



COMMENTARY

Final Reply: When Will Survival Researchers Move Past Defending the Indefensible?

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HIGHLIGHTS

The survivalists' response to the author's skeptical review did not confront the novel criticisms and arguments made against the BICS essay evidence. Such a candid and deep engagement with fundamental issues is needed to advance the question of 'life after death.'

ABSTRACT

The failure of five psychical researchers to confront my critique of Bigelow Institute contest-winning essays with counterpoints or concessions responsive to its novel criticisms is disappointing. Their defensive and scattershot reply lost sight of whether the critiqued essays met their directive to provide "hard evidence 'beyond a reasonable doubt'" of the survival of human consciousness. Those who claim that science should expand its metaphysically conservative picture to include things otherwise not known to exist assume the burden of showing what they claim. My interlocutors' almost exclusively testimonial evidence does not adhere to the long-standing scientific principles required by the scientific community. For the kind of evidence that could be publicly confirmed is simply not the kind that survival researchers have been able to provide, just as we would expect of a hodgepodge of deception, embellishment, malobservation, misreporting, self-deception, and so on; but which would be surprising on the hypothesis that discarnate personal survival occurs. The survival evidence does not even survive elementary scrutiny, let alone outweigh our everyday experience of the biological fragility of our own minds. The *totality* of the evidence renders discarnate personal survival highly unlikely. Attempts to reinterpret this evidence away through various analogies fail because a hypothesis that makes false predictions, like that of the independence of individual consciousness from a functioning brain, will continue to make them no matter what analogy one uses to illustrate it.

KEYWORDS

Analogies; brain damage; falsifiability; McTaggart; testimony



With as many as five psychical researchers working together to respond to my critique of select BICS contest-winning essays, their failure to confront that critique with counterpoints (or concessions) responsive to its general criticisms is disappointing. The lost opportunity is particularly disappointing with a philosopher of Stephen Braude's caliber at the helm, and with commentators whose own essays were the ones most at issue. Their defensive and scattershot reply focusing on tangents—not the central points conveyed by my section titles—contrasts sharply with my rather basic, well-evidenced, and well-structured overview of systemic deficiencies across the winning essays, deficiencies that are symptomatic of long-standing shortcomings within contemporary survival research itself.

Given their constraints, my interlocutors could not respond to *everything* that I said. But as I will show, their neglect of my arguments goes well beyond this. By at the outset acknowledging as valid *only* my prefatory passing criticisms—the bare mentions that I characterized as “neither here nor there”—they blatantly downplay the force of my substantial and cogent criticisms, **poisoning the well**.

Braude et al. (2022) characterize my criticisms of their (and other BICS contestants') arguments as “lazy” and “shallow.” This characterization is not only false or misguided, but ironic. Where I've offered novel criticisms otherwise absent from the survival literature, my commentators simply regurgitate familiar arguments that they've made before. Since the work that they regurgitate did not anticipate my novel points,¹ they never respond to them. The commentators can hardly be faulted for failing to anticipate an argument that they have never heard before. But they most certainly can and should be faulted for failing to confront a novel argument with a novel response. That failure to adapt is the epitome of the “lazy reliance” on “tired” arguments that they claim to eschew.

The charge of shallowness seems to stem more from **hasty presuppositions** about my aim and directive than from anything that I wrote. If I had wanted easy targets, I could have focused exclusively or primarily on the top three prize-winning essays by Jeffrey Mishlove, Pim van Lommel, and Leo Ruickbie.² Instead, I concentrated on the essays written by the three most promising contributors, given the quality of their previous work: Stephen Braude (2021*), Dean Radin (in Delorme et al., 2021*), and Michael Nahm (2021*).

By the time that I had finished addressing these three essays alone, I had already exceeded allotted word count limits twice, even while aiming to make individual points succinct, particularly in the largest section on ranking the survival evidence.³ Prior to this, I had already scrapped the development of entire sections on items like Nahm's feeble attempt to come to grips with the most substan-

tial recent challenges to disincarnate personal survival, and on the pressing need for survival researchers to substitute their habitual use of **loaded terms** with viewpoint-neutral language, among other things.

