



COMMENTARY

Introduction to the Special Subsection: Contemplating the BICS Essay Contest on Postmortem Survival

James Houran

editor@scientificexploration.org
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1725-582X>

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*The answers we get from science depend on the questions
that we dare to ask . . . and fund.*

Ed Lantz (2022), SSE Symposium: Advanced Energy
Concepts Challenging the 2nd Law—Panel Discussion
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7DucTuE2Fk>)

Well-known aerospace entrepreneur Robert T. Bigelow has contributed a great deal privately and publicly to science and technology over the years, including the realm of anomalistics and edge science [see: Kelleher, C. A., & Knapp, G. (2005). *Hunt for the skinwalker: Science confronts the unexplained at a remote ranch in Utah*. Paraview Pocket Books]. This generous support should be celebrated, as it is virtually unique in modern times where academic freedom and consequential funding are sparse in the controversial fields that *JSE* routinely spotlights. In fact, Bigelow recently formed the Bigelow Institute of Consciousness Studies (BICS) to support research on the ostensible survival of human consciousness after physical death and the potential nature of such a state. BICS therefore comprises an ongoing platform for exploration and education versus a singular act of support from a lone patron. Among the organization's first initiatives was a global campaign to solicit the best evidence supporting the notion of postmortem survival. This venture paralleled successful 'crowdsourcing contests' that some companies use to drive product improvements or innovations via public competitions with cash awards [see: Segev, E. (2020). Crowdsourcing contests. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 281, 241–255. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejor.2019.02.057>].

The media coverage that BICS garnered from the contest was a major success from a publicity standpoint. However, its format and outcomes have been the topic of much discussion and debate even among advocates of the survival hypothesis. In a very real sense, the BICS Essay Contest was not an end but instead the beginning of further scientific discovery and discourse. The observations, arguments, and insights from the winning entries hold important learnings about (a) the criteria and logic the judges used to evaluate the proffered evidence, and (b) the commonalities or discrepancies in the evidence and arguments that were deemed the most compelling [see: Tressoldi, P., Rock, A. J., Pederzoli, L., & Houran, J. (2022). The case for postmortem survival from the winners of the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies essay contest: A level of evidence analysis. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 22, 7–29]. Therefore, it can be argued that the BICS essays transcend their status as end products by serving as valuable and new data points in a highly



contentious research domain. This view and approach motivated the creation of our Special Subsection, which was realized with the gracious support and tactical assistance of John Alexander, Stephen Braude, and Michael Sudduth.

Mr. Bigelow and Colm Kelleher in the first Commentary succinctly explain the original motivations and broader aims of the essay contest. This context gives the critical backdrop against which the subsequent Commentaries are set. Prominent skeptic of the survival hypothesis Keith Augustine next presents a detailed critique of representative essays that won BICS awards. The idea was not to invite a scholar to flatly discredit the essays but rather for an informed but critical eye to evaluate their quality of reasoning and consistency of evidence from a viewpoint that was perhaps underrepresented in the original pool of judges. A team of survival researchers and advocates (Stephen Braude, Imants Barušs, Arnaud Delorme, Dean Radin, and Helané Wahbeh) then provide counterarguments to Augustine in their Commentary, which he immediately addresses in a targeted rebuttal. Finally, this Special Subsection ends with an adversarial collaboration. Augustine is joined by fellow skeptic Etienne LeBel and survival agnostic Adam Rock, all of whom endorse experimental methods in this domain. This new team was tasked with finding common ground and a path forward that constructively advances the conversation. The result is a proposed investigation that builds on published work by some of Braude's team members, and other prior approaches, and aims to satisfy parameters set both by skeptics and advocates. Note that this effort draws on Honorton and Hyman's notable example with experimental research on putative psi [see: Honorton, C., & Hyman, R. (1986). A joint communiqué:

The psi ganzfeld controversy. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 50, 351–364] and can serve as the model for a pre-registered study protocol.

The following collection of material will not settle any debates, but it is intended to inform and motivate new research designs that leverage cooperative efforts and team participatory science. It might sound like an absurd assertion, but some skeptical researchers certainly share the same value set and sincere motivation for discovery as do many survivalists. It is thus the fervent conviction of the *Journal's* editorial team that good faith collaborations are possible, advances in research designs and data collection can be achieved, and important new model-building and theory formation can be tackled with respect to the survival hypothesis. It will undeniably take time and continued financial support from bold institutions and benefactors (like BICS or the Bial Foundation) who rise to the challenge posed in Ed Lantz's introductory quote. Our team further hopes that this Special Subsection will be counted among the first steps in this direction, which is already being paved by the publication of some cross-disciplinary efforts [see: Parnia, S., et al. (2022). Guidelines and standards for the study of death and recalled experiences of death—A multidisciplinary consensus statement and proposed future directions. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14740>]. We thank all the contributors for their time and effort in preparing these invited commentaries. The opinions expressed here are solely those of the various authors and the usual disclaimers apply. Special appreciation goes to Brian Laythe and Adam J. Rock for their assistance with the editorial reviews of these collected works.