my new heart, because a black guy from the hood wouldn't be into that. Now it calms my heart. I play it all the time. I more than like it. I play it all the time. I didn't tell any of the guys on the line that I have a black heart, but I think about it a lot."

The recipient's wife reports:

"He was more than concerned about the idea when he heard it was a black man's heart. He actually asked me if he could ask the doctor for a white heart when one came up. He's no Archie Bunker, but he's close to it. And he would kill me if he knew I told you this, but for the first time, he's invited his black friends over from work. It's like he doesn't see their color anymore even though he still talks about it sometimes. He seems more comfortable and at ease with these black guys, but he's not aware of it. And one more thing I should say: he's driving me nuts with the classical music. He doesn't know the name of one song and never, never listened to it before. Now, he sits for hours and listens to it. He even whistles classical music songs that he could never know. How does he know them? You'd think he'd like rap music or something because of his black heart." (Pearsall *et al.*, 1999, p. 68)

Case 2

The donor was a 24-year-old female automobile accident victim. The recipient was a 25-year-old male graduate student suffering from cystic fibrosis who received a heart-lung transplant.

The donor's sister reported:

"My sister was a very sensual person. Her one love was painting. She was on her way to her first solo showing at a tiny art shop when a drunk plowed into her. It's a lesbian art store that supports gay artists. My sister was not really very 'out' about it, but she was gay. She said her landscape paintings were really representations of the mother or woman figure. She would look at a naked woman model and paint a landscape from that! Can you imagine? She was gifted."

The recipient reported:

"I never told anyone at first, but I thought having a woman's heart would make me gay. Since my surgery, I've been hornier than ever and women just seem to look even more erotic and sensual, so I thought I might have gotten internal transsexual surgery. My doctor told me it was just my new energy and lease on life that made me feel that way, but I'm different. I know I'm different. I make love like I know exactly how the woman's body feels and responds—almost as if it is my body. I have the same body, but I still think I've got a woman's way of thinking about sex now."

The recipient's girlfriend reported:

"He's a much better lover now. Of course, he was weaker before, but it's not that. He's like, I mean he just knows my body as well as I do. He wants to cuddle, hold, and take a lot of time. Before he was a good lover, but not like this. It's just different. He wants to hug all the time and go shopping. My God, he never wanted to shop. And you know what, he carries a purse now. His purse! He slings it over his shoulder and calls it his bag, but it's a purse. He hates it when I say that, but going to the mall with him is like going with one of the girls. And one more thing, he loves to go to museums. He would never, absolutely never do that. Now he would go every week. Sometimes he stands for minutes and looks at a painting without talking. He loves landscapes and just stares. Sometimes I just leave him there and come back later." (Pearsall *et al.*, 1999, pp. 67–68)

Case 3

For reasons I'll explain shortly, I find this case especially intriguing. The donor was a 16-month-old boy who drowned in a bathtub. The recipient was a 7-month-old boy diagnosed with Tetalogy of Fallot (a hole in the ventricular septum with displacement of the aorta, pulmonary stenosis, and thickening of the right ventricle).

The donor's mother is a physician:

"When Carter [recipient] first saw me, he ran to me and pushed his nose against me and rubbed it. It was just exactly what we did with Jerry [donor]."

"I'm a doctor. I'm trained to be a keen observer and have always been a natural born skeptic. But this was real. I know people will say I need to believe my son's spirit is alive, and perhaps I do. But I felt it. My husband and my father felt it. And I swear to you, and you can ask my mother, Carter said the same baby-talk words that Jerry said. Carter is [now] six, but he was talking Jerry's baby talk and playing with my nose just like Jerry did."

"We stayed with the [recipient family] that night. In the middle of the night, Carter came in and asked to sleep with my husband and me. He cuddled up between us exactly like Jerry did, and we began to cry. Carter told us not to cry because Jerry said everything was okay. My husband, I, our parents, and those who really knew Jerry have no doubt. Our son's heart contains much of our son and beats in Carter's chest. On some level, our son is still alive."

The recipient's mother reported:

"I saw Carter go to her [the donor's mother]. He never does that. He is very, very shy, but he went to her just like he used to run to me when he was a baby. When he whispered 'It's okay mama', I broke down. He called her mother, or maybe it was Jerry's heart talking. And one more thing that got to us: we found out talking to Jerry's mom that Jerry had mild cerebral palsy mostly on his left side. Carter has stiffness and some shaking on that same side. He never did as a baby and it only showed up after the transplant. The doctors say it's probably something to do with his medical condition, but I really think there's more to it."

