

A Critical Evaluation of the Best Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death

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Almost our whole life is used up in idiotic trifles. By contrast there are things that should excite our curiosity to the highest degree and which, judging from people's everyday lives, excite no curiosity at all:

Where are our dead friends?

Why are we here?

Do we come from somewhere?...

Charles Baudelaire¹

Introduction

The notion that some aspect of our selves — our personality, our memories, our emotional ties — can survive the death of our physical bodies is a pervasive one. It features, in various forms, in all of the Great Religions. It is implied by the historical practices of many cultures in relation to their treatment of the dead so as to provide for their needs in the afterlife, and it is a staple of modern popular culture, from Hamlet's ghost to *A Christmas Carol*, from *Truly Madly Deeply* to *The Sixth Sense*.

In our Scientific Age, these beliefs are dismissed as wishful thinking; a means of dealing with the trauma of loss and the anxiety evoked by thoughts of our own inevitable extinction². However, beliefs and practices often represent our best attempts to make sense of experiences that have occurred to us personally or to those whose testimony we trust, and it is important to engage with the experiences themselves so that we can decide what they mean and how they should be understood. In this essay we shall critically evaluate the best of this testimony concerning spontaneous experiences occurring *in situ*, but also evidence that comes from the decluttered and better controlled setting of scientific investigation. Our aim is to test the degree to which

explanations in terms of conventional factors such as fraud, misperception, faulty recall, and expectancy bias, might be sufficient to account for reported experiences, or whether an expanded worldview is required in order to accommodate these intriguing phenomena.

Even in an essay of this length, we do not have the scope to offer a comprehensive — or even a representative — survey of all the evidence that has been accumulated. Rather, we shall follow William James’s advice³, “If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn’t seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white.” Applied to the current context, we need only consider a small number of the strongest cases for survival in order to test whether even one of these is impervious to explanation in conventional terms and might therefore represent evidence for the survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death.

The ubiquitous nature of beliefs and experiences

It is sometimes stated that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.^a But this claim is unsatisfactory because its core terms are carelessly defined and open to subjective interpretation, with the label “extraordinary” being commonly applied to any idea or claim that is deemed to violate majority opinion⁴. However, it cannot be said that survival beliefs are extraordinary even in this sense. For example, a Gallup survey⁵ found that 32% of the American general public believed that spirits of dead people can come back in certain places/situations, 21% that people can communicate mentally with someone who has died, and 20% that reincarnation is possible. More recently, they report that 45% believe that ghosts “probably” or “definitely” exist.⁶ A UK survey similarly found that 48% of their sample believed in ghosts, 46% believed in psychics/mediums, and 23% believed in reincarnation⁷.

In 2019 we commissioned our own survey with the market research company YouGov,⁸ which found that 34% believed that ghosts and spirits of the dead can come back in certain places and situations, 28% that someone who has died can communicate or interact directly with the living (i.e. not through a medium, but through dreams, visions, etc.). While a smaller proportion (18%) believed that mediums have a genuine ability to communicate with the dead, even this figure represents 9.4 million

^a This quote is often attributed to Carl Sagan, who popularised it, but it has a much longer history.

people in the UK alone. It is clear that for this sample personal experience has been an important driver for belief, with a surprisingly high 9.4% reporting that they had personally sat with a medium for a reading (either privately or as part of a public demonstration), and of these, a large majority found the reading to be accurate (79%) and/or helpful (75%). Additionally, 14% claimed to have seen a ghost or spirit, and 11% had personally experienced unusual phenomena occurring during the time that someone they knew was dying. This isn't peculiar to Western cultures; multinational surveys paint a very similar picture.^{9,10} It seems clear, then, that the general public are comfortable with the idea that such experiences, while they might occur only rarely in any one person's life, are quite a common feature of people's lived experience. Why, then, does the scientific mainstream seem so reluctant to consider them in a serious and systematic fashion?

Survival as incompatible with physicalism

In his recent book *The Flip*¹¹ and in his contribution on the future of the humanities in *Consciousness Unbound*,¹² the philosopher of religions Jeffrey Kripal addresses this by highlighting the pervasive dominance of a philosophy or worldview of physicalism and materialism in both science and the humanities. He argues, rightly in our view, that this rests on “unconscious, unexamined, or unacknowledged metaphysical assumptions”¹³ and especially on the assumption — which we call the central dogma of neuroscience — that the brain generates consciousness. Hence, “they assume that matter is really real and that mind is really not.” Moreover, it is implicitly heretical to challenge this orthodox position, reinforced as it is by social consensus and potential loss of professional standing and advancement. The result is that well attested exceptional human experiences that contradict this premise are actively dismissed or ignored, since they are impossible by definition. This means — paradoxically, and even absurdly — that “such things that happen all the time cannot happen at all.”¹⁴ And yet they do: there can be no impossible facts, and, as Kripal puts it, “to dismiss is to miss”, hence “our conclusions are really a function of our exclusions”.¹⁵

Needless to say, any evidence for survival, and indeed for psi more generally, represents a fundamental challenge to this central dogma, as William James and others realised over 100 years ago when they proposed a filter or transmission

hypothesis to explain the relationship between consciousness and the brain.¹⁶ Kripal highlights the importance of such an approach, since “the impossible suddenly becomes possible. Indeed, it becomes predictable.”¹⁷ So, rather than a position where academics and scientists “absolutely refuse, to imagine anything or anyone outside this strictly physicalist framework,”¹⁸ we propose widening the framework to take in a broader evidence base, in which the evidence for survival forms an important component.

Our Approach

Evidence for survival can take many disparate forms. In this essay we have taken our lead from the experiencers^b themselves — how do they typically interpret or make sense of their experience? Thus, we shall consider those phenomena that the experiencers overwhelmingly take to be direct evidence of personal survival, including hauntings, death-bed phenomena, reincarnation claims, after-death communications, and mediumship.

However, we are also mindful that the competition title restricts the scope of this essay to survival following “permanent bodily death”. In our judgement, this rules out a detailed consideration of the near-death experience, despite the existence of challenging cases.¹⁹ Roberts and Owen define death as “characterised by irreversible loss of organ functions and is a one-way permanent state”.²⁰ According to this definition, then, no-one reporting an NDE has died (since their dying was reversible), and all NDE reports refer to experiences of people who have remained alive. Additionally, people have reported prototypical NDEs even in circumstances where they are not at all under threat of imminent death, although they may think that they are²¹. Researchers have found little difference in the content or sequence of NDEs occurring in the dying compared with those who only believed themselves about to die.^{22,23} Of course, in the wider debate beyond the scope of this essay, the argument for the importance of NDEs does not necessarily hinge on the experiencer being truly clinically dead. As van Lommel and others have argued, the important question is how

^b By ‘experiencer’ we mean the person reporting the experience, preferring this as a more inclusive term than ‘percipient’ with respect to the forms of experience it accommodates.

a coherent phenomenal experience can be sustained when brain function is severely compromised, weakening the link between brain activity and conscious experience, a key tenet of the central dogma of neuroscience.

Additionally, we propose to adopt a particular understanding of “survival”, that Kean labels “personal survival” and which she defines as:

A postmortem existence in which distinct traits, memories, and emotions are sustained at least by some of us for an unknown period of time. It refers to a psychological continuity after death, which makes it possible for the disembodied personality to be recognizable by those left behind.²⁴

This stipulation of psychological continuity means that it is beyond our brief to consider claims that each living person embodies a spiritual essence that at death is absorbed into the ground of all being.

In relation to the status of survival evidence, we adopt two distinctive approaches: scientific and legal. Scientific experiments require phenomena to be reproducible to afford systematic observation and hypothesis testing, but this is often an unachievable criterion when dealing with unique life experiences as well as legal or historical material^c: a given event occurred at a specific moment in the past and is not therefore repeatable. When evaluating people’s accounts of their lived experience, we can at best attempt to establish that the event really did occur as attested; legally this means establishing the facts of the case. In attempting to explain the circumstances or cause of the event, we can advance hypotheses that can be judged by their explanatory power in the light of the evidence adduced.

Such evidence may consist of testimony, admissible hearsay, documents, objects or other evidentiary material that bear on the “facts at issue”; that is to say, those requiring proof. However, proof need only be beyond a reasonable doubt, not proof beyond a shadow of doubt; it is recognised in law that absolute certainty is unattainable. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of a case where there would be *absolutely* no doubts about the verdict, hence the necessity of judgment in the light of the available data. Assessing

^c Indeed, it turns out to be an almost impossible expectation for experimentation in the social sciences such as Psychology – see Maxwell, Lau, & Howard (2015), Roe (2016), Wiggins & Christopherson (2019).

the preponderance or weight of the evidence necessarily entails a subjective judgement.²⁵

Phantasms of the Living is a classic example of this rigorous legalistic approach. A whole chapter is devoted to the discussion and criticism of forms of evidence. Various possible sources of error are considered: in observation, narration, memory with regard to dates and times, etc; second-hand testimony is excluded from the main part of the work. The kind of questions asked included: was the account written down or related before the event was known to have occurred? Has the principal witness been corroborated? Was the percipient educated and of good character? Were they in a state of mind conducive to accurate observation (e.g. sufficiently awake, psychologically balanced, and with no predisposition to believe in the reality of the phenomena). Was the apparition recognised? The book therefore contains extensive corroborating statements and commentaries on the calibre of evidence along these lines. On this basis, the authors conclude that sweeping assertions about the unreliability of human testimony cannot be upheld, and that the evidence cannot therefore be summarily dismissed.

A consideration of evidence from lived experience

The following sections present what we consider to be well attested cases and research in favour of survival evidence — from case studies to case collections, field work to survey data. We discuss each topic by presenting varying levels of evidence in favour of survival, while acknowledging that there are many other equivalent examples within the literature. Many critics, still to this day, use the common refrain “but anecdotes are not evidence”. We regard this as inapplicable to the kinds of cases we consider here. Researchers have exposed such responses as empty rhetoric, or ‘withered scepticism’ intended to avoid having to engage with the empirical base for the claim.²⁶ Our cases have undergone extensive examination, including additional witness statements and corroborative evidence and in our view exceed the standards required of eyewitness testimonies in order to secure a verdict in a court of law. We take the view that many of the cases we present constitute strong evidence of survival, and their cumulative weight in favour of survival is compelling.

Hauntings

Hauntings are one class of experience that is commonly interpreted as evidence of survival. A haunting can be defined as “[a] recurrent localized apparition”,²⁷ and often involve visual phenomena, but are not restricted to these, so that some cases involve noises such as footsteps, odours, or physical phenomena including object movements. In this context, an apparition can be defined as “a perceptual experience in which a person or animal (deceased or living) appears to be present though they are not (at least not physically)”.²⁸ These phenomena are ordinarily related to a fixed location, and may be witnessed by a number of independent persons who visit that location at different times.

The following case is a typical example:²⁹

Mr R[ussell], the bass-singer of the choir, fell in an apoplectic fit upon the street at 10 o'clock on a certain Friday; he died at 11 o'clock at his house. My wife, learning of his death, sent my brother-in-law down to the house of the choirmaster [Mr Reeves] to ask him about music for the funeral. The messenger reached the house of the choirmaster about 1:30pm. He was told that the choirmaster was upstairs, busy looking over some music. He accordingly sat down in the drawing-room, and, while waiting, began to tell the ladies (sister and niece to the choirmaster) about Mr R's death. While they were talking they heard an exclamation in the hall-way. Someone said, “My God!” They rushed out, and halfway down, sitting on the stairs, saw the choirmaster in his shirt-sleeves, showing signs of great fright and confusion. As soon as he saw them he exclaimed, “I have just seen R!” The niece at once said, “Why, R is dead!” At this the choirmaster without a word turned back upstairs and went to his room. My brother-in-law followed him and found him in complete prostration, his face white, &c. He then told my brother-in-law what he had experienced: “He had been looking over some music... Finally, he went to the door on his way downstairs... At the door he saw Mr R, who stood with one hand on his brow, and one hand extended, holding a sheet of music. The choirmaster advanced, extended his hand, and was going to speak, when the figure vanished.” It was then that he gave the exclamation mentioned above.

When the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882, in order to “examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis”, hauntings were regarded as a sufficiently important line of investigation to warrant its own research committee. In their first report, the committee made it clear that presented cases would not be accepted at face value, but would need to be thoroughly investigated. In particular, the unsupported evidence of a single witness would not constitute sufficient grounds for accepting an apparition as having a *prima facie* claim to objective reality.³⁰ Members of the committee — included among them, such distinguished figures as Sir William Barrett and Frank Podmore — would interview witnesses of such phenomena, as well as engaging in personal investigation of allegedly haunted locations.

The committee discussed in detail the conventional explanations that may apply, including several persons mis-remembering or misinterpreting events, but equally they noted that group hallucinations are particularly rare in the literature, especially when there is no obvious environmental trigger, lending credence to the objective — or at least intersubjective — reality of the apparitional experience. Researchers have observed that, unlike other related phenomena, hauntings rarely offer direct evidence of survival.

Bayless has characterised the majority of hauntings as involving “a kind of psychical robot, a mindless automaton, which fit into the generally prevailing attitude of antagonism toward the concept of survival of death.”³¹ Rogo³² similarly referred to the commonly-held belief that apparitions are like “psychic marionettes” (see, for example, Price³³ and Johnson³⁴). The following features of haunting cases would go beyond this characterisation, and so make them of interest as potential evidence of survival: the repetitive nature of the phenomena, meaning that they can be reported by independent witnesses who are oblivious of each other’s accounts, and also that they may be more amenable to investigation by researchers; and the occurrence of apparitions that show awareness of their surroundings and may interact with the witnesses, suggesting independent agency. Cases with these features are much more resistant to explanation in terms of misperception or subjective hallucination, and have received considerable attention.³⁵

The following examples of hauntings have been selected because they possess these properties, and have been extensively documented by multiple witnesses.

The Cheltenham Ghost

This case has been selected on two grounds: first, according to MacKenzie,³⁶ the apparition associated with the Cheltenham Ghost was seen by seventeen people and heard by more than twenty, and secondly because the chief witness was trained in medicine and took a particularly tenacious and fearless attitude to its investigation. She published her account under the pseudonym Rose Morton³⁷ (so that the case is also known as the Morton Ghost), though her real name was Rosina Despard. The case attracted the interest of F.W.H. Myers, who provided an editorial introduction to the report in which he noted the Despard family showed unusually low superstitious fear in pursuing and documenting the apparition.