In the retained sections, supporting examples and analyses were often merely cited rather than even paraphrased—even when they strongly *substantiated* my point—due to limitations of both space and time (e.g., citations on untried tests of survival, especially problematic aspects of Mrs. Piper's mediumship, evidential weaknesses in touted drop-in communicator cases, plausible explanations of the cross-correspondences in terms of chance, the most damning evidence of fraud in the Scole and Felix circle sittings, features of apparitional experiences inconsistent with survivalist interpretations, and so on). Only those that follow up on my citations (typically listing specific pages) will discover many of the finer points underlying my conclusions, but one must compromise somehow, and it's better to refer readers to extant literature (that many are likely unfamiliar with) than to provide no way for them to follow up at all. Some highly relevant literature wasn't even cited *at all* in the interest of moving on—for example, the large corpus of *corroborating* literature on the unreliability of eyewitness testimony *since* Loftus (1979) (which, incidentally, even Delorme et al., 2021* only mention rather than cite). For space, I didn't even *define* more than a couple of the over two dozen *types* (not instances!) of fallacies extracted from the selected BICS essays in the hope that unfamiliar readers would look them up for themselves.

I thus had to be very selective about what I responded to in any of the other five essays (Beischel, 2021*; Mishlove, 2021*; Ruickbie, 2021*; Parnia & Shirazi, 2021*; van Lommel, 2021*), only addressing the most key material in them that tied into what Braude, Delorme et. al, or Nahm had said, or what I had said in response to them. In any case, it seems perverse to complain in one breath that I didn't *say enough*, and then in the next that I said *too much*: “Augustine offers many criticisms . . . and we can't assess them all. In fact, we prefer . . . sparing the reader from being drenched in minutiae.” Pick your grievance. Perhaps Braude et al. (2022) might extend the principle of charity to those who face the same editorial choices that they do, but have the audacity to disagree with them.

The “Best” Survival Evidence: Mental Mediumship

Let's take a look at my supposed “major and pervasive deficiencies,” starting with my supposed “refusal” to acknowledge positive evidence of disincarnate personal survival. Braude et al. (2022) credit me for noting that, at

times, private investigators kept Mrs. Piper under surveillance, and I at least mention the proxy sittings that they later press. They then fault me for failing to address “the impressive successes of Mrs. Piper’s G. P. communicator” in my BICS critique.

Their mischaracterization notwithstanding, it’s already clear that I didn’t quite fail “even to *mention* positive evidence,” but let me explain why I referenced the positive evidence that I did (and not other possible examples). I specifically mentioned both Mrs. Piper sometimes being tailed by investigators and the use of proxy sitters in historical trance mediumship research, *because Delorme et al. (or Nahm) brought them up*. I did not mention the celebrated GP control sittings *because Delorme et al. (or Nahm) did not bring them up* (although Braude and Mishlove did).⁴

In previous work, where I had more space, I *did* provide strong reasons why we should not take Mrs. Piper’s GP control to be the deceased GP,⁵ though Braude et al. (2022) would have had to have familiarized themselves with my work to know that. But regardless, they are surely well aware of similar reasons pointed out long ago by E. R. Dodds and Alan Gauld. For example, GP is clearly among the controls that Gauld has in mind when he asks: “Why should the medium’s influence so often intervene and override the control’s *just when the latter is going to exhibit literary and philosophical information greatly exceeding the medium’s?* And why should it intervene to force the control to appear to give a blessing and *a certificate of genuineness to perfectly preposterous ‘controls’ who can be nothing other than fictions dreamed up by the medium?*” [emphasis mine] (Gauld, 1982, p. 146; cf. pp. 114–115). Compare Dodds:

The main points are the shiftiness displayed even by highly veridical communicators like ‘George Pelham’; their confident statements in cases where they can hardly fail to know that they are lying; the habitual lameness of their attempts to answer direct questions; and above all their acceptance of bogus personalities as genuine spirits (e.g. ‘George Pelham’ guaranteed the authenticity of ‘Phinuit’ . . .). (1934, p. 171)

Different examples are highlighted by Michael Sudduth: “In some cases G. P. *incorrectly* reported on some alleged current or recent event that involved friends or family, which he claimed to have observed” (2016, p. 81n9; cf. Gauld, 1982, pp. 115–117).⁶ I could go on (cf. Sudduth, 2016, pp. 221–223, 231, 273–275, which I cited in note 10 of the critique).⁷ The regurgitation of Braude (2003)’s comments on dissociative identity disorder might well substantiate that “the existence of these controls would not be surprising,” but it’s their *nature* or *characteristics*, not their mere

existence, that’s problematic for survivalist interpretations of mental mediumship. Satisfying oneself with the stock answer that perhaps “the channels of communication are noisy” does not do justice to the facts highlighted by Dodds, Gauld, Sudduth, and others, either.⁸ Given the more sensible option that *all* of the conjectured spirits are characters in a production, I seriously doubt that the 422 survival-agnostic academics surveyed in Delorme et al. (2021*) would be very impressed with the hypothesis that genuine discarnates blend in with majority fictitious ones.