"One more thing I'd like to know about. When we went to church together, Carter had never met Jerry's father. We came late and Jerry's dad was sitting

with a group of people in the middle of the congregation. Carter let go of my hand and ran right to that man. He climbed on his lap, hugged him and said 'Daddy'. We were flabbergasted. How could he have known him? Why did he call him Dad? He never did things like that. He would never let go of my hand in church and never run to a stranger. When I asked him why he did it, he said he didn't. He said Jerry did and he went with him." (Pearsall *et al.*, 1999, p. 67)

How should we understand these cases? Of course, the testimony is fascinating, and it should be clear that we can't discount it simply by appealing to the Usual Suspects. Granted, the recipient in case 2 knew that his donor was female. So we might credibly interpret the recipient's use of a purse and his new interest in shopping as a kind of role-playing due to suggestion. We could claim that knowledge of his donor's gender unleashed his feminine side, which until that time had been largely latent. But other features of the recipient's behavior seem not only less generically feminine, but rather specific to the donor—for example, his newfound interest in museums and landscapes. Similarly, it's unclear why knowledge of his donor's gender would lead to the more specific and intimate knowledge about female anatomy demonstrated during lovemaking, much less the knowledge-*how* demonstrated at those times but never before. Case 1 offers additional striking examples of donor-specific behavior, because the recipient's new interests ran counter to his expectations and racial stereotypes.

Appeals to living-agent psi also have limited utility, although they perhaps take us somewhat further. For example, recipient-ESP or donor-family telepathic influence might help explain the donor-specific behavior exhibited in case 1, and young Carter's Jerry-like behavior in case 3. And in all the cases it's easy to imagine why the donor's family and the recipient might deeply wish for indications of the donor's post-mortem persistence.

Nevertheless, I find these cases to be unusually compelling, and they gain some additional force when combined with the small number of other reported cases. The doner-specific attitudes and behaviors expressed by the recipient are strikingly distinct from those previously displayed by the recipient, and they may also have been quite idiosyncratic to the donor. That's why these cases appear to support what we could call the *hover hypothesis*: that the donor's surviving personality (or a fragment thereof) remains close (in a sense needing to be explained) to the organ recipient (or to the transplanted organs).

Case 3 is particularly interesting in that connection, because the recipient Carter claims that the donor Jerry accompanies him and sometimes controls his body. And I suspect there are good (but of course, not conclusive) reasons for taking this report seriously. We've had evidence for several decades that children score more poorly on ESP tests as they age, pass through the educational system, and presumably learn that others consider displays of psi to be unacceptable or impossible (Winkelman, 1980, 1981). Similarly, a child's reports of having invisible playmates, or seeing and communicating with dead family members is often met (at least in developed countries) with disapproval from parents and teachers. So rather than regard Carter's testimony as naïve, we should perhaps consider it to be unexpectedly accurate, unbiased and unpolluted by social and familial pressures to conform.

And if that's the case, then we might be able to situate transplant cases within what we seem to know already about different kinds of survival evidence. If we're entitled to take Carter's testimony at face value, case 3 looks a bit like a case of sporadic *possession*. Apparently, Carter felt that Jerry was *with* him much of the time and sometimes took over the body. And at those times it was Carter who accompanied Jerry. So perhaps we should regard at least some transplant cases as a subset of possession cases: namely, those possession cases in which transplanted organs provide a clear motivating link between possessor and host. And if that's the case, then the transplant cases may not be nearly as unprecedented as they seem at first. They would still be cases of a new type, but that type wouldn't differ radically from other forms of possession.

This approach to the cases also clarifies possible connections with reports of hauntings. According to survival-sympathetic interpretations of those reports, the deceased hover around locations. Obviously, one could say approximately the same about transplant cases. The difference would be that the location in question is a moving target—namely, wherever the organ recipient happens to be.

Clearly, it would be useful to have more case studies, and perhaps especially studies of organ transplants in young children, to help clarify whether or not Carter's understanding of his situation is an anomaly. Unfortunately, although organ transplants are increasingly common, survival-sympathetic studies of these cases are not, though of course one can find additional accounts on the Internet (see, e.g., https://listverse.com/2016/05/14/10-organ-recipients-who-took-on-the-traits-of-their-

donors/). This probably reflects the prevailing, but naïve, assumption that cellular memory can account for the phenomena.[46]

It would also be interesting to have follow-up reports on the transplant recipients, to see whether their new donor-specific characteristics have persisted. It's well-known that the survival evidence *cannot* show that everyone survives death, or that those who survive do so eternally. The evidence more clearly supports the view that some survive, and that when they do, they survive for a limited time. Thus, it could be illuminating to see whether we have indications that (aspects of) the donor last throughout the life of the recipient. Evidence of continued donor-persistence might then distinguish these cases from most mediumship and CORT cases. So even if one judges that the transplant evidence is not stronger than other bodies of evidence, it might still turn out to be distinctively useful in virtue of the light it sheds on postmortem longevity.