The focal phenomenon was the appearance of a tall woman in black, holding a handkerchief over her face. The apparition was first seen by Miss Despard in April of 1882.

I had gone up to my room, but was not yet in bed, when I heard someone at the door, and went to it, thinking it might be my mother. On opening the door, I saw no one; but on going a few steps along the passage, I saw the figure of a tall lady, dressed in black, standing at the head of the stairs. After a few moments she descended the stairs, and I followed for a short distance, feeling curious [as to] what it could be. I had only a small piece of candle, and it suddenly burnt itself out; and being unable to see more, I went back to my room. (p. 313)

Contrary to some sceptical claims concerning such experiences, this apparition was often seen in daylight hours, and on occasion was sufficiently solid-looking to be mistaken for a real person; so much so that it was often taken to be an intruder in the house. On another occasion, the apparition was seen in the garden for over half an hour. Attempts at communication failed, however; apparently, all that was heard from the figure was “a stifled cry”.

Rose Despard’s sister, Edith, reported that the apparition could be clearly seen close by her. She called out for Rose to come and observe, and she too, on joining Edith,

saw the figure, though by that point Edith could no longer see it. This was not the only occasion on which the figure was not seen by everyone present. The Skye Terrier dog of the home also reacted to the apparition, including times when the humans present could perceive nothing, and would run under the sofa for cover. Miss Despard began to experiment with the apparition's behaviour, for example:

I have several times fastened fine string across the stairs at various heights before going to bed, but after all others have gone up to their rooms. These were fastened in [various ways] ... They were knocked down by a very slight touch, and yet would not be felt by anyone passing up or down the stairs, and by candle-light could not be seen from below. They were put at various heights from the ground, from 6 inches to the height of the banisters, about 3 feet. I have twice at least seen the figure pass through the cords, leaving them intact. I have repeatedly following it into a corner, when it disappeared, and have tried to suddenly pounce upon it, but have never succeeded in touching it or getting my hand up to it, the figure eluding my touch. (pp. 321-322)

Other tests of the apparition's immaterial nature were attempted, such as photographing it, but no image was captured. Its appearances were unpredictable, and attempts to wait around day or night for it to appear were in vain, and produced no sighting for those keeping watch. By 1886, sightings became rare. A key element of this case is the apparition's seeming awareness for other people, evident in the care taken to avoid them or navigate around furniture.

Willington Mill

Our second case involved the Mill House, at Willington Mill, and is considered one of the most detailed hauntings to date. Phenomena first occurred in 1834, with full accounts of the various phenomena being reported in the diary of Mr Joseph Procter between 1834-1841, though a formal report was only published in 1892³⁸ A subsequent examination and summary was produced by Andrew MacKenzie.³⁹ The main impressive survival-related element of the case is the occurrence of a collectively witnessed apparition. Reports of unusual phenomena were first witnessed by the nursemaid of the house, reporting to Mrs Procter — the homeowner — “the state of dream and alarm she was kept in, in consequence of noises she had heard for about

two months, occurring more particularly nearly every morning”, when left alone with young Edmund, then two years old, in the nursery on the second floor. Dull and heavy treads of the floorboards were heard in an unoccupied room above, as if someone were pacing back and forth and going to the window. The vibrations of such noises caused the windows of the nursery to shake violently. At times, the nursemaid called for the kitchen girl to come to her aid, who found her shaken and scared upon reaching her. According to Mr Procter’s diary, the nursemaid never deviated in her testimony, yet no natural cause was found to account for the phenomena.

In January 1835, Mrs Procter, while in the nursery after dinner, heard the sound of a person stirring about in the unoccupied room above her. She assumed that it was the maid, emptying chamber posts or something similar, but shortly afterwards discovered, to her surprise, that no one had been in that room, or indeed upstairs. Around that time, the nursemaid left their employment and a new girl was hired, with care being taken not to inform her of previous reports. However, she too reported the same activity, which alarmed her and led to her asking who was in the room above.

Other reported phenomena included: sounds like a mallet heard in the Procter’s bedroom; peculiar whistles; the sounds of a clock being wound; sounds of a person stamping purposefully on the floor; beds being raised with people in them; voices muttering meaningless phrases; beds vibrating from the thumping, and apparitions. These continued for months, despite concerted efforts to discover a conventional explanation, such as fraud, strangers entering from the loft space to access the third floor, and even consideration of weather conditions and operations of the nearby mill as causes of building reactions that could have been misperceived.

There were also visual phenomena. A “respectable neighbour” claimed to see a transparent white female figure in a window on the second storey of the house. Mrs Mann, on leaving the house to get coal, reported seeing a figure in the same window. It was reported to be luminous, transparent, and had the appearance of a priest in a white surplice. Mrs Mann drew her husband’s attention to the figure, and he called his daughter and a relative of the Procter family, Mrs Christiana Wright (from Mansfield, Nottinghamshire) to come and observe it. By the time all witnesses had gathered, the head of the apparition was nearly gone and the brightness had lessened, but the remainder was still visible to all witnesses for a further ten minutes, disappearing

gradually from top to bottom. Mrs Wright later re-confirmed the report of this event in 1892. The apparitions in this case may therefore be considered more evidential of survival given the number of instances that involved multiple witnesses to the event.

Section Summary

Both the Cheltenham and Willington Mill Hauntings are thoroughly documented, and involved recurrent phenomena, but the most significant feature is the report of apparitions witnessed by multiple people and concerned apparitions that displayed ostensible conscious awareness of their surroundings. Due to the spontaneous nature of such events, experimentation is extremely difficult, but attempts were made in the Cheltenham case that supported the apparition's immaterial nature. As Rogo states,⁴⁰ "it is a moot point just how much evidence hauntings give us for survival of death, but even though this problem has not been solved ... some of the collected cases do indicate purpose, consciousness, and activity by the dead." However, the specific elements of survival themes within hauntings as discussed here do serve as a strong twig added to the bundle of sticks.^d Many of the examples given here are certainly not modern, but they are detailed, well attested accounts, with reports further observed by critical minds of the SPR, often providing such commentary in their final presentation.

A number of psychological and environmental explanations have been advanced for haunting type phenomena, particularly emphasising misperception and suggestion, and environmental sensitivity.⁴¹ Many cases may be amenable to explanation in these terms, but others have challenging features. Bozzano argued⁴² that often the apparition witnessed in a haunting experience is perceived as solid and indistinguishable from a "real person". In 41 out of 374 cases examined, the apparition was only recognised as such after the event, and the persons depicted may be unknown at the time of the experience, only to be identified subsequently from photographs, portraits and historical records.

Bozzano provides six objections to any theory other than survival: (1) Apparitions that represent the dead are seen "haunting" areas where they have never lived, (2) such

^d The bundle of sticks analogy draws attention to the possibility that individual sticks might have inherent weaknesses can be strengthened by combination with others, so that they compensate for each other. In this context, a single case may be weak in certain respects or lacking in certain qualities, but when added to several others that don't share those weaknesses can produce a bundle that presents a more convincing case.

theories do not account for mysterious [responsive] raps, etc. and yet seem unconnected to the apparition, (3) hauntings seem to be prompted by tragedy involving a specific death (a point supported now by more modern research⁴³), (4) hauntings are often intermittent and do not follow set patterns, (5) hauntings often cease after a specific task is carried out “on the apparition’s behalf”, (6) theories for hauntings must be similar to theories explaining apparitions in general which are hard to account for by non-survival based theories.

Considered in isolation, many haunting cases do not represent a strong case for survival, because the phenomena are so varied and typically do not contain elements that can be independently verified. However, there are some cases, such as those highlighted, that consist of repetitive phenomena involving apparitions that show some semblance of conscious awareness of their surroundings, and these bear closer consideration. When considered alongside other forms of evidence, they may also allow us to identify common features or elements that could serve as a form of independent validation.

Death-Bed Visions

A death-bed vision is an experience reported by a dying individual in the final days or hours of their life. They constitute survival evidence in that such experiences involve the apparent return of the deceased to “welcome” the dying person in their transition to death, and may involve the communication of previously unknown information. Such instances are evidenced by the reports and behaviour of the dying person in response to what they are experiencing, and witnessed by those who attend them in their last moments, including family, friends, and physicians and nurses. The standard explanation for such reports is as symptoms of underlying pathology as the person goes through the dying process, such as delirium and altered sensory function through cerebral anoxia.

However, some cases provide stronger support for the survival hypothesis, including: instances where those in attendance (who presumably do not share any underlying pathology) also witnessed the apparitions; occasions when the dying person reported information from apparitions that they should not have known by any recognised

means, including visions of recently deceased individuals whom the dying person *did not know* had passed away; and perceptions of something (including light phenomena, mists, and even shimmering air) that is equated with the person's soul or spirit, as has been documented in many cultures and historical periods.^{44,45}

To illustrate this last type, we include a personal account from Randall.⁴⁶ He had spent much of his professional career focused on studies of extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK), until a death-bed vision involving the death of his partner, turned his interests to survival research:

On the day that Margaret died I was sitting by her bedside holding her left hand. Her daughter, Barbara, was sitting opposite me holding her right hand. It was early in the afternoon, and the ward was quiet. Looking across at Barbara I saw her expression change suddenly from one of grief to one of surprise. She muttered something like "Oh, my God!" She told me that she had seen something come out of Margaret's head, move across, and descend onto me. She thought it was Margaret's soul leaving her body. Shortly after this one of the doctors placed a stethoscope on Margaret's chest and declared her dead. (pp. 3-4)

Randall goes on to mention how important he believed it was to produce contemporary reports of the experience, while memories of the event are relatively fresh. Of particular interest are instances in which multiple witnesses have independently experienced the same phenomenon at the very moment the dying person passes away.⁴⁷ These experiences prompted scientific tests that were intended to capture objective evidence of this emission by weighing the body at the point of death to identify any potential weight loss.⁴⁸

The classical publication in this area is *Death-Bed Visions* by physicist Sir William Barrett.⁴⁹ It is a detailed yet incomplete study, published posthumously thanks to the editorial input of his widow Lady Florence Barrett. Lady Barrett was a consultant surgeon, gynaecologist and obstetrician, who had sadly witnessed many instances of women dying during childbirth. Some of these unfortunates had death-bed visions that she related to her husband, which instigated his research into them.

In one of the most striking instances, Lady Barrett was called in by Dr Phillips to attend to a patient who had just given birth and was dying of heart failure. The following statements were written up immediately following the events⁵⁰:

When I entered the ward Mrs B held out her hands to me and said, "Thank you, thank you for what you have done for me — for bringing the baby. Is it a boy or girl?" Then holding my hand tightly, she said, "Don't leave me, don't go away, will you?" And after a few minutes, while the House Surgeon carried out some restorative measures, she lay looking up towards the open part of the room, which was brightly lighted, and said "Oh, don't let it get dark — it's getting so dark... darker and darker." Her husband and mother were sent for.

Suddenly she looked eagerly towards one part of the room, a radiant smile illuminating her whole countenance. "Oh, lovely, lovely," she said. I asked, "What is lovely?" "What I see," she replied in low, intense tones. "What do you see?" "Lovely brightness — wonderful being." It is difficult to describe the sense of reality conveyed by her intense absorption in the vision.

Then — seeming to focus her attention more intently on one place for a moment — she exclaimed, almost with a kind of joyous cry, "Why, it's Father! Oh, he's so glad I'm coming; he *is* glad. It would be perfect if only W. (her husband) could come too."

Her baby was brought for her to see. She looked at it with interest, and then said, "Do you think I ought to stay for the baby's sake?" Then turning towards the vision again, she said, "I can't — I can't stay; if you could see what I do, you would know I can't stay."

But she turned to her husband, who had come in, and said, "You won't let baby go to anyone who won't love him, will you?" Then she gently pushed him to one side, saying, "Let me see the lovely brightness."

I left shortly after, and the Matron took my place by the bedside. She lived for another hour, and appeared to have retained to the last the double consciousness of the bright form she saw, and also of those tending her at the bedside, e.g. she arranged with the Matron that her premature baby should remain in hospital till it was strong enough to be cared for in an ordinary household.

This was the initial account written by Lady Barrett, and later confirmed by Dr Phillips, who was also present at the time. However, the most important information came from the observations of a Matron who took over from Lady Barrett at Mrs B.'s bedside:

I was present shortly before the death of Mrs B., together with her husband and her mother. Her husband was leaning over her and speaking to her when pushing him aside she said, "Oh don't hide it; it's so beautiful." Then turning away from him towards me, I being on the other side of the bed, Mrs B. said, "Oh, why there's Vida," referring to a sister of whose death three weeks previously she had not been told. Afterwards the mother, who was present at the time, told me, as I have said, that Vida was the name of a dead sister of Mrs B.'s, of whose illness and death she was quite ignorant, as they had carefully kept this news from Mrs B. owing to her serious illness.

Dr Phillips saw to it on the request of Lady Barrett that Mrs B.'s mother provided a statement of her observation of these conversations. For Barrett, the case was particularly evidential because Dr Phillips and others who attended Mrs B. were not aware of any of her relatives having recently died, so were not in a position to unwittingly disclose information about her sister. Care had been taken by the family not to inform Mrs B. of her sister's death because of her precarious health, and yet she spoke of seeing her in much the same way that she had seen her deceased father. Only Mrs B. could see these visions, however, and their subjective nature could still relate to the cognition of the dying brain.

Explanations in terms of pathology associated with end-of-life processes could not, of course, account for phenomena that are jointly witnessed by those in attendance. To illustrate, we now consider one of our own death-bed cases taken from a survey that involves an unexpected and shared experience concerning a woman whose eldest son was killed at the age of 24:

In a clinic, at my mother's bedside in a very serious condition, I was watching over her at night when I saw a ray of light at the door. I thought it was a visit from the nurse, but this light moved, stopped at the foot of the bed, and inside this white glow I saw very clearly my son, Jean-Pierre, who had been murdered 7 years earlier. I couldn't see his legs, but he was quite distinct up to his upper thighs, the white light made him a little blurred. He ignored me, all concentrated

on his grandmother. He held out his arms to her with tenderness. I knew at that moment that he had come to fetch her and inside me I collapsed, like a building being demolished and falling into ruin all at once. Then he went around the bed, he came and stood behind me, my neck and head were touching his body, I could feel him. He put one hand on my left shoulder and the other at the base of my neck and he filled me with peace, as if he was pouring it into me with a funnel. I squeezed my hands, nails in my palms, to make sure I wasn't dreaming. When everything in me was filled with peace, Jean-Pierre disappeared. I got up in one bound and went to the toilet to look at myself in the mirror, I was really awake and what I had just experienced overwhelmed and soothed me. I sat back down, my mother was breathing softly but I knew she was leaving us.