Braude et al. (2022) further complain that I am “mute on the significance of the many times Mrs. Piper got intimate hits with anonymous sitters she was meeting for the first time—including proxy sitters and people who . . . happened to be travelling through Cambridge.” Whenever I was aware of relevant extant literature that I did not have the space to expand on, I cited it. Literature on the problematic evidentiality of anonymous/proxy sittings was not cited because, as far as I know, little such literature exists. But in light of the recent discovery of how easily spurious correspondences could be generated from whole cloth in cases of the reincarnation type (CORT) (Sudduth, 2021; cf. Angel, 2015, pp. 575–578), I did ask Michael Sudduth for his take on whether similar spurious correspondences could have plausibly arisen in historical mediumistic proxy sittings. After all, veridical information fished out of *reams* of mediumistic twaddle might well be conventionally explicable by the law of near enough (cf. Sudduth, 2021, pp. 999–1000, 1006).

Sudduth opined that the law of near enough “probably has a lot of explanatory mileage” in accounting for proxy sittings when combined with their other features (personal communication, May 9, 2022). As far as I know, a systematic study of this possibility has yet to be carried out, and I’d certainly encourage psychical researchers to pursue one. However, we are not totally in the dark here. After noting that proxy sittings reduce “whatever evidential value dramatic portrayals of deceased personalities might have [since] the proxy cannot attest to that evidential value” (Moore, 1981, p. 88), philosopher Brooke Noel Moore adds in a footnote (taking a cue from the late philosopher Antony Flew):

There is reason to believe that the number of true statements produced in proxy sittings is substantially lower than it is in standard sittings . . . Stevenson [1977] indeed states that in contemporary research (i.e. since 1960) with its stricter controls, when the medium deals not with the person wanting information but with his representative, “no positive results have been obtained.” This certainly suggests that the impressive results some-

times obtained in standard sittings may be due to factors other than communication with the dead. (Moore, 1981, p. 88n13)

If Moore's suspicion is right—that when nonverbal communication is controlled for (since proxy sitters are blind to whether or not the specifics provided by mediums are accurate), the number of accurate statements made in comparably long/detailed mediumistic sittings decreases—this outcome would be rather telling. The likelihood of spurious correspondences goes up the fewer the hits and/or the more copious the material to sift through. And whether sittings were by proxy or not, it seems unlikely that all of that copious twaddle and nonverbal communication was faithfully transcribed/noticed (which is why police interrogations are now standardly video recorded).⁹ As the late mathematics popularizer Martin Gardner pointed out, **motivated reasoning** could have easily led psychical researchers to record mental mediums' ambiguous statements as direct hits (1992, p. 228). The store of normal/conventional sources of information that early SPR mediums could draw on is likely larger than appears in their transcripts.

Testimonial Evidence and the Burden of Proof

According to Braude et al. (2022), a survival skeptic “must do more than assert that evidence suggesting survival can be accounted for by appealing to the possibility of fraud¹⁰ or other Usual Suspects.” And in general, that expectation seems reasonable enough. But whether it is reasonable here depends upon *what the skeptic is trying to accomplish in a given context*. Some skeptics may simply point out that empirical survivalists *have not made their case for personal survival* without committing to a position on the survival question (e.g., Kastenbaum, 1986; Lester, 2005; Sudduth, 2016). Others may be more pessimistic than optimistic about the prospects for discarnate personal survival and offer their reasons why (e.g., Lamont, 1935/1990; Moore, 1981). Others still may have a particular take on the issue, but reserve making a full-blown case for their position for elsewhere (if they desire to make a case at all), limiting their comments to *the particular task at hand*.

My directive for the initial critique was to critically evaluate the arguments for discarnate personal survival presented within a manageable subset of *the BICS contest-winning essays*, which in turn had been called upon to provide “hard evidence ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’” of the survival of human consciousness (About BICS, 2021). I took it upon myself to go further and question the essay contest's goal “to award contestants for writing papers that summarize the best evidence available for the survival of

human consciousness after permanent bodily death” [emphasis mine] (About BICS, 2021) because a *scientific* (or even legal) investigation of evidence does not proceed in such a partisan way, and because survival researchers have *consistently* sought evidence ostensibly favoring personal survival without giving due care to potential evidence *against* it, both within and outside of the BICS contest.