Moreover, it would be especially interesting to have a follow-up report on case 3, to see whether the now older Carter still feels Jerry is with (or around) him. Will that perspective be eradicated as Carter learns from family and others which beliefs are acceptable? Or will there have been a blending of Jerry and Carter's personalities as Carter matures? If so, we could see an interesting link to cases of dissociative identity disorder, where alter identities sometimes seem to blend during the integration process.[47] Here, too, we have to wonder whether the prevailing, and naively trendy, fascination with cellular memory, diverts inquiry in other directions.

One potential stumbling block in the search for new good transplant cases is that many people now know that such cases occur. So it will presumably be increasingly difficult to find "pure" cases that haven't been shaped in advance by prevailing expectations or the popular wisdom. In any case, and despite the relative paucity of material, the transplant cases remain valuable. They take the study of survival in a new direction, and compared to CORT cases the link between deceased and living is uncommonly transparent and easily understood. As we've seen, transplant investigations require no lengthy search simply to establish a credible connection to the deceased.

One more striking case

[46] E.g., Liester, 2020.
[47] See Braude, 1995.

When we examined the mediumship of Mrs. Piper, we noted that she had an impressive record of providing, over many years, consistently accurate information about the deceased. We also saw that survivalists seem to explain that consistent success more neatly than partisans of LAP, even if both deceased and living-agent psi activities confront obstacles from the surrounding causal nexus. Similarly, when we considered CORT and transplant cases, we saw again that survivalists can boast a kind of causal or explanatory simplicity which many would consider to be a theoretical asset when compared to more causally complex LAP scenarios. Now although I can't go into great detail here, I should note that the fascinating Thompson-Gifford case of ostensible possession (or obsession) may also combine the virtues of both consistency and explanatory parsimony (although the former may be more difficult to assess than in the case of Mrs. Piper). In any case, because it clearly reinforces the lessons learned from the examples considered earlier, it merits a brief discussion.

The Thompson-Gifford case is most fully described in principal investigator James Hyslop's painstaking and meticulous account, which consumed 469 pages in the 1909 *Proceedings of the ASPR* (Hyslop, 1909). The subject of the case was a thirty-six-year-old goldsmith from New York City, Frederic L. Thompson. During an earlier apprenticeship as an engraver, he had exhibited some talent for sketching. But apart from a few art lessons during his school years, he had no formal training in art. However, throughout the summer and autumn of 1905 he often found himself seized by powerful impulses to sketch and paint in oils. These impulses began to dominate Thompson's life, and (as his wife confirmed) during these periods he often felt that he was the artist Robert Swain Gifford.

When Thompson attended an exhibition of Gifford's work in January 1906, he learned that Gifford had died a year earlier, approximately six months before Thompson's apparent obsession began. Moreover, as he looked at one of Gifford's paintings, he had an apparent auditory hallucination. A voice said to him, "You see what I have done. Can you not take up and finish my work?" This experience seemed only to strengthen Thompson's urge to paint, and he began having frequent auditory and visual hallucinations.

Reportedly, Thompson had always been somewhat dreamy or distracted, but his current situation was more extreme. He painted in mental states ranging from slight dissociation to nearly complete automatism, and as these episodes became more common, he began neglecting his work. Before long, his financial situation deteriorated

badly, and both Thompson and his wife Carrie feared that he was becoming insane. So on January 16, 1907, Thompson sought advice from Hyslop, who at first also suspected that Thompson might be insane.

Nevertheless, Hyslop was intrigued enough by Thompson's obsession with Gifford to arrange a series of anonymous sittings for Thompson with several mediums he'd found to be impressive. The most significant of these sittings, on March 16, 1907, was with Mrs. Chenoweth. Thompson entered the séance room only after Mrs. Chenoweth's trance had begun, and the session was preserved in full stenographic records. The medium's control mentioned numerous specific items that seemed clearly to apply to Gifford, many of them subsequently confirmed by Mrs. Gifford. These included Gifford's distinctive clothing and mannerisms (Hyslop, 1909, pp. 117, 121–122), the oil skins he wore when boating and painting (p. 126), his fondness for rugs (pp. 118, 127), his color preferences (pp. 119, 126–127), his love of misty scenes (p. 126), his two homes (p. 130), and his unfinished canvases (p. 124).