We do not know if our participant's dying mother perceived her grandson, but this testimony suggests that Jean-Pierre had "come to fetch his grandmother" and at the same time he would have comforted his mother.

Gauld⁵¹ includes the interesting case that involves the independent confirmation of information communicated during the death-bed event. It involved "Madame Elisa", a lady who was known to psychical researchers Richard Hodgson and Frederic Myers. She died relatively young, and was outlived by some years by her uncle, "F." Hodgson learned of F.'s death in a Boston newspaper on his way to a sitting with the medium Mrs Piper (to be discussed later). He goes on to report:

The first [automatic] writing of the sitting came from Madame Elisa, without my expecting it. She wrote clearly and strongly, explaining that F. was there with her, but unable to speak directly, that she wished to give me an account of how she had helped F. to reach her. She said she had been present at his death bed, and had spoken to him, and she repeated what she had said, in an unusual form of expression, and indicated that he had heard and recognised her.

Hodgson shared the account of the sitting with a mutual friend and also F.'s nearest surviving relative, "who was present at the death-bed, [and] stated spontaneously that F. when dying said that he saw Madame Elisa who was speaking to him, and he repeated what she was saying. The expression so repeated, which the relative quoted

to my friend, was that which I had received from Madame Elisa through Mrs Piper's trance, when the death-bed incident was of course entirely unknown to me."

A large-scale survey of death-bed visions, in the tradition of Barrett's work, was carried out by Osis and Haraldsson⁵² and focused on those witnessed by physicians and nurses; that is, persons who might be less inclined to hold beliefs in the paranormal, and had no vested interest in confirming that the dying person might be received by deceased relatives at the threshold of death. They found that most of the experiences of distinct apparitions were brief, lasting up to five minutes, with their primary purpose being to "take away" the dying person (hence the term "take-away apparitions", which is often used). In a large proportion of cases, the apparitional experience was so pleasant that the experient wanted to go with them (as in Mrs B.'s case just described), but sometimes the dying person tried to resist.

Osis and Haraldsson⁵³ do report some cases in which ESP (on the part of the dying person or the attendant witnesses) could account for the observed phenomena, but other cases were consistent with the notion that the visiting discarnate persons were satisfying their own needs or motivations. Fenwick and Fenwick⁵⁴ offer a contemporary view of these experiences and describe their own case collection of instances in which the dying individual referred to visitations, including from people they did not know had died, consistent with earlier collections. Other reviews of psychical research literature have presented cases whereby the dying have accurately described apparitions of deceased persons they did not know, but were confirmed by witnesses to the deathbed scene upon research.⁵⁵

Section Summary

Deathbed phenomena have provided some compelling instances of what could be classed as survival evidence. This relates 1) to friends and family, who watch on as their loved one slips away from life and describes their interactions with apparitions of the dead — coming to take them away and 2) to accounts provided by physicians and nurses who interact with the dying. In some cases, multiple witnesses to the deathbed phenomena have come forward, not only to corroborate messages the dying relayed from the dead, but to offer similar descriptions of silvery mists leaving the body of the

dying at the point of death, or of apparitions which appeared to be facilitating the dying person's transition from life to death.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation can be defined as cases in which people report momentary flashbacks to previous lives, children born with extracerebral memory, people who have recalled past lives through hypnotic regression or through psychedelics, and instances in which individuals have spoken languages not native to them (nor acquired by conventional means) which relate to the person they claim to have previously been, in some former life.⁵⁶ There are also cases in which birthmarks, skin pigmentation and various birth-defects (e.g. fingers or limbs non-developed) relate to the manner in which the former life was lost or injuries sustained, as claimed by the persons presenting such memories.⁵⁷ Therefore, there are many elements within reincarnation cases which when brought together within a single case, can be compelling evidence for survival of memory and personality beyond death. Collectively, many would argue that reincarnation presents a strong case for survival on their own merit.⁵⁸

A classic case which has been discussed widely is that of James Leininger.⁵⁹ In early childhood, James often had dreams of being inside a burning plane that was crashing and from which he was unable to escape. In recounting the dreams to his parents, he told them that he could remember a previous life in which he'd been shot down close to Iwo Jima. He also told them that he had a friend called Jack Larsen and had been based on a ship called 'Natoma'. In researching these details, Leininger's father identified James Huston Jr., an American pilot who was killed in action, in March 1945. Tucker examined this case in more detail.⁶⁰ He notes that even though Leininger's original reports were lost, there was clear evidence (supported by video footage and other written materials) that James had made these specific statements before Huston was identified. Verified statements included: he flew a Corsair; Corsairs tended to get flat tyres when they landed; the plane took off from a boat; the plane was shot in the engine, which caught fire; the plane crashed into the water and sank, and he could not get out; he died during a conflict near Iwo Jima.

In his recent book *When I Was Someone Else*,⁶¹ French journalist Stephane Allix recounts a remarkable personal experience of past life connection, beginning with a waking vision in Peru where he relived scenes from the life of/as SS officer whom he immediately knows to be Alexander Hermann; life “recollections” included a desolate snow scene, fondness for a little girl, lying next to another familiar man by a lake, a scene from Paris, and finally Alexander’s last day. He saw troops:

They are German. It’s war. They’re advancing, sheltering behind the tank. What is totally strange is that I am one of them. An SS officer. I see the face yelling at me. I’m in a demolished village, and I’m going to die, wounded in the throat from the burst of the shell that has severed my jugular. I die ... He is dead. He is me. His body is my body.

The book recounts how extensive investigations by Allix, including reconstructions, interviews with family members, and journeys to places associated with Alexander – including the place where he died — allowed him to verify the detail of his experiences. An 80-page file on Obersturmführer Alexander Herrmann enabled him to recognise from family photos that the girl was Alexander’s niece, and the other man his brother; Alexander did spend time in Paris, and his death occurred as he had experienced it, on October 20, 1941 during the Russian campaign with snow already on the ground.

A sensitive, Marie-Pierre Dillenseger, suggested that rather than representing a ‘classic’ reincarnation case, the personality of “Alexander” is part of him and is reflected in his interests and dispositions (Allix was drawn to spend time as a war correspondent in Afghanistan as a young man) to move forward on an unresolved issue of going beyond violence. This resonates with Stephane who writes: “I feel at one and the same time that Alexander is part of me and is an entity external to me.” There are occasions when Stephane feels that Alexander is intuitively guiding him in places familiar to him as an external being but others such as revisiting a childhood playground when he feels that Alexander is *in* him. He concludes that “Alexander and I are not the same man, but emanations of the same consciousness. We are linked by a breath of life that moves through us both and is impregnated by the character and emotions of our two lives; and no doubt many more besides. It was given to me to measure during these months of inquiry that our lives are individual and unique, even

though what animates them is eternal. *I am not Alexander who returns, but an individual carried by an immortal breeze that passes from eternity into mortal bodies.*⁶²

Sheldrake⁶³ explains such connections through self-similarity of morphic resonance. And in a personal communication with a friend and former intelligence officer Diana Fynn, Diana explained that her fiancé had been killed in the Battle of Britain and that she had ostensibly communicated with him on many occasions after his death. When he was about three, one of her grandsons began to speak about and draw fighter aircraft, which prompted Diana on her next session to ask if there was any connection between them. The reply was “a part of me went forward into your grandson.” This intriguing answer suggests both survival and a form/energy of reincarnation consistent with what Allix describes. This paints a more complex picture whereby, as Ramana Maharshi suggested when questioned about reincarnation, it is only and always the One Self that incarnates, as Allix himself proposes, but seemingly with resonances through time.

Section summary

The precise nature of survival in relation to reincarnation cases is hard to fathom, as indicated in the discussion of the Allix case above. However, there is extensive documented evidence for the presence or transfer of specific memories, personality traits, skills and even birthmarks correlated with the death of the previous personality.⁶⁴ The memories of children who remember previous lives cannot be stored in their brains, so where do they originate? At the very least, such cases call into question the adequacy of conventional approaches to memory, identity and the brain-mind relationship.

After-Death Communications

A spontaneous and direct After-Death Communication (ADC) occurs when a person unexpectedly perceives a deceased person through a variety of sensory perceptions, i.e. through sight, hearing, smell, or touch. It is very common for experiencers simply to feel the presence of the deceased person or perceive a contact during sleep or when falling asleep or waking up. The deceased person is perceived in a manner interpreted

by experients as indicative of the continued survival of some aspect of that person. The following is a fairly typical example of an ADC taken from our own case collection.⁶⁵

The most significant was June 12th, 2012. I was awakening around 6 a.m. I saw someone walking on my front porch through my bedroom window. I thought “who would be here this early”? I got dressed and went to the front door. I opened the door and saw a woman with her back to me on my left, crying. I asked if she was ok? She turned around and it was my grandmother from my father’s side of the family. I was in shock to see her. She spoke and asked me for forgiveness and apologized for no longer talking to me after my father had passed away. I told her it was ok and I forgave her. She walked towards me and we hugged. I felt her frail body hug me and I hugged her back. I felt her clothes, her smell and she thanked me as we hugged. I felt this most intense feeling of love. I started to cry. She then started to turn into this bright white light. I had to close my eyes due to it being so bright. I could see the light fading away through my eyelids. The feeling of her started to slowly leave. I opened my eyes and she was gone. I was standing there with my arms still looking like I was hugging someone. I was in shock. I went back into the house and lay on my bed and my wife woke up. I told her what happened. For two days I felt light headed/dizzy... My grandmother had been dead for about 7 years and I was so in shock from the experience. (E197).^e

ADCs have been documented and researched for centuries,⁶⁶ and surveys indicate that they are quite common, with an estimated 50-60% of people, in particular mourners, having experienced one or more spontaneous ADCs.^{67,68}

Although, as our survey confirmed, the vast majority of experients are convinced of the authenticity of their experience, ADCs are by nature intrinsically *subjective*, and therefore susceptible to explanation as a psychological response to a deep emotional need. People profoundly affected by the death of a family member and friend might *imagine* having experienced these perceptions, even unconsciously, as their suffering

^e The case numbers correspond to the data collections of our survey conducted in English (E), French (F) and Spanish (S).

would be so intense that they would be unable to cope with life without the loved one by their side, if only for brief, hallucinatory moments.

There are, however, some types of ADCs that are more resistant to explanation in such terms and are therefore more evidential with respect to the survival hypothesis. These involve: a) contacts that occur when the experient is not in bereavement (e.g. perception of unknown deceased persons); b) contacts witnessed simultaneously by more than one person; c) contacts during which previously unknown information is perceived (such as the passing of the perceived deceased person); and d) ADCs for warning and protection. In the following sections, we shall consider each of these types of case, drawing on historical examples and contemporary ones taken from our own collection.

a) ADCs in non-bereavement situations

ADCs can be witnessed by people who do not regard themselves as in mourning for the deceased person, either because a significant amount of time has passed that has allowed them to come to terms with their loss (as in our first example), or because they were not emotionally close to them — indeed, they may not have known them at all, as in the following example:

At the end of August 2018, I visited a friend who lives in Paris. My friend's twin sister invited us to her home — a beautiful 100-year-old house. I was reluctant to visit the house, but at my friend's insistence, I let myself be convinced. When I arrived upstairs in the guest room, an immense sadness overwhelmed me to the point of having to hold back my tears. In the corner of the room, I saw a beautiful woman, tall, thin, with her head bent forward. I was obviously the only one to see her. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She told me (telepathically) that she had given birth to a baby girl and that she was immersed in a depression from which she could not escape (hence the immense sadness I felt when I entered the room). I distinctly heard the name "Henriette". I could also describe her clothes (small blue cotton waistcoat, spring-like, and a classic skirt). I hastened to tell the lady of the house what I had just seen. I asked her if she knew the history of her house because a tragedy took place there, a tragic death. I saw her turn pale and she ended up telling me the history of the house. This house was sold to her by a widower who lived there with his daughter. The

widower sold his property in Paris to move to Lyon. A year after the purchase, neighbours told my friend's sister that the former owner of the house had committed suicide after many years of depression. She left behind her husband and a 7-year-old daughter named Adèle. The guest room was in fact the room once occupied by the child. I understood that this poor woman was waiting to see her daughter again and had been haunting the room since the date of her death. I explained to her that she had to go into the light. It would appear from the current occupants (my friend's sister and her husband) that the sense of presence is no longer there. After doing some research, we found her date of death: Friday 13 April 2007. Last detail: the deceased was named "Henriette". (F227)

Such cases are reasonably common – in our collection, 13% were “not sad and not mourning anymore”, and 14% “have never been in mourning for the perceived deceased”. It is difficult to account for such cases in terms of psychological need, since no such need is evident. In fact, ADCs involving unknown deceased persons are understandably more likely to be regarded as uncomfortable, destabilizing, oppressive, or even frightening experiences. At the very least, they surprise and intrigue. Unlike ADCs involving deceased loved ones where the benefit is obvious, ADCs with strangers are of a completely different nature, as they lack the bond of love and tenderness between the deceased and the experient that can make them such profoundly moving and beautiful experiences.

b) Multiple witness cases

Some ADC cases are more evidential than others because they have been perceived simultaneously by several people gathered in the same place. These contacts are also called shared ADCs, and are of particular interest if the reported experiences have common or consistent features. Research suggests that collective experiences, particularly detailed and precise episodes, are rare;⁶⁹ either the experient is alone at the time of contact or other people are present but do not perceive the deceased. However, such cases do exist. We will first present a historic case of a shared ADC:⁷⁰

My mother died on the 24th of June, 1874, at Slima, Malta, where we were then residing for her health. Seven nights later she appeared to me... I seemed to have been sleeping [for] some time when I woke, and, turning over on the other

side towards the window, saw my mother standing by my bedside, crying and wringing her hands. I had not been awake long enough to remember that she was dead, and exclaimed quite naturally, "Why, dear, what's the matter?" and then suddenly remembering, I screamed. The nurse sprang up from the next room, but on the top step flung herself on her knees and began to tell her beads and cry. My father at the same moment arrived at the opposite door, and I heard his sudden exclamation of "Julia, darling". My mother turned towards him, and then to me, and, wringing her hands again, retreated towards the nursery and was lost. The nurse afterwards stated that she distinctly felt something pass her... My father ordered her out of the room, and told me that I had only been dreaming, staying until I fell asleep. The next day, however, he told me that he, too, had seen the vision, and that he hoped to do so again, and that if ever she came to see me... I was not to be frightened... but she never appeared again.