To be sure, *he who makes a positive claim has the burden to back up that claim*. But limitations of space (and time) often preclude a commentator from being able to adequately defend every claim that he makes in a given context, and so he has no choice but to direct readers to other treatments where the particular claim in question *is* investigated in more depth. That's why we all use *citations*.

Moreover, given that a commentator cannot include *everything* that he might say in a finite critique, one must prioritize, giving more weight to bigger claims over smaller ones. Claims of having “proven” discarnate personal survival beyond a reasonable doubt, or of having “unequivocally disprove[n] the modernist view that consciousness ends with bodily death” (Mishlove, 2021*, p. 93), are examples of bigger claims. Claims about, say, “Crookes' accordion test with D. D. Home” are comparably smaller ones, especially given their dubious relevance to the survival question. Since such bigger claims can remain untouched regardless of whether or not specific smaller ones are defensible, it makes sense to give more priority to an overview of the broad outlines of the relevant evidence as a whole, especially given the breadth of the essays that I was invited to critique.

When it comes to the bigger claims, it's the job of survival researchers trying to make a positive case for the existence of conjectural forces or entities to rule out potential conventional explanations. This would be just as true if the subject were tachyons rather than spirits. It's not the job of those who hesitate to make another's leap to demonstrate that others' conjectures do not correspond to anything real (especially when establishing that a thing exists is usually easier than establishing that a thing does *not* exist). After all, *survival researchers—particularly in the BICS essays—*are the ones trying to persuade thus-far unpersuaded “agnostics to accept the existence of survival” (Delorme et al., 2021*, p. 33). Luminaries like Ian Stevenson recognized their burden here and, to their credit, took the mantle. It's perfectly reasonable for a person discussing survival research to take a position along the lines of: “I believe all of the same things that you do . . . *except* that I'm not convinced that discarnate personal survival actually occurs.” Let's be loud and clear about this: empirical survivalists are the ones making the bigger positive claim that *science* should expand its metaphysically conservative picture of the world to include things otherwise not known to exist.

It's also perfectly reasonable to step back and take a look at the big picture. One can reasonably argue along the following lines. None of the arguments *in favor of* the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God are very compelling *even by theistic philosophers' standards*. On the other hand, such philosophers struggle with how to reconcile the existence of such a being with a world that has long been steeped in suffering. The parallels here should be obvious. None of the variable-quality ostensible evidence for discarnate personal survival is very compelling even by parapsychological standards (cf. Delorme et al., 2021*), and those psychical researchers who acknowledge that contrary evidence should count for something struggle with how to reconcile discarnate personal survival with independent, well-vetted evidence from cognitive neuroscience (and elsewhere) (Stokes, 1993; cf. Stairs & Bernard, 2007, p. 301). When two sources of evidence appear to conflict, is it not more reasonable (absent further evidence) to give greater weight to the more reliable of the two? (cf. Rowe, 2007, pp. 159–160).

If I had thought that skeptics were “under no obligation to consider apparently positive evidence of Mrs. Piper’s paranormal abilities” *at all*, then I would have never mentioned specific points like “historical trance mediums’ accurate statements must be fished out of reams of twaddle” (Augustine, 2022). My interlocutors’ hyperbole aside, I do think that because “conventional explanations have already been vetted by the scientific community,” they should be given some *precedence* over explanations invoking conjectural forces or entities. So, like Delorme et al. (2021*)’s survival-agnostic academics, I would certainly give precedence to explanations in terms of known substances like cheesecloth or artificial cobwebs over those in terms of unknown substances (or “manifestations”) like ectoplasm. Greater weight should be given to conventional explanations for the same reason that we should take appearances to be what they seem to be in the absence overriding positive reasons to think that we are misled. Of course, the latter is complicated in psychical research since the opportunities to be misled increase with the involvement of human intermediaries (like mediums or “chosen” experients) who may engage in deception or self-deception. In investigations of tachyons, by contrast, the experimenter’s self-deception is still possible, but there are fewer sources of such confounds, and scientific scrutiny can ultimately sort this out, as it did in the cases of N-rays and cold fusion.