In the months that followed, Thompson traveled to locations where Gifford frequently painted. And he found several sites that matched his visions and earlier sketches. In fact, he often felt that something was directing him to the scenes. On one occasion, while sketching a group of trees on Naushon Island, he heard a voice telling him to look on the far side of the trees. There he found Gifford's initials carved into a tree, along with the year 1902.

Despite difficulties in evaluating some of the correspondences between Gifford's paintings and Thompson's sketches and visions, this case is undoubtedly impressive—certainly worth the considerable time required to assess its many intriguing details. Not surprisingly, many believe the case provides unusually compelling evidence of survival. Nevertheless, partisans of living-agent psi can raise legitimate concerns. First, there are the usual worries about the subject's ESP. Could Thompson have exercised refined clairvoyance to "view" Gifford's original works, and could he then have painted his resulting visions? Moreover, although some of Thompson's sketches are strikingly close to Gifford's pictures, others are less so. In fact, some seem to depict fairly generic New England landscapes. But then it's unclear how much psi Thompson's sketches and

paintings represent, and perhaps this case doesn't challenge us—as Mrs. Piper's case does—to explain prolific and consistent psychic functioning.[48]

Of course, LAP explanations must do more than indicate *how* psi among the living might create the appearance of postmortem survival. They must also indicate *why*. They must posit a plausible underlying *motivation* (conscious or subconscious) for simulating evidence of survival. Significantly, however, both survivalists and LAP partisans have something to say about the role of motivation in this case. Survivalists would appeal, plausibly, to Gifford's intense desire to complete the work he left unfinished. And they could claim that Gifford selected Thompson as his medium because of Thompson's native artistic abilities and perhaps also (as D. Scott Rogo suggested) because Thompson "was both psychically and psychologically bonded" to Gifford.[49] By contrast, anti-survivalists need to propose a compelling motivation *in Thompson* for simulating evidence of survival, and that's considerably more challenging. The most heroic attempt I've seen is Jule Eisenbud's suggestion that Thompson's paintings resulted from "a natural, if psi-mediated, projection of Thompson's unconscious fantasy...[rather] than...a kind of emanation from someone who in life found Thompson uninteresting both as a person and as an aspiring painter."[50] I must say, however, that although I've been sympathetic to Eisenbud's depth-psychological interpretations of other survival cases,[51] survivalists tell a more credible story here.

Still, perhaps the biggest challenge of the case is to explain the sheer number of correspondences between Gifford's works and Thompson's sketches and visions—especially the clearest similarities. LAP partisans would probably argue that Thompson either (a) acquainted himself clairvoyantly with Gifford's works and sketched directly from those clairvoyant impressions, or (b) learned telepathically "(perhaps from Mrs. Gifford) of Gifford's favourite hunting grounds, clairvoyantly investigated them, and selected from them, as the themes of recurrent visions, the sorts of spots which might appeal to a painter."[52]

---

[48] Incidentally, we can probably ignore appealing to the Unusual Suspects by suggesting that Thompson might have been an artistic savant. Although Thompson wasn't a trained artist, he was clearly an artistic person, and he had previously demonstrated skill in sketching. Moreover, he did not exhibit the cognitive or physical deficits usually seen in savants.
[49] Rogo, 1987, p. 275.
[50] Rogo, 1987, p. 274.
[51] See, e.g., his discussion of the Cagliostro case: Eisenbud, 1992 and the summary in Braude, 2003.
[52] Gauld, 1982, p. 154.

Survivalists can probably avoid positing such causally convoluted scenarios, but they must still posit an impressive and prolonged psychic achievement. Let's grant (as I believe we should) that Thompson had no normal knowledge of the Gifford works he replicated and saw in his visions. In that case, survivalists must suppose either (a) that the surviving Gifford telepathically supplied Thompson (presumably repeatedly) with detailed information about those works, and that this allowed Thompson to construct sufficiently detailed visions from which to sketch and paint, or (b) that Gifford controlled Thompson's body and mind for a few years to produce the needed visions and to guide his hand in both the production of the sketches and paintings and also during his travels to sites that Gifford had painted.