Sometimes the additional witness is an animal, whose behaviour suggests a shared perception. Animal cases are valuable in that they are arguably less susceptible to suggestion from other witnesses. In our survey, 20% of the respondents were in the company of a pet when the ADC occurred, of whom 25% noted an unusual behaviour of the animal. The following account of a woman illustrates this type:

I felt the warm arms of my deceased father-in-law; he had been at a distance in the corner of the room. My sister-in-law felt cold and suddenly asked me what was wrong. The cat, asleep on my lap, then sprang up, arched back and fur standing up, claws dug into my leg, staring at the corner of the room where Henry was. She would never go near that corner, even if she was not fed for two days and her food put down there, she was frightened to go near that area. (E050).

Such instances are a challenge for conventional explanations in terms of misperception or hallucination, since they would need to explain how different persons, and supposedly even an animal, could independently have created the same imagery.

c) ADCs with perception of previously unknown information

The most evidential type of ADC involves the perception of previously unknown information that can subsequently be verified. The most common information to be

communicated is the fact of the ADC's demise, where this was unexpected. Carrington defined the so-called *Death-Coincidence* as "a case in which an apparition or other ghostly phenomenon has taken place, at the moment of the death of the person represented by the phantom".⁷¹ Also called a crisis ADC, information about the death of a significant other was reported by 21% of our participants.⁷² For this type of contact, experiencers claim to have been informed of the death of a family member or friend by the deceased himself or herself, at or around the time of the demise. These experiences precede the announcement of the death (by the hospital, the police in case of an accident, etc.).

This type is illustrated by the account of one of our female participants whose grandfather died due to cardiac arrest:

I awoke suddenly for no reason from a good sleep and saw my grandfather standing at the side of my bed. He seemed slightly younger, healthier and radiating pure love. He smiled at me and said "I'm going away my wee dove" (his pet name for me). I smiled back at him and looked at my alarm clock, it was 06.00, then he was gone. It didn't occur to me to ask my grandfather where he was going or why he was in my room at 6 in the morning. I just slipped back into a peaceful sleep. I was later awakened by the telephone ringing and my grandmother sobbing on the phone that papa was dead. His death certificate later stated approx. time of death 06.00. (E 274).

A historical account published in *Phantasms of the Living*⁷³ also describes an ADC at the moment of death:

On February 26th, 1850, I was awake, for I was to go to my sister-in-law, and visiting was then an event for me. About two o'clock in the morning my brother walked into our room (my sister's) and stood beside my bed. I called to her, "Here is ---." He was at the time quartered at Paisley, and a mail-car from Belfast passed about that hour not more than a mile from our village... He looked down on us most lovingly, and kindly, and waved his hand, and he was gone! I recollect it all as if it were only last night it occurred, and my feeling of astonishment, not at his coming into the room at all, but where he could have gone. At that very hour he died.

Mr. Gurney writes: “We have confirmed the date of death in the Army List, and find from a newspaper notice that the death took place in the early morning, and was extremely sudden.”

The medium Mrs Leonard describes the following ADC in her autobiography, *My Life in Two Worlds*.⁷⁴

My mother's health became bad, but as she was an active woman I had no idea that it was really serious. One day — December 18, 1906 —I went to stay the night at a town thirty miles from our home. In the night I awoke suddenly with a feeling that something unusual was happening. I looked up and saw in front of me, but about five feet above the level of my body, a large, circular patch of light about four feet in diameter. In this light I saw my mother quite distinctly. Her face looked several years younger than I had seen it a few hours before. A pink flush of health was on her cheeks, her eyes were clear and shining, and a smile of utter happiness was on her lips. She gazed down on me for a moment, seeming to convey to me an intense feeling of relief and a sense of safety and well-being. Then the vision faded. I was wide awake all the time, quite conscious of my surroundings.

I jumped out of bed, struck a match and looked at the clock. It was just a few minutes past 2 a.m. I returned to bed and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, awakening late the next morning to find a telegram from my brother, saying, “Mother passed away two o'clock this morning.”

I was deeply impressed, and felt convinced that my mother had come to me immediately after leaving her physical body to let me know that she still lived, and that all I had heard from the Spiritualists was true.

It is not always easy to determine whether the ADC coincided exactly with the time of death, either because the experient didn't check the time when the contact occurred, or because the official time of death was not available. Nonetheless, for 60% of our participants, concordance between time of ADC and time of death was later confirmed.⁷⁵

The following case describes a shared NDE in which the respondent seems to have been able to witness the dying process of another person during her ADC. Since that

other person went on to die, it falls within the scope of this essay. A friend of the respondent's, a 47-year-old wife and mother named Carole, had suffered a cardiac arrest but could be resuscitated. She was hospitalized and remained in a coma for two or three days from which she did not emerge:

One afternoon, during my daily nap on the sofa in the living room, I had a dream, but I wasn't really asleep, as if I was in an "in-between" state. I see Carole. She has a face that reveals a serious situation. She looks gravely at her family, which I cannot see, a husband and three children. Then I see her turn towards a light that I also see shining behind her. Her face lights up with a wonderful smile, the one she used to show. I understand that she has a choice to make and prefers to leave. My "vision" stops when my mobile rings. It is Dominique, Carole's mother, who calls me in tears without being able to say a word. I understand, and I knew, that Carole had just passed away." The wife of our participant reports an ADC at about the same time: "My wife, who was napping in our room, was awakened by the phone conversation. Coming to me, I tell her the bad news and she says, "Look, I just saw her in my dream, dressed in her usual casual clothes and she told me she had to go". I say, "Yes! She came to see me too". After that, we never "saw" her again. (F040).

Our database contains a number of cases presenting practical information previously unknown to the experient which is evidential since its veracity can subsequently be checked. The perceived practical information sometimes concerns everyday events, such as a lost item, although these objects often have sentimental value for the experient. The subject of these contacts may include the location of a family record book, a life insurance policy taken out without the knowledge of others, investments in the stock exchange kept confidential, or any other documents urgently needed by the family or friends of the deceased.

One night I woke up and saw my biological father. He greeted me and said that he had come to tell me that he was leaving and that he had left me a small legacy. He added that he had met my children and that I had a beautiful family. He bid me a fond farewell and left. I never had any contact with him and I never met him in person. I learned of his existence at the age of 9 when I discovered that the father I grew up with and whose surname I have was not my biological

father. However, I never sought to meet him, and neither did he. So, we only met personally after his death. Two days after this experience, his family contacted me to inform me of his death and his wish that I receive a legacy he had left me. This confirmed that my experience was real and accurate. (S023)

Solem⁷⁶ reports on a woman in Connecticut who documented a sleep ADC she had had with her deceased father-in-law, appearing in her dream the night after his funeral:

He told her he had a bank savings book hidden in his bedroom and urged her to look for it. He said the account held \$2,800. The next morning at breakfast when she told her husband about her dream he laughed and said, "That's ridiculous. Dad never could save a nickel." So, the dreamer forgot about her dream. Then several weeks later her husband's stepmother phoned him to report that she'd discovered a bank savings book she'd known nothing about. The son asked, "How much money did it have in it?" The reply was, "\$2,800".

The following report refers to the mother of our participant who died four days before her 91st birthday of cardiac arrest:

My husband has had several experiences of contact whilst totally conscious. He has heard the voice of my mother on several occasions. One occasion was when he was worried when a box of controlled drugs (we own a pharmacy) went missing and he spent days searching the stock room and controlled drugs cabinet. He went in on a Sunday for one last look before having to report it. He was upstairs just staring at the cabinet when he heard my mum say "look behind the radiator" — he reached down behind and wedged in there was the box of diamorphine! (E264).

A further evidential case was reported by the psychologist C.G. Jung.⁷⁷ One night he was lying awake thinking of the sudden death of a friend, whose funeral he had attended the day before. It seemed to Jung that his friend was standing at the end of the bed, beckoning him to accompany him. Jung was not at all sure whether his friend was a self-created visual image, but eventually gave him the benefit of the doubt and credited him with reality. He then followed him in his imagination out of the house, out to the road, and finally to his former house several hundred yards away. On arriving they went up to his study, his friend then climbed on to a stool and showed him the

second of five books with red bindings, which stood on the second shelf from the top. At this point the vision broke off, but Jung was so curious that he went to visit his friend's widow the following morning and asked if he could look something up in his library. He saw the stool and spotted the five books with red bindings: they were translations of Zola, and the second volume was entitled *The Legacy of the Dead*. Jung comments on the significance of the title in view of his experience, which he makes no attempt to explain. Two points are worth noting: first, it is hard to make sense of the story without invoking a degree of agency on the part of the dead man; and second, it appears that Jung was in some sense present in the library, as he was able to verify the details of the stool and the five red books, even if during the vision he had not caught a glimpse of the titles.

Such evidential cases also feature in historical accounts, such as that of Mr. H. Walton, of Dent, Sedbergh, England:⁷⁸

In the month of April, 1881, I was located in Norfolk, and my duties took me once a fortnight to a fishing village on the coast — so I can guarantee the following facts: It is customary for the fishing smacks to go to Grimsby “line fishing” in the spring. The vessels started one afternoon on their journey north. In the evening, a heavy north-east wind blew, and one of the boats mistook the white surf on the rocks for the reflection of a lighthouse. In consequence the boat got into shallow water, a heavy sea came, and swept two men from the deck. One man grasped a rope and was saved; the other, a younger man, failed to save himself, though an expert swimmer. It was said that he was heard to shout about 11 o'clock. Towards one o'clock, the young man's mother, lying awake, saw his apparition come to the foot of the bed, clad in white, and she screamed with fright, and told her husband what she had seen, and that J. was drowned. He sought in vain to calm her by saying that she must have been dreaming. She asserted the contrary. Next day, when her daughter came in with the telegram of the sad event, before her daughter had time to speak, she cried out: “J. is drowned”, and became unconscious; she remained in this state for many hours. When she regained consciousness, she told them particularly and distinctly what she had seen; and what is to the point is this remarkable thing: she said: “If ever the body is to be found, it has a cut across the cheek”,

- specifying which cheek. The body was found some days after, and exactly as [the] mother had seen it, was the cut on the cheek.

The next case — also involving a scratch on the cheek — was first reported by Myers⁷⁹ and is related by a Mr F.G. He had a sister who died of cholera in 1867. In 1876 he was travelling in the west of the United States. One morning he was occupied with drafting some orders for his firm when he suddenly became aware of someone sitting on his left. He looked up and had a vivid impression of the form of his sister who “appeared as if alive”; the apparition vanished instantly, but G. was so impressed by the experience that he took the next train home to tell his parents. His father was amused at first, but then amazed to learn that G. had seen a distinct scratch on the right-hand side of his sister’s face. On hearing this the mother “rose trembling to her feet and nearly fainted away”. When she had recovered her composure, she explained that when her daughter had died she had been treating her face and had accidentally scratched her right cheek. She had touched it up as best she could with powder, and had told no one of the incident. The only explanation of this case which excludes some agency on the part of the daughter is some kind of unconscious visual telepathy from the mother; but the mind boggles at how a fact known only to one person can be unconsciously and telepathically impressed on an image of a second person while she is appearing to a third party.

Other previously unknown information may concern the forthcoming death of a family member or friend, but also happy events such as the announcement of a pregnancy. For example, the following death was probably neither expected nor foreseeable, since the person died of a stroke:

The most significant contact was meeting my father. I always felt his presence from the beginning. He passed away when I was 23 years old. At first, I saw him in my dreams. We would talk, he would help me to make the right decisions. He appeared to me the first time while I was cleaning my kitchen. I felt his presence. I turned around and he was just a foot away from me. He appeared to me dressed in white. A halo of light surrounded him, but I was not dazzled. I knew why he was coming. He was coming for my uncle. It was a Thursday. The following Sunday, my sister called to tell me that our uncle had died. He had been rushed to the hospital on Thursday for a stroke. (F279)

One of our male participants claims to have received during a sleep ADC the following information from his father who died 6 years earlier: "I didn't know my daughter was pregnant, in fact she didn't know either because she didn't want to have any more children" (S121).

d) ADCs for warning and protection

About 50% of ADCs occur within a year of death, with a high concentration in the first 24 hours and up to 7 days. Other contacts take place with decreasing frequency from two to five years after death.⁸⁰ Contacts that happen later, sometimes even decades after the demise, are rarer and often fall into the category of ADCs for warning and protection. These ADCs occur in situations of crisis or imminent danger and result in the avoidance of a dramatic event such as an accident, a fire, an assault, a drowning, an undiagnosed health issue, a young child in danger, etc. These experiences do not occur when a danger has already been identified by the person concerned. For example, an individual who has realized that his house is on fire and is running to get a fire extinguisher or is calling the fire brigade will not have this type of experience. These ADCs are not about *managing* a crisis situation but about *becoming aware* of it. In cases where experiencers have heeded the warning, we obviously do not know whether the announced potential danger would actually really have occurred. However, our data collection contains several cases in which experiencers did not make use of the warning and the announced danger did actually take place. For this female respondent, a warning during sleep was not enough and a second intervention was apparently needed to avoid a dramatic outcome:

Several years after my mother's death, I dreamed of her one night. She was very present, I could feel her close. She was visibly concerned, and told me that she was worried about me because she was afraid I would have a motorbike accident (I ride a motorbike or a car). I told her "I'm careful" (I am, 40 years on two wheels, zero accidents). But she insisted, repeating that she was worried despite my answer. The contact ended there. A few days later, in the morning, I needed to go to a work meeting which made me take an unusual route. I went to the car park where my motorbike and car are parked, which is five minutes away from my house. When I arrived, I realised that I had made a mistake (this has never happened to me), I had taken the car keys instead of

the motorbike keys. So, I had to go back to my house and then to the car park, which made me lose ten minutes. Then I took the road to my destination, and a few kilometres away, at a junction known to be very accident-prone, there was a very big pile-up that took up the whole width of the road. And obviously this accident had just happened, probably ten minutes before, the ten minutes I had lost getting my key. That morning I didn't feel my mother's presence, but I'm sure she created this unusual absent-mindedness that delayed me and probably saved my life. (F080).