It’s worth adding that to the extent that the existence of conjectural forces or entities is *not* scientifically established, paranormal explanations don’t really *explain* anything at all. They are just an umbrella catchall of the

negation of the conventional/normal explanations that researchers have *thought of* (maybe they didn’t think of everything) and that *don’t fit*. To have a real scientific *explanation*, we need to know *something* about the positive characteristics of the ‘explaining’ hypothesized force or entity—*what it is*—not simply *what it is not* (Augustine, 2015, p. 34). Until then, the label psi is just a placeholder or promissory note for an explanation. That’s why *it’s solely by convention* that we don’t include unknown lights in the sky, unidentified living creatures, or other Fortean under the umbrella of psi. (If conventionally inexplicable, are ghost lights ostensible spirits, ostensible extraterrestrial probes, ostensible plasma-based cryptids, or something else entirely? No one will ever be able to say without some verifiable positive characterization of what they are.)

Braude et al. (2022) have much worthwhile to say about testimonial evidence—on various perceptual and cognitive errors, conducive conditions of observation, accounts of purported events recorded soon after they allegedly occurred,¹¹ observers’ erroneous reports following experiments with staged “paranormal” events (e.g., Jones & Russell, 1980), and so on. And what they have to say about these things deserves unpacking *somewhere, by somebody*. But since there are more important fish to fry, I’ll keep my comments on testimonial evidence limited, as I did in the opening critique itself.

None of my interlocutors’ (sometimes valid) points detract from the fact that testimonial evidence falls short of the gold standard demanded by *the scientific community* for exceptional claims. The evidential strength of commonly uncross-examined testimony of purported events occurring under uncontrolled conditions pales in comparison to that of experimental evidence. Experimental evidence has *survived greater scrutiny*, after all, because of the protocols planned and implemented *before* experiments took place, in addition to being subsequently checked by protocol reviews and attempted replications. When more rigorous experiments are conducted to replicate the findings of uncontrolled or poorly controlled experiments, it is not unheard of for an “effect” to evaporate altogether (as much in parapsychology as anywhere else). The implementation of properly controlled experiments at least *reduces* the number of confounds contaminating other kinds of evidence, then, if earlier findings cannot be replicated when it is no longer *possible* for confounding variables to influence outcomes. Evidence obtained when confounding variables can be ruled out as potential sources of effects constitutes much stronger evidence than testimonial evidence that comes with varying degrees of arguable corroboration. If lead author Braude wants to take his coauthors to task on this, I recommend that he prepare a separate critique of Delorme et al. (2021*).

Does Physical Mediumship Provide Good Evidence of Survival?

Throughout their reply, Braude et al. (2022) chide me for failing to address all things paranormal, or specific kinds or instances of parapsychological evidence that have little to do with ostensible evidence for discarnate personal survival. Why they ever expected me to do so is beyond me, and hardly different from what most BICS contest participants themselves did (for obvious reasons). Even if covering more had been part of my directive, I had neither the time nor the space to do so. And while I did incidentally *mention* the overall state of the evidence for other kinds of psi (macro-PK, precognition, and telepathy) to illustrate a point or two, it was never my intention to assess anything *other than* ostensible evidence for what theologian Michael Stoeber has called “otherworldly psi” (1996, pp. 1–2). Should I be faulted for failing to address the crop circle evidence, too?

While one could commit to a document review on the physical mediums that thrived in the century before last, as I said in my BICS critique, “there was never any need to invoke the existence of deceased human spirits to explain any genuine paranormal effects from physical mediums anyway, should there be any” (Augustine, 2022). This point is bolstered by *Braude himself*, whose *Immortal Remains* only mentions D. D. Home *once*, in the context of what he characterizes as an unconvincing or fictitious mediumistic communicator *pretending to be the deceased Home* (2003, p. 60). Eusapia Palladino isn’t even mentioned there *at all*. So Braude evidently does not regard the cases involving either of them as ostensible evidence for discarnate personal survival rather than, say, recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK). If Braude himself says so little about Home and Palladino *in his own classic on evidence for an afterlife*—let alone in his BICS essay—why would he expect *me* to comment on such cases?

Moreover, the *sole* winning BICS essay (not among those that I critiqued) that does more than cite sources on these mediums—that of Survival Research Institute of Canada’s Walter Meyer zu Erpen—concludes:

Home is touted as the physical medium never exposed in fraud. Based upon understanding of misobservation in dimly-lit séance rooms, reports of Home’s miraculous feats were probably embroidered. In any case, the physical feats of Palladino and Home did not add to the evidence for life after death. (2021*, pp. 44–45)

If even survival researchers, Braude or otherwise, doubt the value of these cases as ostensible evidence of

discarnate personal survival, it would have been out of place for me to critique them.