Thus, it may seem, initially at least, that there's no clear or conclusive reason to prefer either the survivalist or LAP explanation of the correspondences. Both approaches posit several years' worth of successful psi. However, the frequency and persistence of the correspondences might give a slight explanatory edge to the survivalist. That advantage may be small, but it's arguably enough to tilt the scales in the survivalist's direction. Moreover, that advantage increases when we consider that survivalists offer a more plausible account of the case's psychology.

Furthermore, when we look at the case as a whole and recognize that Thompson's achievements have to be explained along with some good material gleaned from mediums, the problem of crippling complexity clearly becomes an issue, just as it did in the case of Mrs. Piper. Gauld expressed a similar point when he wrote that the LAP hypothesis, "applied to this case...is *messy* in a way not to be equated with mere complexity. If the survivalist theory were tenable it would immensely simplify things."[53] On the LAP hypothesis, the evidence needs to be explained in terms of the psychic successes of, and interactions between, many different individuals. And it must also posit multiple sources of information, both items in the world and different people's beliefs and memories. So the LAP hypothesis posits a variety (perhaps a large variety) of causal links, each one of which risks interference from the extensive surrounding causal nexus. But on the survival hypothesis, we seem to require fewer causal links and one individual—a surviving Gifford—from whom all information flows.

Concluding Thoughts

[53] Gauld, 1982, p. 155.

So what can we say, finally, about the evidence for survival? There are no stronger cases, or types of cases, than those I've described. Although some CORT investigations are undeniably intriguing, they are too often hobbled by investigative intricacy, psychological superficiality, and a failure to deal in an empirically-informed way with challenges from the Unusual Suspects.[54] Reports of NDEs are likewise fascinating, but the evidence is exceptionally difficult to interpret. Even those sympathetic to NDE research would probably admit that this body of evidence is not the *best* evidence of survival. In fact, we may have no justification for saying that NDErs were ever dead. Moreover, NDE studies face the notorious problem of accurately time-stamping the NDEr's experience—something that can only be attempted after resuscitation.

What most commentators consider the central (and most survival-friendly) feature of NDEs is that, if the time-stamping of the NDE is accurate, then the NDEr's consciousness was apparently operating in the absence of what are usually thought to be necessary physiological conditions for mental activity. But that doesn't license the inference that mental activity can occur *independently* of physiological activity. The most that we can confidently infer is that we were wrong about what those necessary conditions are. Of course, one of the possible reasons for that error might be that mental activity is more autonomous than received science has made it out to be. But another might be that NDErs always had some residual biological activity, of a kind we haven't figured out how to measure, and enough of it to sustain mental activity, and that this is why the NDErs were able to be resuscitated. So although the data are *consistent* with the survivalist view, they don't support it.

Similarly, some NDE researchers are impressed by the NDEr's apparent "persisting or enhanced mentation at a time when one would expect it to be diminishing, or entirely absent."[55] But (quite apart from time-stamping issues) there's an assumption at play here that needs to be questioned. Why should we expect cognitive functioning to diminish under physically traumatic conditions? Some commentators on NDEs have argued that during oxygen deprivation and certain other physiologically stressful states, one might actually expect subjective experiences to take on a kind of hallucinatory clarity and brilliance.[56] Granted, attempted physiological or chemical explanations of

[54] See Braude, 2003 for details.
[55] Cook, Greyson, & Stevenson, 1998, p. 379.
[56] See, e.g., Saavedra-Aguilar & Gomez-Jeria, 1989; Siegel, 1980, 1981.

NDEs have been clearly inadequate, and they're particularly weak in accounting for the NDEr's veridical experiences.[57] But ironically, NDE survivalists have a related problem. As Cook, *et al.*, concede, "we do not even know what physiological conditions are minimally required for organized, vivid cognition."[58] Now that's a very important admission of ignorance. If we don't know the physical or physiological conditions required for ordinary cognitive functioning (much less optimal cognitive functioning), we should be wary of drawing conclusions about the significance of the evidence. The inconvenient truth is that we simply don't know what exactly is going on in the case of NDEs, any more than we know what to say about savants, who display enhanced cognitive or motor functioning despite what are usually considered to be debilitating physiological impairments.

Similarly, it's exceptionally weak to base an argument for survival on the evidence of OBEs. Those who embrace that strategy typically claim that because the OBEr's mind (or secondary body) travels to a different location than the one occupied by the physical body, we may conclude that it can exist independently of the body. But that line of thought has two outstanding flaws. First of all, it confuses mind-body *independence* with mere mind-body *distinctness*. (I'll explain this in more detail below.) And second, we can't even confidently assert that the OBEr's mind or secondary body is actually *at* the ostensibly visited location. The OBEr's experience can still be easily and plausibly interpreted as relatively humdrum clairvoyance. Let's consider the second of these problems first.