Electronic voice phenomena

Evidence from reports of electronic voice phenomena (EVP), instrumental trans-communication (ITC), and spontaneous telephone anomalies have not been considered in this essay. In these cases, experimental methods are employed to elicit recordings of anomalous sounds, voices, raps and images, that allegedly come from the dead. However, in our view, the conventional explanations that have been offered to explain these phenomena,⁸¹ particularly in terms of the projection of meaning onto degraded or ambiguous sensory stimuli are sufficient to account for the best evidence available. As for telephone anomalies, their occurrence, as of yet, is still under-researched, compared to the phenomena we consider here, and according to one commentator,⁸² “at present, no one case of telecommunication phenomena on record appears to offer a *robust* case for survival that would hold up against more traditional survival themed phenomena”. However, in principle they could potentially include cases that include the evidential features we have identified for other forms of ADC, and so could provide evidence for the survival hypothesis.⁸³

Section summary

We have seen that spontaneous after-death communications have been documented and researched over the centuries. The few historical ADC accounts presented above and paralleled by contemporary accounts show that the perceptions are very similar, although they have been interpreted by researchers according to the knowledge available at that time.

Despite significant advances in consciousness research, the ontological status of ADCs has not yet been ascertained, although the vast majority of our over 1,000

survey respondents were convinced of the authenticity of their experience (only 1% answered this question in the negative). Of course, it should be stressed that personal conviction does not count as evidence, and most cases reported to us in our survey do not have sufficient detail, or did not occur in circumstances that would offer persuasive evidence to an independent observer. However, some cases in that collection did, in our view, meet this threshold for evidence, and we have presented a sample of them here. They typically fall into the categories of: contacts that occur when the witness is not in bereavement; contacts witnessed simultaneously by more than one person; contacts during which previously unknown information is perceived; and ADCs for warning and protection.

Induced ADCs and the psychomanteum

Some accounts of ADCs have involved apparitions spontaneously observed in mirrors and other reflective surfaces (e.g. Sidgwick et al., 1894). This is reminiscent of the ancient Greek tradition of consulting the dead via a “psychomanteum”, which typically involved gazing into a darkened pool of liquid under low illumination conditions so as to encourage meaningful visual imagery. Later Dionysian rituals replaced the pool with a reflective surface such as a mirror,⁸⁴ and similar necromancy is attributed to Tungus shamans, North American Pawnees, and New Zealand Maoris.⁸⁵ Raymond Moody recognised the powerful therapeutic effect of encountering deceased loved-ones in the course of near-death experiences, and speculated that similar benefits could be achieved if such encounters were facilitated by mirror gazing. He created an “oracle room” that consisted of a large mirror mounted on a wall. A comfortable easy chair was placed 3' in front of and facing the mirror, inclined very slightly backwards so that the person sitting in the chair was unable to see their own reflection. The walls were otherwise covered in black velvet, and a low wattage bulb provided the only illumination. Under these conditions, Moody found that

“A number of persons participating have experienced full-sized, appropriately moving, three-dimensional, aptly colored apparitions of departed persons. All subjects were psychologically normal adults who were in a waking state of awareness during the process. Some of the subjects reported complex communication with the apparition and most described having a convincing sense of the presence of the departed person during the interlude. All subjects

so far have voiced their unequivocal personal convictions that the visitations were real.” (p 85)

For example, Moody describes his own experience (p. 113):

At first ... I did not recognize this person, though she immediately seemed somehow familiar. She looked somewhat as she had while alive on the earth, but appeared younger than she had been even when I was born. When I recognized her as my grandmother and confronted her with this fact, she immediately acknowledged it and began to use the nickname she alone had used for me when I was a child. She talked with me about events only my grandmother and I knew. She imparted to me certain very personal information about my early life that has been quite important and revealing.

Nonetheless, the encounters have focused on healing the relationship between the departed person and the subject, so that to date they provide only limited evidence that might support the case for survival, no matter how convincing they have been for the participants. Similarly, Caputo, Lynn and Houran⁸⁶ reviewed 44 experiments that used the psychomanteum with non-clinical participants, and concluded that it was an effective method for facilitating “anomalous experiences” that can be life changing for the percipients. As yet these studies have provided limited evidence that bears on the question of survival, but it would be a simple matter to design future experiments in such a way that they encourage encounters that produce previously unknown but verifiable information that could offer a laboratory-based corollary of spontaneous ADCs.

Mediumship

Early cases of mediumship

Mediumship can be defined as the alleged ability to provide evidence of the continued existence of spirits of the deceased.⁸⁷ Two forms of mediumship are usually delineated: physical mediumship provides evidence in the form of material effects such as raps or bangs, movements of objects, and other physical effects that are thought

to be caused by discarnate spirits; with mental mediumship evidence takes the form of verbal communications that contain information that is known only to the deceased person or is characteristic of them when they were alive.⁸⁸ Mediumship has been described by Hunter and Luke as "ancient and ubiquitous across cultures",⁸⁹ and attempts to communicate with the dead are a common feature of human history.

One such historical case involves Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), one of the greatest scientists and engineers of his time, who sat in the upper house of the Swedish Parliament. In 1743 he declared that he had had a series of visions and his inner senses opened so that he was able to interact with the spiritual world and with deceased people. In 1761 the Countess de Marteville came to Swedenborg to explain that her husband, who had been ambassador to the Netherlands, had given her a valuable silver service before his death. The silversmith was now demanding an exorbitant payment, even though she was sure that her husband had paid for it already; however, the receipt was nowhere to be found. The countess asked Swedenborg to contact her husband to ask about the receipt. Three days later, he told her that he had spoken to her husband, who had informed him that the vital document was in a bureau upstairs. The woman replied that the bureau had already been searched, but Swedenborg insisted that she should remove a certain drawer and pull off its false back. The papers were duly found in this secret place, whose existence was known only to the dead count. The story is related by eleven different sources and vouched for by Swedenborg himself when he was later questioned about it.

Modern mediumship has its origins in the rise of Spiritualism in the late 19th century.⁹⁰ For the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, mediumship was an appealing phenomenon through which to scientifically test claims of survival. Phenomena associated with hauntings or ADCs tended to be spontaneous and unpredictable so that their investigation relied upon the evaluation of retrospective testimony concerning events that had occurred under relatively uncontrolled conditions; in contrast, the central claim of mediumship was to be able to provide evidence of survival more or less on demand, which allowed for more careful control over the prevailing conditions at the time when phenomena occurred, and enabled experimentation in the sense of being able to change those conditions so as to test the effect it had on the quality of evidence produced. Much of this early work involved sittings with physical mediums,

but despite some impressive results,⁹¹ the overall impression was one of disappointment, as a number of promising claimants were caught in the act of fraud,⁹² and researchers came to appreciate the severe limitations concerning the reliability of witness testimony from the séance room.⁹³

Work with mental mediums was deemed to have been more successful, particularly the investigations involving first Mrs Piper and later Mrs Leonard, which extended over 60 years and many hundreds of sittings. In this long period of close observation, Mrs Piper “never gave any cause for suspicion; indeed, she was admirably patient and amenable”,⁹⁴ while “no taint of suspicion ever clouded the reputation of Gladys Osborne”⁹⁵

Mrs Piper came to the attention of the eminent psychologist William James, when his wife and mother-in-law had been impressed by readings she gave them. After some informal sittings, James progressed to conduct more formal tests. Mrs Piper would enter a deep trance and give herself up to a ‘spirit control’ to work through her, claiming to remember little of the sittings themselves. Tests of her trance state confirmed that she was unresponsive to pin pricks and smelling salts.

The communications produced during James's investigation were sufficiently impressive for him to invite Richard Hodgson, who had established a reputation for exposing fraudulent mediums in the UK, to America to test her. Hodgson arranged further anonymous sitters but also employed a private detective to follow her and her family to ensure that she was not gathering intelligence about possible sitters. These produced no evidence of foul play and the sessions continued to provide accurate information. At his suggestion, Piper was invited to England to participate in further tests. She knew no-one in the UK, and stayed in the houses of the investigators where her movements could be carefully monitored and her access to information that might be useful when producing messages for sitters was tightly controlled. Nevertheless, many of the sittings were impressive. Although some of the spirit controls who worked through her were of dubious validity — including ‘Walter Scott’, who believed there were monkeys in the sun, and ‘George Eliot’ who claimed to have met Adam Bede in heaven — others seemed characteristic of the person they claimed to have been in life. One of these was ‘G.P.’, who had been an acquaintance of the investigators but had died in an accident. G.P. acted as spirit control for 150 sitters

who were introduced anonymously. Of these, 30 were known to G.P. in life and, he recognised all but one of them (the other was a young woman whom he had only known when she was a little girl) and recognised none of those that the living G.P. had not known. Hodgson's report comments:

I may say generally that out of a large number of sitters who went as strangers to Mrs. Piper, the communicating G. P. has picked out the friends of G. P. living, precisely as the G. P. living might have been expected to do, and has exhibited memories in connection with these and other friends which are such as would naturally be associated as part of the G. P. personality... and which are accompanied by the emotional relations which were connected with such friends in the mind of G. P. living.⁹⁶

Mrs Leonard is best known for the sittings she had with Sir Oliver Lodge. Her principal control while in trance was 'Feda' who claimed to be an ancestor who had died in childbirth aged just 13. From spring 1914 she urged Mrs Leonard to begin work as a medium so that she could help people in need, since "something big and terrible is going to happen to the world".⁹⁷ Sir Oliver Lodge first sat with her in Sept 1915 and received a somewhat cryptic message that was interpreted as implying a traumatic loss. Soon after he learned of the death of his son Raymond while fighting near Ypres. At a sitting in December Feda/Leonard described a photograph of Raymond with his fellow officers. "Raymond" described being seated with some others standing behind him, and a recollection that one of them wanted to lean on him. Subsequently, Oliver Lodge received three photographs of the group of officers with them in three rows. Raymond is cross-legged on the floor with the seated officer behind him variously resting a hand on his shoulder or leaning on him with his crossed leg.

Most early studies with mediums were purely descriptive⁹⁸. Attempts to quantify the accuracy of information given — particularly to estimate how likely they were to be true for other people besides the intended recipient — highlighted the great difficulties in establishing appropriate baselines. For example, statements from Hyslop's sittings with Mrs Piper⁹⁹ were translated into a set of questionnaire items that were completed by 420 "control" persons to see how frequently statements were accepted as true of them (if 42 of the sample responded that the statement applied to them, Hyslop estimated that there was therefore a 1 in 10 probability that the statement would be

accepted by the intended recipient by chance coincidence). When the odds for all the statements in the reading were combined, it gave a statistical significance that was “astonishingly low”.¹⁰⁰

However, there are two problems that can inflate the significance levels. Firstly, control participants typically know that the statements were not originally intended for them, and this can reduce the cognitive effort that they apply in trying to make sense of the statement in a personally relevant way. In support of this, Roy and Robertson¹⁰¹ found that people who were misinformed that they were the recipient of a message, when in fact it was intended for someone else, gave significantly higher ratings than those who were accurately informed that they were non-recipients. Secondly, statements tend to be inter-related, so that if the recipient can accept a discarnate who, say, was a soldier in WWII, then a cluster of other statements in the reading are much more likely to also be acceptable.

Hettinger¹⁰² recognised the limitations of working with control *subjects* and instead used control *statements*, which were randomly selected from a different reading in the series. The statements were randomly mixed and both intended recipients were asked to select the ones they believed were applicable to them. The intended statements were chosen significantly more often than the control statements. However, it is difficult to select control statements that are equally likely to be true just by chance, so that comparisons still have an element of subjectivity.

More generally, impressive mediumistic communications are often dismissed as being due to a set of deceptive practices known collectively as “cold reading.”¹⁰³ Cold reading has also been cited to account for more controlled experimental tests that have been designed to rule out exactly these kinds of information gathering.¹⁰⁴

Unfortunately, there are very few systematic descriptions of cold reading methods¹⁰⁵ and consequently allusions to cold reading tend to be vague and inconsistent and to overestimate the kinds of successes that are possible, particularly when using the more basic techniques. We shall consider cold reading in more detail so that we can evaluate the degree to which it might account for the evidence presented for survival from tests of mediumship.

Hyman¹⁰⁶ distinguishes between two types of reading — “static” and “dynamic” — which exploit quite different psychological mechanisms. The former can involve the use of a stock spiel of general statements that can fit any individual, often reflecting common concerns around love and relationships, money and career, health and wellbeing, hobbies and travel. A more tailored description can be based on the client’s sex and age to reflect common changes in priorities across the lifespan. Their success depends on people’s tendency to believe that general statements are especially applicable to them, exploiting a phenomenon called the Barnum Effect¹⁰⁷ which includes statements like “disciplined and self-controlled outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside”, and “you have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others”.

The dynamic methods exploit nonverbal feedback as a means of testing the accuracy of statements, but can include gathering information in advance if the client’s visit is expected. Roe & Roxburgh¹⁰⁸ developed a more detailed model of cold reading that distinguishes between “true cold reading” and “warm reading”, based on accounts found in a specialist pseudo-psychic literature with titles such as *Money-making Cold Reading*, *Cashing in on the Psychic* and *Confessions of a Cold Reader*, and on research with an experienced pseudo-psychic who was filmed giving cold readings and then analysing the footage to explain his *modus operandi*. “True cold reading” depends on being able to monitor the client’s nonverbal behaviour that indicate interest in and agreement with what the speaker is saying, including smiles, and eye contact. The cold reader can introduce a topic in a generalized form and steer the development of that topic based on this feedback, making increasingly narrow choices that can result in end points which give very specific information indeed. The client will tend to only remember this end point, not the stages that led to it. “Warm reading” involves fishing for information, encouraging verbal responses by implicitly asking the client to explain or clarify messages that are confusing to the medium. Couttie presents a conversation that illustrates how this might work:¹⁰⁹

Psychic: I’m getting something about a car crash?

Client: Yes... my brother.

Psychic: Because he keeps talking about his shoulder. He’s saying “It doesn’t half hurt.”

Client: He had head injuries.