While physical mediumship is arguably relevant to the survival question, only *those cases that constitute potential evidence for discarnate personal survival* are germane to my critique. It’s no more incumbent on me than it is on Braude et al. to engage in a never-ending game of Whack-a-Mole challenging every proffered instance of an anomalous effect that has convinced somebody or other that there is something interesting going on that demands novel explanation. So, like most BICS contestants and Journal readers, I don’t *pretend* to have “command of”—let alone much interest in—“the details of Crooke’s accordion test” and the like, any more than Braude et al. pretend to have a command of or interest in the last 50 years of cryptozoological research into the existence of Bigfoot (even if such things actually exist).

Nevertheless, I will make some general comments given (1) how much space Braude et al. devote to this digression and (2) the fact that some of the evidence from physical mediumship—as secondary as most psychical researchers take it to be—could be deemed relevant to the survival question. In the “strongest cases,” we’re told, (a) “investigators knew what they were doing” or were “experienced in detecting fraud,” (b) taking “specific measures . . . to minimize the possibility of fraud from the start” where (c) “phenomena occurred slowly enough to permit careful close-up examination” and “witnesses had plenty of time to examine the setup and could monitor the phenomena closely while they occurred,” sometimes even (d) in “good light.” Which of these features are present in the highly investigable séances that take place *today*, rather than those conducted with the long-dead physical mediums of yesteryear? All but the last of these features were said to be present in both the Scoble and Felix circle sittings that still managed to produce evidence of fraud, and whatever events physical mediums allow sitters to see, they go to great lengths to prevent those events from being video recorded in good or infrared light. If readers want a sense of the comparably underwhelming effects that physical mediums can produce in sittings utilizing the more stringent precautions available today, they need only read Nahm’s (2015) brief missive on what he characterizes as merely “promissory mediumship.”

Little wonder, then, that Braude et al. default to cases of physical mediumship contemporaneous with when medicine was still unclear on whether or not germs were the causes of disease, or whether flies spontaneously generate directly from rotting meat. From the perspective of their coveted survival-agnostic academics—not to mention that of everyday people who already believe in survival—Home’s mediumship is about as likely to engender confidence in paranormal manifestations as the legend of

the Bell witch. The specifics of how Home accomplished Victorian-era feats *that have no contemporary parallels*—much like Mrs. Piper’s mental mediumship¹²—seem rather moot if neither Nahm, Braude, nor any other investigator can capture comparable demonstrations today using modern tools that are more than capable of clearly documenting events through high-resolution closed-circuit, livestreamed, or otherwise unalterable video recording from multiple angles. When simply *informed* of the general character of this evidence, most people (survival skeptics or not) would be compelled to ask: *where have all the bona fide physical mediums gone?*

A final complaint warrants comment. Where I noted that normal ways of producing the Kluski molds were available—citing a source on how to produce them—Braude et al. complain: “But that’s as far as Augustine takes his discussion of Kluski. He fails to provide even a single example of a plausible normal counter-explanation . . .” The section in which the comment was made was already more than twice as long as any other section, so I intentionally cited outside sources for additional details in that instance—and many others in that section, even when the unspecified details substantially bolstered my point—because I had a lot of ground to cover and had to compromise *somehow*. Considering that Delorme et al.’s (2021*) systematic ranking of the survival evidence (that I was there emulating) devoted a total of *four sentences* to the Kluski molds—and that none of the other BICS essays that I critiqued mentioned *at all*—my interlocutors’ complaint seems rather hypocritical. And interested readers should certainly follow-up on Braude et al.’s citation on the molds—the details of which their reply also “tawdrily” left unspecified—no less than my own.

An endless debate over the strength of inherently weaker testimonial and other poorly controlled sources of evidence could be avoided altogether, of course, if only Braude et al. had more rigorous experimental evidence to offer. But one cannot produce evidence akin to an Earth-bound extraterrestrial artifact, a Bigfoot skeleton, or a working SoulPhone if the hypothesized entities never existed in the first place.