We can't hope to evaluate the significance of OBE imagery until we get clear on the role of imagery in ESP generally. Parapsychologists have known for many years that some ESP subjects experience more vivid imagery than others. They've also known that ESP may occur without *any* accompanying imagery. In many reported cases of telepathy and clairvoyance, subjects seem to experience nothing more than inexplicable and incongruous desires to act (e.g., "I should phone so-and-so"). And in classic card-guessing ESP tests, subjects typically experience nothing at all that's subjectively noteworthy. So it appears that occurrences of ESP are as varied and idiosyncratic as other mental states, and that (as in the case of memory) some people's psychic experiences are regularly—and perhaps unusually—detailed, vivid, and rich in imagery.

---

[57] See Kelly et al., 2006.
[58] Cook *et al.*, 1998, p. 404.

But in that case, we can account for the features of OBEs without having to shoulder the externalist's ontological burden of positing (say) secondary bodies or silver cords. We can reasonably interpret OBEs as one type of imagery-rich or vivid manifestations of ESP, and we can reasonably argue that for some the information gathered is accurate and experienced *as if* from a position in space, just as it may be for ESP *not* accompanied by an OBE. For example, star subject Pat Price in the remote viewing experiments at SRI often gave accurate and detailed descriptions of the locations visited by an outbound experimenter.[59] But he tended to describe those sites from perspectives quite different from those of the outbound experimenter. Often, he described locations as if he first looked at them from high in the air and then zoomed down toward the target. But Price was not having an OBE. He was engaged in a conversation, reporting his impressions of the target. So there's no need, then, and certainly no compelling reason, to say that subjects actually leave their bodies in veridical ESP *or* OBE experiences. At our current (and considerable) level of ignorance about psi functioning, this cautious approach seems more defensible than the externalist alternative.

Even more damning, the abundant evidence for clairvoyance of objects in sealed envelopes or decks of cards, or in closed books, shows clearly that clairvoyant awareness of an object can occur even when there's currently *no* position in space from which a person (or, presumably, a spatially localizable secondary body) could perceive it. So for those cases, there's clearly no reason to posit a literally traveling mind. But then, it's not clear why recourse to a spatially localizable traveling mind is ever justified.

Granted, some OBE accounts are undoubtedly interesting—for example, *reciprocal* cases in which people report seeing the OBEr at the site that person is ostensibly visiting. But survivalist attempts to infer something metaphysically momentous from that suffer from the aforementioned failure to distinguish mind-body distinctness from mind-body independence. The evidence for OBEs can all be understood, plausibly, as showing that the relation of body to mind is analogous to the relation of an object to its shadow. After all, the object and its shadow are distinct, and they occupy different locations in space, just as the mind and physical body purportedly occupy different locations during OBEs. Moreover, shadows are causally efficacious; they can affect the world around them by (say) lowering the ambient temperature and altering light meter readings at their locations, or by alerting animals to the presence

[59] See Targ & Puthoff, 1977; Targ, Puthoff, & May, 1979.

nearby of a possible predator. But of course, the shadow has no independent existence; once the object ceases to exist, so does the shadow. So for all we know, the mind may be similarly dependent on the body, and there's nothing in the OBE literature to suggest otherwise.

Besides, if OBEs provide evidence for any kind of survival of bodily death, strictly speaking, it would be evidence only of short-term survival. OBEs provide no justification for assuming that mental activity could persist independently of the body for periods significantly longer than an OBE. But of course, survivalists aren't positing that one's characteristic mental activity continues for only a few seconds or minutes after bodily death. The evidence purportedly explained by the survival hypothesis—most of it from ostensible mediumship, reincarnation, and hauntings—suggests personal survival over many years (though not eternally). Moreover, the reason many consider postmortem survival to be a source of hope and solace is that they regard it as a form of prolonged noncorporeal existence. They hope that when they die, they might reunite with friends and family members who had long since "passed over." Thus, even if we had convincing evidence that mental activity in near-death OBEs occurred in the absence of *any* residual bodily activity, not even that would lend much support, if any, to the case for survival—at least in the protracted form that interests most survivalists.