Psychic: That's right, dear, his head and shoulder are hurting. It was your brother wasn't it?

Client: Yes, that's right.

Psychic: He's saying, "I was a fool for not doing up my seat-belt." He didn't do up his seat-belt, did he?

Client: No, he didn't, that's right.

Psychic: No, we haven't met before have we? I couldn't know your brother was in a crash unless I was in contact with him, could I?

Both cold and warm reading rely on being able to observe (or hear from) the client in real time.¹¹⁰ Although clients might be aware of, and take steps to control or reduce their reactions, in practice this is very difficult to achieve, so that it is virtually impossible to rule out cold reading as an explanation of impressive communications produced in a natural setting. In order to rule out cold reading completely, we need to turn to experimental studies that afford much greater control over the reading situation.

Mediumship: Modern controlled tests as a way to take cold reading into account

A recent experiment reported by Beischel and colleagues¹¹¹ illustrates how this can be achieved in practice. This team pre-screens the mediums they work with, having developed a rigorous testing programme to give them some guarantee that their participants are able to work under the conditions of the experiment. Twenty such mediums contributed 96 readings in this experiment. Sitters were chosen randomly from a pool of 1,000 volunteers. Interaction was solely between the medium and a member of the experimental team who did not know the identity of the intended sitter, so could not unwittingly give feedback during the reading concerning the accuracy of statements. The normal psychological connection between medium and sitter is absent, and this might be important in establishing a connection to the latter's deceased loved ones. Instead, at the start of each reading the first name of a discarnate was given to the medium.

Providing a first name may give some general cues as to the age and cultural background of the deceased, as names fall in and out of fashion; however, the later

evaluation of readings includes a second “control” reading that was produced for another recipient, and these are matched for the deceased person’s gender, religion and ethnicity, so that knowing the deceased person’s first name should not affect the outcome of the experiment. Mediums give a spontaneous reading, and also answer specific questions of the discarnate. The sitter is given their intended reading and also the matched control reading to evaluate. This controls for the “static” cold reading techniques that rely on statements being applicable to most people, since this would be true for both the intended reading and the one it has been matched with. They interact with a second experimenter who has no direct involvement with the medium and so cannot cue them as to which reading is theirs. Sitters rated accuracy and specificity in three ways: percentages of accurate statements, global scores given to whole readings, and a forced-choice selection between the two readings. On all measures, the intended readings were rated as significantly more applicable than were the control readings. This demonstrates that it is possible to produce personally applicable information under conditions that completely rule out the use of cold reading.

Of course, one significant study is not sufficient to provide compelling evidence for a claim; indeed, some other studies found no difference between the ratings for intended and control readings,¹¹² or even that the control readings were rated as more accurate”.¹¹³ This demonstrates the need to look collectively at all the research that has been conducted. This can be done using meta-analysis, which combines the statistical outcomes from different studies to produce an overall estimate of the effect size.

Cohen distinguished between “small”, “medium” and “large” effects. A medium effect is “likely to be visible to the naked eye of a careful observer” and other effects are described in relation to it: a small effect is unlikely to be obvious even to a careful observer but will be detectable using statistical tests, while a large effect may be so obvious that any competent observer would notice it. Jessica Utts helpfully illustrates this with the example of heights. The standard deviation for adult height is about 2.5 inches for both men and women. If the average difference in height between men and women gave only a small effect size of 0.2, then that would equal about half an inch (0.2×2.5). In practice it would be very difficult to detect such a small height difference

even if we were to observe lots of men and women. In the UK the actual average height of men is 5ft 9in and of women is 5ft 3in, giving an effect size of 2.4, which is so large that we should immediately notice the sex difference in height.

Sarraf and colleagues¹¹⁴ published a meta-analysis of proof-oriented tests of mediumship that was restricted to studies reported in the 21st century, reflecting a recent upsurge in interest in working with mediums. They calculated a cumulative effect size of .18, which would be classified as small in Cohen's terms, but is highly statistically significant, meaning the superior performance is unlikely to occur just by chance. They concluded, "the results of this meta-analysis support the hypothesis that some mediums can retrieve information about deceased persons through unknown means" (p. 1). Adam Rock and colleagues¹¹⁵ conducted a similar meta-analysis but with more restrictive criteria that focused on just eight studies, though it still involved 15 researchers and 200 individual trials. While the authors reported that, overall, sitters were not able to select their intended message when presented alongside one or more decoy messages, the combined effect size is actually 0.22, so is a little higher than for Sarraf's analysis, but because the number of included trials was much lower, the deviation from chance wasn't enough to be statistically significant.

Survival or super-psi?

Even where the medium is able to provide information that is accurate and specific that relates to the claimed discarnate personality, there is still the problem of so-called super-psi or living agent psi (LAP). Experimental evidence has demonstrated that under certain circumstances people are able to acquire information from others' minds (known as extrasensory perception) or directly from the environment (clairvoyance) in ways that do not rely on conventional sensory systems.¹¹⁶ In practice, the limitations of ESP or clairvoyance are unknown, so it is at least conceivable that mediums may be able to provide accurate information about deceased persons, no matter how esoteric or obscure, by utilising their own psychic ability rather than some capacity to communicate with persons post-mortem – however, this does not seem to apply to the Swedenborg case cited above, at least not by his own account. Alan Gauld¹¹⁷ has proposed that for evidence to be indicative of survival,

We would need evidence of intelligence, of personality characteristics, of goals, purposes and affections, and of a stream of memory, that are largely or

recognizably continuous with those once possessed by a certain formerly incarnate human being.

One type of case in which these qualities can be found involves the apparent replacement of the medium's personality by a secondary one that claims to have lived (and died) as another person entirely. In trance mediumship it is commonly claimed that the medium's identity is replaced by that of a "communicator" claiming to have survived death, though this usually represents a transitory state. There are rare examples in which the "host personality" seems to have been permanently displaced and the "guest" remains in control for the rest of the person's life. Examples include the North American case of Lurancy Vennum, in which the host was ostensibly replaced by "Mary Roff" from summer 1877 to May 1878,¹¹⁸ and the Indian case of Sumitra Singh who was replaced by "Sumitra Tripathi" from July 1985 until her death in 1998.¹¹⁹ Rather less well known than these is the case of Iris Farczady.¹²⁰ Iris was born in 1914, the second of four children born to an upper middle-class family (her father was director of a factory). Her early years were spent in Budapest, but a post-war depression led to Iris being sent to stay with a foster family in the Netherlands. Thus, from age 5 to 7 she learned to become a Dutch speaker and largely forgot Hungarian. When she returned home she regained her fluency in Hungarian and largely forgot the Dutch she had learned. Additionally, at school she was taught German and French (but not Spanish). Clearly, she had a talent for languages.

She became involved in family Spiritualist circle meetings, and showed an aptitude for mediumship, with "a vast repertoire of communicators, her speciality being exotic foreigners who spoke [or appeared to speak] various languages" (p. 5), but, less credibly, also communicators who claimed to be from other planets. Unusually, these communicators seemed to remain in possession of Iris even after the sance had ended, often for hours and sometimes for days. Iris went to bed unwell one night in August 1933 with her mother beside her as she went to sleep. At one point she appeared to stop breathing, but recovered and slept soundly. However, when she awoke in the morning she was very upset, and was crying "Wo bin ich?" [where am I?], though she seemed unable to understand responses in German or in her native Hungarian. Instead, she began speaking in a language that was not recognised by her family. Iris was expected to come to herself in time, as she had previously, but this

new personality showed no inclination to withdraw. Various people visited Iris to identify the language she spoke, and it was eventually recognised as Spanish. Delighted to be in contact with someone of the same language, she identified herself as Lucía Altares de Salvio, and described how she had lived in Madrid with her husband Pedro and 14 children, until her death three months previously, at the tender age of 41. In contrast to the well-to-do Iris, Lucía claimed to be a communist who hated the upper classes.

In an effort to dislodge this squatter personality, Iris's mother had her hypnotised. This was successful insofar as Iris re-emerged to complain about having her body taken over by someone so vulgar and distasteful, but soon seemed to have come to terms with the situation and disappeared. Left with a young woman who spoke only Spanish, the family proceeded to teach her German so that they could communicate. Although Iris/Lucía did try to leave the family on a few occasions, prompted it seems by her desire to contact her children, she soon became accustomed to this new way of life. The Farczádys accepted Lucía as a family member, and no further attempts were made to restore Iris. Mr Farczády, only an occasional visitor to the house, seems astonishingly pragmatic in reflecting that while he missed his clever daughter, her transformed self was much less nervous, and was now quite a good cook. Iris/Lucía was an accomplished dancer, particularly in the Spanish style, and she went on to appear on-stage both in the chorus line and as a soloist. At the age of 21 she married a German-Hungarian officer, and bore him two sons and a daughter. After the war she qualified as an electrical engineer, which seems out of character for the uneducated Lucía. When interviewed at age 80 by Barrington, Mulacz and Rivas,¹²¹ "Lucía" still believed that she had supplanted Iris, and became upset when asked about it. She protested that she had not asked to be re-born at all. She remembered a very contented post-mortem existence, rather like floating happily in space, when suddenly she found herself in the body of this attractive young girl, fresh and vital in contrast to the worn-out body she remembered as a 41-year-old washer woman who had given birth to 14 children. At the time of Barrington et al.'s report, Lucía had been in possession of Iris's body for 61 years.

Attempts at verification have been mixed; no record has been found of the streets that Lucía claimed to have lived in, and attempts to trace family members were

unsuccessful, though spellings of various names that were thought to be un-Spanish were subsequently found to occur, albeit rarely. She was not familiar with some well-known “sights” of Madrid or other public buildings, but she did correctly describe some Madrid churches, including features of their interior, and she was adept in handling and describing utensils that were common to the Spanish poor, including a brazier and a drinking vessel. She had a confused understanding of popular Spanish children’s games and had little to say about socio-political events from her past life, though these might have been of little concern to a Spanish washer woman.

Opinions concerning her mastery of Spanish also varied. When being overtly tested, such as by a Spanish embassy representative, she became timid and nervous, and tended to make errors, but in more informal settings she could be loquacious and engaging, keeping up with rapid exchanges without hesitation for hours. The “errors” she made were interpreted by native Spanish speakers as signs of Madrileña speech, consistent with her claim to have lived in Madrid. Barrington et al. conclude “the balance is strongly in favour of the view that Lucía spoke fluent Spanish and on occasion might have passed for a native speaker”. When they interviewed her at age 80, she was still fluent enough to suggest that Spanish was a mother tongue that she had fallen out of practice with (by this point she had spoken German and Hungarian almost exclusively for 60 years). No plausible means has been suggested by which Iris could have learned Spanish conventionally, and there is no precedent in the history of parapsychology of acquiring skills such as correct pronunciation of a language or a dialect by means of ESP. She also demonstrated a proficiency in Flamenco and other Spanish (or Gypsy) dances, which falls clearly into the same category of “unacquired skills”.

Another form of mediumship that is of interest with respect to Gauld’s stipulated characteristics are so-called “drop-in communicators” — that is, soi-disant personalities that are unknown to any of the sitters — since their appearance seems to reflect the discarnate’s “goals, purposes and affections”, rather than those of the living persons at the sitting. For example, Erlendur Haraldsson¹²² has described a séance that took place on 24th November 1905 in Reykjavik and involved the Icelandic medium Indridi Indridason. During the sitting, a communicator spoke through the medium, introducing himself as “Mr Jensen” (a common Danish surname, but

unrecognised by any of the sitters), claiming that a fire was raging in a factory in Copenhagen (1,300 miles away). Later in the evening, Jensen returned to say that the fire service had managed to get it under control.

Although Iceland was at that time a Danish dependent territory, no telegraphic connection existed between the two, and news from the mainland came via newspapers that were carried by cargo ships, so there was no immediate way to verify the information. One of the witnesses, theology professor Haraldur Nielsson wrote an account of the event the following morning, and this was countersigned by his uncle, the Bishop of Iceland. The next boat from Denmark only arrived at Christmas, but it did carry an edition of the Danish paper, *Politiken*, that included an account of a fire at a lamp factory at 63 Store Kongensgade, Copenhagen. This had occurred at the time of the séance, and had been brought under control within an hour, which was consistent with the second communication from Jensen. In re-investigating the case, Haraldsson was able to consult the fire brigade's report of the fire, and this confirmed the details given in the newspaper. To test the possibility that this correspondence may simply reflect a coincidence, he checked the frequency with which fires were reported in *Politiken*, and found that in a sampling period from two weeks before the Store Kongensgade fire to two weeks afterwards, three other fires were described. Only one took place in the evening, and only one in a factory, namely the Store Kongensgade fire, which was the largest, and caused most damage.

Why might this communication better reflect the motivations or interests of the alleged discarnate than those of the living agent sitters? Ten days after the sitting in which Jensen reported the fire (but still before the arrival of newspapers), he communicated again, and in response to questions about his personal life claimed to have been a "klædefabrikant" (clothing manufacturer) from Copenhagen. He gave the first name Emil, and described himself as a bachelor with no children. He also reported "I was not so young when I died", but all his siblings were still alive. Given the large distances involved and difficulties with communication, it seems that no attempt was made at the time to confirm any of these details, especially given the commonality of the surname "Jensen".

Haraldsson followed up many years later, consulting Copenhagen's Royal Library, and found that although hundreds of Jensens were listed for 1890, only one manufacturer

had the Christian name Emil. His address was 67 Store Kongensgade, just two doors from the location of the fire. Haraldsson also found an entry in census documents that listed an Emil Jensen who was born in Copenhagen, worked as a “manufacturer” and “coffee merchant”. The census entry described him as single, with no children, and Haraldsson ascertained that he died in 1898 survived by all his siblings (three sisters and two brothers). Thus, all of the statements that Jensen made about his personal life were confirmed.

Of course, it is possible that the medium or a confederate could have discovered this information by normal means in advance of the reading, though the motive would not be clear since the sitters would have found it difficult to verify such details for an ordinary working-class person who had lived so far away; and indeed, no such attempt had been made by any of the researchers at the time. However, even if we were to allow this possibility, it would not account for why Jensen’s first appearance had been to announce the outbreak of a fire that was happening contemporaneously, but which had no importance for any of the sitters, and of which they could have no knowledge by normal means. The case rather seems to reflect the interests and motivations of the alleged discarnate personality, since the fire was initially very violent and took place so close to where he had lived for most of his life.