Therefore, it seems that even under the most charitable of readings, the evidence from OBEs shows too little. It gives us no reason to believe that the mind is more substantial, resilient, and self-sustaining than a shadow.[60]

But as far as the cases highlighted in this essay are concerned, we can say, at the very least, that we have good reasons for taking seriously the possibility of postmortem survival. Granted (as we've noted), the evidence doesn't support the conclusion that everyone survives, or that those who do survive persist non-corporeally for very long. Nevertheless, hypothetical ideal cases show what overwhelmingly persuasive survival evidence might look like. They also illustrate how maximally impressive evidence could move us to abandon prior—and even cherished—anti-survivalist metaphysical commitments. Thus, they provide a standard by which to measure less-than-ideal actual cases, and they open the door to serious, sensitive, and unbiased consideration of the merits of those cases and the assumptions underlying their competing interpretations.

[60] For details on this topic, see Braude, 2003.

In the end, however, what we decide about the evidence for survival may rest on our assessment of the problem of crippling complexity. As I see it, an extended and consistent flow of verifiable mediumistic information seems more easily explainable for the survivalist, despite the challenge to both survivalist and LAP accounts posed by the surrounding and pervasive causal nexus. Similarly, in transplant cases, a survivalist interpretation seems almost coercively straightforward compared to LAP alternatives. And more generally, the explanatory messiness of LAP accounts, compared to that of the survivalist, allows survivalists to make a familiar, rationally respectable, and scientifically sanctioned appeal to parsimony.

What's certain, however, is that the evidence of survival is not certain, at least to the extent some would like. Granted, we've seen that some of that evidence is clearly respectable (and even compelling), and of course some cases are clearly stronger than others. So we've seen that one can have legitimate and defensible reasons for concluding that some form of postmortem existence can occur. However (as noted at the beginning of this essay), no empirical claim is immune from doubt, revision or rejection, and the ineliminable and controversial metaphysical baggage of an inquiry into survival can only increase that uncertainty. We need to remember that certitude in science is an ideal goal, like the goal of being perfectly wise—something we aim for, but which we recognize as a theoretical vanishing point, not something literally attainable.[61] So even if the best actual evidence doesn't warrant a reassuring confidence in the reality of survival, at the very least it encourages optimism on the matter. Confidence will have to come later, if it comes at all.

References

Almeder, R. (1992). *Death and Personal Survival*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

[61] Recall Browning's "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

Braude, S.E. (1995). *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind* (Rev. ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Braude, S.E. (2003). *Immortal Remains: The Evidence for Life after Death*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Braude, S.E. (2005a). "Personal Identity and Postmortem Survival." *Social Philosophy and Policy,* 22 (2): 226-249. Reprinted in E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller, and J. Paul (eds), *Personal Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 226-249.
Braude, S.E. (2005b). "Personal Identity and Postmortem Survival." In E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller & J. Paul (Eds.), *Personal Identity* (22 ed., pp. 226-249). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Braude, S.E. (2007). *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Braude, S.E. (2014). *Crimes of Reason: On Mind, Nature & the Paranormal*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Braude, S.E. (2020). *Dangerous Pursuits: Mediumship, Mind, and Music*. San Antonio: Anomalist Books.
Broad, C.D. (1962). *Lectures on Psychical Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Reprinted by Routledge, 2011.)
Bursen, H.A. (1978). *Dismantling the Memory Machine*. Dordrecht, Boston, London: D. Reidel.
Cook, E.W., Greyson, B., & Stevenson, I. (1998). "Do Any Near-Death Experiences Provide Evidence for the Survival of Human Personality after Death? Relevant Features and Illustrative Case Reports." *Journal of Scientific Exploration,* 12: 377–406.
Eisenbeiss, W., & Hassler, D. (2006). "An Assessment of Ostensible Communications with a Deceased Grandmaster as Evidence for Survival." *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* 70: 65-97.
Eisenbud, J. (1992). *Parapsychology and the Unconscious*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books.
Fitzpatrick, S. (2013). "Simplicity in the philosophy of science." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from https://iep.utm.edu/simplici/#SSH4ai
Fontana, D. (2005). *Is There an Afterlife?* Hampshire: O Books.
Gauld, A. (1982). *Mediumship and Survival*. London: Heinemann.
Goodman, N. (1983). *Fact, Fiction & Forecast (fourth edition)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Haraldsson, E., & Stevenson, I. (1975). "A Communicator of the 'drop in' Type in Iceland: The Case of Runolfur Runolfsson." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research,* 69: 33–59.
Harris, M. (1986). *Investigating the Unexplained*. New York: Prometheus Books.
Heil, J. (1978). "Traces of Things Past." *Philosophy of Science,* 45: 60-72.

Hodgson, R. (1898). "A Further Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance." *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research,* 13: 284–582.
Hyslop, J.H. (1909). "A Case of Veridical Hallucinations." *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research,* 3: 1–469.
Kelly, E.F., Kelly, E.W., Crabtree, A., et al. (2006). *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Kuhn, T. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed. ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Leininger, B., & Leininger, A. (2009). *Soul Survivor: The Reincarnation of a World WSar II Fighter Pilot*. New York: Grand Central.
Liester, M.B. (2020). "Personality changes following heart transplantation: The role of cellular memory." *Medical Hypotheses,* 135. doi: 10.1016/j.mehy.2019.109468
Lund, D.H. (2009). *Persons, Souls, and Death: A Philosophical Investigation of an Afterlife*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Myers, F.W.H., Lodge, O., Leaf, W., et al. (1889). "A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance." *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research,* 6: 436–659.
Pearsall, P., Schwartz, G.E.R., & Russek, L.G.S. (1999). "Changes in Heart Transplant Recipients that Parallel the Personalities of Their Donors." *Integrative Medicine,* 2 (2/3): 65–72.
Pearsall, P., Schwartz, G.E.R., & Russek, L.G.S. (2002). "Changes in Heart Transplant Recipients that Parallel the Personalities of Their Donors." *Journal of Near-Death Studies,* 20 (3): 191-206.
Prince, W.F. (1927/1964). *The Case of Patience Worth*. New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books.
Rogo, D.S. (1987). *The Infinite Boundary: A Psychic Look at Spirit Possession, Madness, and Multiple Personality*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.
Saavedra-Aguilar, J.C., & Gomez-Jeria, J.S. (1989). "A Neurological Model for Near-Death Experiences." *Journal of Near-Death Studies,* 7 (4): 205–222.
Sahay, K.K.N. (1927). *Reincarnation: Verified Cases of Rebirth After Death*. Bareilly, India: N.L. Gupta.
Siegel, R.K. (1980). "The Psychology of Life After Death." *American Psychologist,* 35: 911–931.
Siegel, R.K. (1981). "Accounting for "After Life" Experiences." *Psychology Today,* 15 (1): 65–75.
Soal, S.G. (1925). "A Report on Some Communications through Mrs. Blanche Cooper." *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research,* 35: 471–594.

Stevenson, I. (1972). "Some New Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation II. The Case of Bishen Chand." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research,* 66: 375–400.
Stevenson, I. (1975). *Cases of the Reincarnation Type Vol. 1: Ten Cases in India*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
Sudduth, M. (2009). "Super-Psi and the Survivalist Interpretation of Mediumship." *Journal of Scientific Exploration,* 23 (2): 167-193.
Sudduth, M. (2014). "Is Postmortem Survival the Best Explanation of the Data of Mediumship?" In A.J. Rock (Ed.), *The Survival Hypothesis: Essays on Mediumship* (pp. 40-64). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Sudduth, M. (2016). *A Philosophical Critique of Empirical Arguments for Postmortem Survival*. New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Sylvia, C. (1997). *A Change of Heart: A Memoir*. New York: Warner Books.
Targ, R., & Puthoff, H.E. (1977). *Mind-Reach: Scientists Look at Psychic Ability*. New York: Delacorte.
Targ, R., Puthoff, H.E., & May, E.C. (1979). "Direct Perception of Remote Geographical Locations." In C.T. Tart, H.E. Puthoff & R. Targ (Eds.), *Mind at Large* (pp. 77–106). New York: Praeger.
Thomas, C.D. (1932). "A Consideration of a Series of Proxy Sittings." *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research,* 41: 139–185.
Thouless, R.H. (1959). "Review of R. Heywood, *The Sixth Sense: An Enquiry into Extra-sensory Perception*." *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* 40: 140–142.
Tucker, J.B. (2013). *Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
West, D. (2000). "Correspondence: The Gordon Davis Precognitive 'Communications'." *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* 64: 252–254.
Winkelman, M. (1980). "The Effects of Schooling and Formal Education upon Extrasensory Abilities." In W.G. Roll & J. Beloff (Eds.), *Research in Parapsychology 1980* (pp. 26–29). Metuchen, NJ & London: Scarecrow Press.
Winkelman, M. (1981). "The Effects of Formal Education on Extrasensory Abilities: The Ozolco Study." *Journal of Parapsychology,* 45: 321–336.