A more recent example of a communicator expressing goals or motivations that are not obviously shared by the medium or sitter is the case of Jacqui Poole.¹²³ On Friday 11 February 1983, Jacqui was murdered in her London council flat aged just 25. Christine Hollohan lived about 3 miles away, and learned of the murder some days later in a local shop. She didn’t know Jacqui but felt that the incident explained a bad feeling she had had all weekend. Christine was training to become a professional medium, so when she felt a strange sense of presence that evening she thought it might be related to Jacqui’s death. She had a vision of someone who called herself “Jacqui Hunt” rather than Poole (this turned out to be her maiden name), who claimed she had approached Christine to assert that she had been murdered and was seeking justice.

After a number of such “visits”, Hollohan reluctantly called the police. One of the officers sent to take her statement, detective constable Tony Batters, had been first to arrive at the murder scene and had spent 5 hours there gathering and recording

evidence. He made real-time notes during the interview, which amounted to 131 separate statements about the victim and the crime. Christine explained that Jacqui had been due to work that evening as a barmaid but had felt unwell so decided to cancel and had been visited by an acquaintance whom she let into her flat thinking he might have a message from her boyfriend. She described the struggle that began in her bathroom and ended with her murder in the lounge. Her description of the scene matched Batters' recollection and notes, including details of two cups on the kitchen drainer, one of which had been washed up and one that still had coffee in it, and a pile of unread newspapers. She noted that Jacqui had all her rings stripped from her fingers except two, and gave five names besides "Jacqui Hunt", all of which could be placed, including her best friend, her brother and mother. Other information was unknown at the time but was confirmed later. Batters estimated that of the 131 statements, 120 had been "proved absolutely correct". Some of these could have reflected information that was in the public domain (e.g., in newspaper reports), but many were known only to the investigators, and others related to the attack that were consistent with circumstances but unverifiable.

Christine had struggled to express the name of the murderer, so attempted automatic writing and managed to write "Pokie", which was immediately recognised as the nickname of Anthony Ruark, a known acquaintance of Jacqui's. At that time, Ruark was not a major suspect since he had no record of violence and had been provided with an alibi; despite the accuracy of the information, it did not offer ways to progress the investigation¹²⁴ so Ruark was released and the case remained unsolved for 18 years.

However, the police had retained Ruark's jumper, found in a rubbish bag, as evidence. By 2000, advances in forensic science enabled them to procure and analyse DNA samples from the jumper that demonstrated contact between Ruark and Jacqui, which implicated him as her killer. He was found guilty of her murder at the Old Bailey in London, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Of course, it is possible that Ruark's jumper would have been retained for analysis in the normal course of the investigation, though the investigating officer, Batters, was convinced that "without Christine's information, we might have failed to procure the most conclusive evidence". As with the Emil Jensen case, the nature of the communications via Christine Hollohan seem

to reflect the goals and motivations of the alleged discarnate communicator rather than the needs of the living agents (albeit the officers were intent on solving the case). The information provided did include elements that were already known to the attending officers but also other information that was only verified some time later. It seems a mammoth task to account for this in terms of the exquisite application of ESP and clairvoyance by Christine in order to meet the needs of a deceased person that was previously unknown to her.

Another approach in meeting Gauld's criteria is to identify cases in which the communicating "entity" expresses talents, aptitudes or learned skills that are characteristic of the deceased person but are not shared by the host medium. As we shall see, the nature of these abilities is such that it is difficult to see how they might be accounted for simply in terms of information acquired by ESP or clairvoyance. An exemplary case is that of communications attributed to the chess grandmaster Géza Maróczy (1870-1951).¹²⁵ Wolfgang Eisenbeiss, a keen amateur chess player who had extensive experience of interacting with mediums, was encouraged to try to initiate a chess match between a living chess master and a deceased person who might participate via a medium. Eisenbeiss recruited Robert Rollans, an automatic-writing medium whom he had worked with for many years, and knew well enough to trust his assurance that he did not know how to play chess (he had to be taught the basic movements of the pieces), had no knowledge of chess history, and had no means to cheat through secret communication with a living chess expert. Rollans was not paid for his service. Eisenbeiss was able to persuade the world-famous chess champion Victor Kortchnoi (at that time ranked third in the world) to participate, in full knowledge that his "opponent" would be a medium taking instructions from what he believed was the mind of a deceased chess player. Rollans was given a list of deceased Grand Masters and his spirit controls were charged with seeing if any of them were willing to co-operate.

Géza Maróczy came forward to offer his services,^f and opened the match playing as white. Communication of moves was slow, in an era before the internet and mobile phones, and with Kortchnoi often away on business. Indeed, the match lasted 7 years

^f It would be cumbersome to continually refer to the communicator as the "alleged" or "purported" person Géza Maróczy, but these qualifiers should be presumed.

8 months, ending when Maróczy resigned at move 48 (though the first 27 moves, comprising the key part of the game, had been made between June 1985 and March 1987). Reflecting on his opponent's performance, Kortchnoi commented:

During the opening phase Maróczy showed weaknesses. His play is old-fashioned. But I must confess that my last moves have not been too convincing [and] I am not sure I will win. He has compensated the faults of the opening by a strong end-game. In the end-game the ability of a player shows up and my opponent plays very well.

Vernon Neppe¹²⁶ carried out a detailed analysis of the game, comparing moves with computer simulation suggestions and evaluations. He was well qualified to do so as a professional member of the Parapsychological Association and a highly competent chess player (performing at high expert or low master level). He also consulted with an outside independent International Chess Master, Leon Pliester. Neppe identifies significant errors by Maróczy during the opening phase, but comments that from move 13 he

plays perfect chess and no moves can be seriously criticized ... Maróczy clearly played the endgame far better than the computer ... it is appropriate to regard Maróczy as competing at no lower than master or low grandmaster level.

More importantly, in Neppe's judgement, Maróczy "played in a style reminiscent of the early twentieth century [i.e. oblivious to advances in opening theory], and demonstrated the endgame expertise he was famous for. I don't think that even today a chess computer would play like that". The game is not only impressive in terms of proficiency, but also style. Although Maróczy attributed his relatively weak opening play to being out of practice, it was in fact characteristic of the historical player, who was particularly known for his end-game. Hornecker¹²⁷ offers an independent analysis of the game and concludes:

The game was played in the style of Maróczy. If this was a fake, there must have been at least one chess master involved that not only knew the opening theory of Maróczy's time and how he played but he also would have needed to play like Maróczy.

Maróczy was also asked to give an account of his life, with an emphasis on his career in chess. The next day Rollans produced at a single sitting 38 handwritten pages in German and Hungarian (Maróczy's native tongue, apparently unknown to the medium) that contained 91 distinct statements. Eisenbeiss approached a historian and chess expert from the Hungarian Chess Club to confirm or disconfirm them. This was no simple task, and the expert took over 70 hours to consult several library archives in Hungary and to contact surviving family members. He was able to confirm that 77 statements were correct, 3 were "semi-correct", and 2 incorrect, while 9 remained "unsolved". Of the correct items, 31 were classified as reflecting expert knowledge that was difficult to investigate (hidden sources), or private knowledge (known by few persons only, not known to be written down), and included surprising responses that contradicted some records but turned out to be correct. This is a valuable complement to the case, given the extreme difficulty even for a chess historian to locate the information communicated, but the strength of the case lies in the demonstration of a technical skill with such virtuosity that it seems impervious to explanation in terms of ESP. As Neppe summarises, "the game alone is strongly evidential" of the post-mortem existence of Maróczy.

With respect to cases of an "intruding entity" that present a challenge to the super-psi hypothesis, Braude describes the Thompson-Gifford case as "about as good as they get".¹²⁸ First described by James Hyslop,¹²⁹ it involves a goldsmith named Frederic L. Thompson who, from Autumn 1905, was suddenly compelled to start sketching and painting pictures. These feelings were accompanied by visions of trees and landscapes that he sought to reproduce. Thompson had no training in art, beyond his formal schooling to the age of 13, at which point he was apprenticed to become an engraver and then later turned to goldsmithery.

Thompson attributed the periods when he felt overcome to sketch and paint to the artist Robert Swain Gifford (he would announce to his wife, "Gifford wants to sketch"¹³⁰). The two were not complete strangers — Thompson had met Gifford on at least a couple of occasions when he was out hunting in the New Bedford marshes and the latter was there sketching, and Thompson had once visited Gifford's home to show some jewellery, but they could not be described as more than acquaintances, and he

only learned of Gifford's death in January 1906 when a posthumous exhibition of the latter's paintings was arranged by the American Art Galleries.

While attending the exhibition, Thompson claimed to hear a voice that said "You see what I have done. Can you not take up and finish my work?", and from this point onwards the artistic impulse was even greater. According to Gauld,¹³¹ when painting, Thompson entered states of mind that ranged from slight dissociation to more or less complete automatism. As these periods increased, he became incapable of attending properly to his work, and his financial situation worsened. He began to fear he was becoming insane. In January 1907 Thompson went to see Hyslop for treatment. He was particularly haunted by a scene of gnarled oak trees, that he had felt compelled to sketch many times.

Hyslop was aware of the research on post-mortem survival but did not regard the communications as especially evidential, and attributed the experiences to an underlying mental health condition. He initially advised Thompson to resist the urge to paint and to return to his goldsmith's work, expecting the phenomenon to be transitory. However, he had second thoughts and consulted a medium to see if Gifford might come through to confirm that he was responsible for the impulses. A man came forward who was said to be fond of painting, and a description was given that Thompson recognised as Gifford. A particular location was described that concurred with Thompson's visions: a group of oak trees at a place near the ocean, that one needed to take a boat to reach. Hyslop later identified this as one of the Elizabeth Islands on the New England coast. Emboldened by this experience, Thompson began to attempt more paintings, and these were of sufficient quality for him to sell them. One of the patrons likened the work to Gifford's, oblivious of Thompson's story.

Thompson visited Gifford's summer home in Nonquitt, Massachusetts, to see if he could find any of the locations he had sketched from his visions. He claimed to have had no prior knowledge of the area, but was able to find and photograph a few of the scenes he had previously sketched, and also learned that Gifford's favourite site was one of the Elizabeth Islands. While visiting he was invited by Mrs Gifford to visit his studio, and was astonished to find an unfinished sketch on the easel that was identical to one he had produced and had passed on to Hyslop for safe keeping some months previously. Two other pictures on easels matched sketches by Thompson, but these

were not among those that had been passed on to Hyslop. Mrs Gifford confirmed there was no possibility that Thompson had seen these by normal means in advance of this visit.

Skeptics might claim that Thompson had simply visited the scenes beforehand and made the sketches he claimed came from his visions. However, it is difficult to see a motive, especially given the financial difficulties his artistic obsession placed him in. More importantly for current purposes, fraud could not explain how Thompson suddenly became an accomplished artist with no prior experience or training. Hyslop¹³² reproduces some of Thompson's sketches alongside photographs of Gifford's work and draws attention to the many features that correspond, though it is difficult to judge the degree of similarity from the black and white reproductions — of course, it is possible that colour images might enhance the degree of correspondence rather than diminish it, if they replicated Gifford's characteristic preference for a subdued autumnal palette.

Braude accepts that there is a stylistic correspondence between the two artists' works, and this represents "the most intransigent feature of the case",¹³³ but no detailed analysis is offered. Gauld concurs,¹³⁴ stating "the resemblance of subject-matter between Thompson's paintings and Gifford's was obvious to anyone", though he goes on to note,

as to whether or not there was an underlying similarity of style and technique, expert opinions differed, and it is perhaps safer to say that few experts could believe that the Thompson paintings were the work of a man who had only been painting a short time and had had virtually no formal training. Yet there could be little doubt that this was so.

The motivation to produce this artwork and the technical ability to achieve it are clearly qualities that can be attributed to Gifford, and are much less satisfactorily attributed to Thompson. We should note, however, that Thompson began signing his own name to paintings after Gifford "said goodbye" to him in 1908,¹³⁵ and became something of an artistic success, making a lucrative living selling via a number of prominent galleries around New York City¹³⁶ so at least some residual artistic capacity remained after the "departure" of Gifford. Nevertheless, Gauld concludes "There is no doubt that the

super-ESP 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.”

Making Sense of Survival Evidence

In the course of our essay, we have found a range of phenomena that the experients interpret as evidence that some aspect of human consciousness may, under at least some circumstances, be able to survive bodily death. We have seen that the best of that evidence (both in situ and in the laboratory) is impervious to explanation in simple terms such as fraud, misperception and error. This leaves us no choice but to question the prevailing materialist orthodoxy which regards these phenomena as impossible. If materialists are right in their assumption that consciousness is produced by the brain and perishes with it, there should be no evidence for survival of the kind we have discussed and certainly no such phenomenon as a post-mortem description of the death experience.

And yet such reports do exist, even a highly articulate account purporting to come from the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell that characteristically begins: “You may not believe that it is I, Bertrand Arthur William Russell, who am saying these things, and perhaps there is no conclusive proof that I can offer through this somewhat restricted medium”.¹³⁷ Such accounts are striking in their close correspondence to some of the features noted by near-death experiencers, so that one cannot help speculating that the same continuum of experience is being described.

In considering the event of death, the Oxford philosopher F.C.S. Schiller warned against the “spurious self-evidence of death” and asserted that our third person view of death is necessarily incomplete and one-sided:

For we contemplate it only from the point of view of the survivors, never from that of the dying. We have not the least idea of what death means to those who die. *To us* it is a catastrophic change, whereby a complex of phenomenal appearances, which we call the body of the dead, ceases to suggest to us the presence of the ulterior existence which we called spirit. But this does not prove,

nor even tend to prove, that the spirit of the dead has ceased to exist. It merely shows that he has ceased to form part of our little worldit is at least as probable that thisis to be ascribed to his having been promoted or removed, as to his having been destroyed.

The influence of worldviews on the interpretation of evidence

The essential presupposition at issue in our discussion is that the brain generates or produces consciousness, which logically entails that bodily death means extinction of consciousness. As we have already suggested, this absolute presupposition has assumed the status of a “central dogma” of neuroscience. Based on this premise, any putative evidence for survival must by definition be mistaken, illusory or fraudulent. However, we maintain that “the procedures of science are actually derived from the rational method of philosophy.”¹³⁸ This means that “issues such the validity of rational thought and argument are presuppositions on which scientific thought and experiment rest, *but they are themselves not scientific: they are philosophical*” (our emphasis). Philosophy is therefore logically prior to science.

The philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper pointed out that all our observations are theory-laden. The way in which individuals are inclined to interpret survival evidence is underpinned not only by their philosophical assumptions but also by prevailing scientific metaphors, which have been dominated by mechanistic lenses since the 17th century. Many scientists think of human beings as complex biological machines, in spite of demonstrable differences between machines and organisms. Galileo, Descartes and Locke helped structure such scientific reasoning and thinking by drawing a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. “Primary qualities” are characterised by a third-person perspective prioritising the outer, matter, quantity, measurement, objectivity, mathematics and mechanism, while “secondary qualities” represent our first-person inner experience of consciousness, qualia and sensations. Crucially, this distinction has also influenced the direction of causality and hence of explanation: the causal arrow points from matter > mind and therefore from brain > consciousness, so, logically, death = extinction.

Aldous Huxley noted in his book *Ends and Means*¹³⁹ that “It is impossible to live without metaphysics. The choice that is given is not between some kind of metaphysics and

no metaphysic: it is always between a good metaphysic and a bad metaphysic.” Work on the metaphysical foundations of modern science goes back to the classic book of that title by E.A. Burtt (Burtt, 1924). Oxford philosopher Sir A.J. Ayer popularised the positivism of the Vienna Circle¹⁴⁰ claiming that there was no such thing as metaphysics. In response to this, R.G. Collingwood published his *Essay on Metaphysics* in 1940 in which he proposed that thinking of any kind - including science - is undergirded by unexamined “*absolute presuppositions*”. These are inescapable and are simply taken for granted - very few scientists are trained in history and philosophy of science.

Collingwood’s key insight bearing on our argument is that “the answer to any question presupposes whatever the question presupposes... And because all science begins with a question (for the question is logically prior to its own answer), all science begins with a presupposition.”¹⁴¹ In relation to survival evidence, just such a key presupposition is revealed in the formulation of David Chalmers’ “hard problem of consciousness” when he asks how the brain generates consciousness. The essential point here is that the question in itself presupposes that the brain does indeed generate consciousness, so this assumption fits the definition of an absolute presupposition, almost universally held to be self-evident by neuroscientists, philosophers and psychologists.

How we assimilate new knowledge

Faced with the choice between changing one’s mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.

John Kenneth Galbraith

As we have noted, the way in which we assess the validity of survival evidence necessarily derives from our existing worldview or paradigm¹⁴² and its specific presuppositions, which creates a logical structure and corresponding network of expectations — thinkers such as E.O. Wilson have been striving to create “consilience” on the basis of a purely biological and materialistic framework that has no place for survival evidence. The general process by which we acquire new knowledge was known both by C.G. Jung and William James as “apperception”. New knowledge has to be correlated with existing knowledge in order to be apprehended and understood.

This means that existing presuppositions and conceptions are bound to condition and limit the way in which new knowledge is assimilated or indeed rejected. James observes in an essay on apperception¹⁴³ that a general law becomes apparent: *the law of economy*.

In admitting a new body of experience, we instinctively seek to disturb as little as possible our pre-existing stock of ideas. We always try to name a new experience in some way which will assimilate it to what we already know.

Understandably in view of its explanatory reach and technological success, academics and scientists are very reluctant to make a fundamental change to their reductionist physicalist paradigm — what A.N. Whitehead calls their Conceptual Order,¹⁴⁴ defined as “our general way of conceiving the universe”. This Conceptual Order determines our interpretation of data derived from the “Observational Order”, and coordinated knowledge is formed by the meeting of these two orders of experience. The key point is that data relating to the observational order — in this case evidence for survival — will invariably be filtered through, or even blocked by, the concepts supplied by the prevalent conceptual order dominated by reductionist and materialistic thinking characteristic of an exclusively left hemisphere approach.¹⁴⁵

Likewise, the Cambridge philosopher and President of the Society for Psychical Research, C.D. Broad¹⁴⁶ put it another way. He maintained that our existing worldview — which he also analyses in terms of basic limiting principles — will determine our assessment of the “antecedent probability” of an alleged event, which he defines as follows: “Its probability or improbability relative to all the rest of our present knowledge and well-founded belief *other than* the special evidence adduced in its favour.”¹⁴⁷ From this, it follows that the evidence for an “antecedently improbable” event must be stronger if it is to convince a reasonable person — as already noted in Sagan’s statement that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. However, for the materialist, survival evidence is 100% antecedently improbable, i.e. impossible in principle — with an antecedent probability of zero.

Survival as an “impossible fact”

“Neither the testimony of all the Fellows of the Royal Society, nor even the evidence of my own senses, would lead me to believe in the transmission of thought from one person to another independently of the recognized channels of the senses.”

Hermann von Helmholtz¹⁴⁸

Over a hundred years ago in his SPR Presidential Address of 1896, William James warned of the dangers of scientism or mechanical rationalism, the conviction that only the material world is real and only physical causation is scientifically respectable:

Science taken in its essence should stand only for a method and not for any special beliefs, yet as habitually taken by its votaries, Science has come to be identified with a certain fixed general belief, the belief that the deeper order of nature is mechanical exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such a thing as human life.

The co-originator of the theory of evolution, Alfred Russell Wallace observed in relation to such fixed general beliefs that

My first great lesson in the enquiry into these obscure fields of knowledge, was never to accept the disbelief of great men, or their accusations of imposture or of imbecility, as of any weight when opposed to the repeated observation of facts by other men admittedly sane and honest. I assert that whenever the scientific men of any age have denied the facts of investigators on a priori grounds, *they have always been wrong*. [emphasis in original]

Wallace himself was seriously interested in psychical research, much to the dismay of his scientific contemporaries, but he knew that their prejudice was based on ignorance of the field. He wrote: “to put the matter in a simple form, the asserted fact is either possible or not possible. If possible, such evidence as we have been considering would prove it; if not possible, such evidence could not exist”.¹⁴⁹ Exactly the same argument applies to the evidence we have presented in our own essay.

This point was taken up by LeShan,¹⁵⁰ who quotes Gustav Fechner as saying: “the actual cannot be impossible”. He himself adds that “impossible events do not occur. Therefore, if a scientist is faced with the fact that an impossible event has occurred —

our daily fare as psychological researchers — the paradox must be resolved.” The danger is that we accept our definition of reality as a fact when in fact it is a theory. Hence “if an event is a major violation of our theory about reality, a major revision of that theory is necessary.” Logically, “an event either occurred or did not occur, and labelling it is not going to change that fact.” Faced with a white crow,

you can hold onto your theory about reality and declare that the event did not occur since it *could* not occur. Here the facts violate your theory, and we can say that your theory of how reality works is invalid or limited in scope and must be revised in terms of the fact that the event occurred. This is thinking scientifically. [He concludes that] ... in science we need to be clear about which is the theory and which is the fact that violates it, and that in science theory must *always* bow to the fact.¹⁵¹

As we noted in our introduction, Kripal’s recent book *The Flip*¹⁵² highlights the paradox of saying that “such things that happen all the time cannot happen at all.” Hence, he argues that “a materialist interpretation works so well only inasmuch as it rigorously leaves out everything that it cannot explain, including individual, subjective experiences. Put differently, materialism only “wins” as long as it gets to declare the rules of the game”. This means that classical materialist theories of human consciousness “have to deny, erase, and take off the table so much of human experience to retain the illusion of the completeness of the materialist model.” (p. 125) Commenting on William James’s distinction between the production and transmission models of brain and consciousness (see below), he observes that the first is almost completely dominant in academic and scientific circles. As we have already argued, this view represents a philosophical presupposition, and not a scientific finding; truly open-minded scientists base their views on the whole range of evidence, adopting what William James called “radical empiricism” and do not automatically adopt the “promissory materialism” criticised by Popper and Eccles.¹⁵³ This states that it is only a matter of time before consciousness is explained in physicalist terms, though the argument was first proposed by Emil Dubois-Raymond in 1842, who was unlikely to have expected time to be marked out in centuries.

Looking through the telescope

We see this attitude of closed-minded refusal to consider survival evidence as equivalent to Galileo's experience of 1610 described in a letter to Kepler: "Here at Padua is the principal professor of philosophy, whom I have repeatedly and urgently requested to look at the moon and the planets through my glass, which he pertinaciously refuses to do".¹⁵⁴ Galileo continues that this professor laboured before the Grand Duke with logical arguments based on the authority of Aristotle. He adds that Aristotle himself as an empiricist would surely have changed his mind on the basis of new evidence and observations. This refusal to look through the telescope conveys a striking metaphor. In the 17th century, the infallibility of Scripture and Aristotle was at stake, while today we suspect that the infallibility and conceptual adequacy of scientific materialism is at stake. Many scientists seem unwilling to investigate the evidence for survival precisely because they have an unshakeable presupposition that consciousness is generated *in and by* the brain. But is this the only plausible theoretical view?

As long ago as 1898 in his Harvard Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality,¹⁵⁵ William James noted that the crux of the issue relates to the exact *type* of functional dependence of consciousness on the brain. This is normally thought of as productive, in the sense that steam is functionally dependent on the kettle; from this it follows that annihilation of consciousness and personality is inevitable when the brain perishes. However, James advances two other possible kinds of functional dependence: the *permissive*, as is found in the trigger of a crossbow, and the *transmissive*, as in the keys of an organ. He then expounds the transmissive theory, using as a starting point Shelley's famous lines to the effect that life is a dome of many-coloured glass which stains the white radiance of eternity. Metaphorically substituting the brain for the glass, the white radiance comes through the dome with all sorts of staining and distortion imprinted on the glass. James points out that the experiences investigated by psychical researchers, including evidence of survival, are "quite paradoxical and meaningless on the production theory", while the transmission theory enables them to fall naturally into place.

William James was not the only one to express such views — he drew on the work of his contemporaries, Cambridge classics don F.W.H. Myers, and the Oxford philosophy don F.C.S. Schiller — while similar views were articulated by Henri Bergson. In view

of the prevalent “anti-metaphysical current”, Schiller published his seminal work *Riddles of the Sphinx* in 1891 under the pseudonym of “A Troglodyte” (or Platonic cave dweller) for fear of his professional reputation. Whereas the prevalent tendency, expressed by the then President of the Royal Society, T.H. Huxley, was to explain spirit in terms of matter, Schiller proposed to turn the formulation round by explaining matter in terms of spirit. He inferred that materialism inverted the relationship between matter and consciousness:

Matter is not what *produces* consciousness but what *limits* it and confirms its intensity within certain limits: material organisation does not construct consciousness out of arrangements of atoms, but contracts its manifestations within the sphere which it permits.¹⁵⁶

This line of thinking, currently referred to as “filter theory”, was also espoused by Aldous Huxley¹⁵⁷ and has been rigorously elaborated by Michael Grosso, Edward Kelly and David E. Presti in *Beyond Physicalism*¹⁵⁸ and the recently published *Consciousness Unbound*.¹⁵⁹ A recent book by Matzke and Tiller¹⁶⁰ proposes a model where the mind is likened to a quantum computer in the cloud while the brain “is an antenna that maps the hyperdimensional mind into three dimensions.” If one objects that we don’t know how this might work, then the same equally applies to the physicalist hypothesis that assumes causation rather than correlation. We argue here that in relation to the evidence we have considered, filter theories not only have superior explanatory power, but the central dogma of neuroscience, that the brain generates consciousness, can only be upheld by dismissing all the evidence we have adduced here — a position we regard as rationally and empirically untenable.

Conclusion

History shows clearly that the advances of science have always been frustrated by the tyrannical influences of certain preconceived notions which were turned into unassailable dogmas. For that reason alone, every serious scientist should periodically make a profound re-examination of his basic principles

Duc Louis de Broglie, Nobel Prize for Physics, 1929¹⁶¹

In a 1949 article from the Hibbert Journal, the Oxford philosopher observed that “telepathy is something which ought not to happen at all, if the materialist theory were true. But it does happen.” Hence, he argues that “there must be something seriously wrong with the materialist theory, however numerous and imposing the normal facts which support it may be.” This argument applies *a fortiori* to survival evidence: it ought not to happen at all. Facts are only regarded as implausible or impossible within a particular theoretical framework, as Wallace, LeShan and Kripal logically demonstrated above. If the facts cannot be denied — and we do not believe they can — then the materialist-physicalist-functionalist worldview is due for a radical overhaul and expansion.

In his classic work on scientific revolutions, Thomas Kuhn¹⁶² discusses the role of anomalies in violating paradigm-induced expectations, in the present case survival evidence indicates the inadequacy of purely materialist approaches to consciousness. Anomalies indicate the incompleteness of prevailing orthodoxy and the greatest scientists take notice of them. Charles Darwin’s son wrote about a special quality leading him to make discoveries: “it was the power of never letting exceptions pass unnoticed.” Putting the matter in terms of Sir Karl Popper’s philosophy of falsifiability, the advance of knowledge involves the process of seeking counter-examples that contradict an existing hypothesis — a white crow, to use the term of William James — with a view to proposing a more adequate hypothesis in terms of explanatory power. In any event, with respect to our collection of anomalous white crows, scientific materialism has no explanatory power in accommodating our case histories other than summary dismissal, which is no explanation.

Our evidence and analysis have shown that the third person view of the phenomenon of death is one-sided: apparent loss of consciousness is interpreted from the outside as extinction, while from the inside conscious experience may well be continuing in an enhanced state, released from the confines of space-time. In considering research involving hauntings, deathbed visions, after death communications, reincarnation and mediumship, we have combined legal with scientific rigour in our approach to the evidence, first-person lived experiences with third-person experimental research

studies. In our view, these yield mutually consistent and self-reinforcing data that together form a coherent picture and a powerful argument for the survival hypothesis.

As the Galileo Commission Report argued,¹⁶³ there is a pressing need for a metaphysical expansion of scientific assumptions relating to consciousness studies beyond the restrictive ideology of scientism and the central dogma of neuroscience that the brain generates consciousness while retaining science's generic commitment to openness and critical enquiry. Our essay thus leads us to conclude that the survival hypothesis is the most rational plausible explanation for the range of evidence discussed.

We leave the last word to French Nobel Laureate Charles Richet in addressing his sceptical colleagues: "I never said it was possible, I just said it was true".

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