Advancing Beyond Eternally Debatable Evidence

On permanent paranormal objects (PPOs), Braude et al. write: “Apparently, Augustine assumes that a physical medium’s paranormally produced objects should at least sometimes be permanent, or perhaps that they should be more common. But why? We find no argument for those assumptions.” Given the limited scope of my initial critique, the lack of an argument here should not surprise them. But I can provide one now and clarify my position.

The impermanence or rarity of PPOs isn’t the problem, although both are a symptom of it. The problem is that, in practice, the evidence for putative paranormal effects is *perpetually ambiguous*. Compare cosmologist Sean Carroll’s concern with attempts to confirm a positive characterization of negatively defined entities like unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP/UFOs):

The argument that UFOs are not aliens is not mostly about priors, it’s about likelihoods. If UFOs were a combination of glitches/test flights/weather, we would expect to see fuzzy inconclusive images. If they were aliens, we’d expect to see something very different. (Carroll, 2021)

That is, we should hesitate to interpret UAP as evidence for the extraterrestrial visitation hypothesis not so much because crossing the vast distances of interstellar space is potentially insuperable, but because as a matter of fact, *we simply do not find the sorts of evidence that we would expect to find* were extraterrestrial visitation occurring. If extraterrestrials were regularly visiting Earth, why would evidence of their presence *always* fall within the narrow range of possibilities that we might call the *perpetually ambiguous* range? There is a wide continuum of conceivable evidence consistent with extraterrestrial visitation, ranging from no evidence at all to undeniable evidence (indigenous peoples did not eternally debate the presence of European colonists, for example).

Researchers like Braude et al. maintain that however deficient the *publicly available* evidence for paranormal effects, for a select chosen few (e.g., Home’s sitters), the evidence is undeniable (akin to witnessing an extraterrestrial spacecraft 10 feet above one’s head for 20 minutes). By their lights, undeniable evidence of such effects is thus possible—but happens to only reveal itself to the few who have received personal revelations. Stepping back and looking at the big picture, one cannot help but ask: in the plentitude of reports of ostensible paranormal phenomena, why is it *always* the case that *the kind of evidence that could be publicly confirmed* is never the kind provided? Why does the actual evidence offered never deviate from the eternally ambiguous? This consistent, historical *feature of the evidence* would be surprising for a *genuinely anomalous* phenomenon, but exactly what we would expect of a hodgepodge of deception, embellishment, malobservation, misreporting, self-deception, and so on. If the word of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is anything to go by, full-bodied apparitions of deceased human beings are available for extended conversations with the living—just not with anchors on live television for all the world to see. Videos of “apparitions” fleetingly appearing in backgrounds and disappearing around corners in the

same manner as living persons abound, but videos of apparitions interacting closely with a video camera for extended periods of time, or fading away just when an in-focus video camera is trained on them, are much harder to come by. This is akin to large triangular spacecraft that purportedly hover over cities for hours—but only at night, for daylight evidence would be too unambiguous. It's a rather convenient coincidence that such novel forces or entities would only ever reveal themselves in a manner that is indistinguishable from misperceptions, photographic artifacts, and the like. What Braude calls the Usual and Unusual Suspects explains this *persistent pattern in the data themselves* far better than either discarnate personal survival or extraterrestrial visitation—no biases necessary.

Prospective Experimental Tests of (Potential) Survival

It's not much of a surprise that Braude et al. would speculate—*after* generating no clear hits—that well-controlled direct tests of survival (or of mind–body separation) might not “even [be] appropriate to the phenomena.” That bare possibility doesn't speak to the concerns of most BICS contestants, though, since *had the exact opposite results been obtained*, they surely would've paraded them ahead of everything else as rigorous scientific evidence of discarnate personal survival (or at least as alternatively explicable only in terms of empirically indistinguishable paranormal competitors like all-knowing clairvoyance, psychic reservoirs, or what have you). In such experiments we have simple prospective tests that, if successful, would be collectively lauded by nearly all survival researchers as all but proof of discarnate personal survival—which is exactly why dozens of survival researchers went out of their way to actually conduct them.

To be clear, in outlining their soul-crushing results I don't in fact purport “to know what we should expect to find if the phenomena under investigation are real” (except, perhaps, partially). My point was simply that *if we grant survival researchers their own assumptions*, then by *their* standards of what to expect, absent extenuating circumstances, a medium ought to be able to provide the sort of information that the postmortem tests of survival seek (Thouless, 1984, pp. 24–25). After all, mediumship researchers invariably claim that, outside of experimental settings, mental mediums are *already able to obtain the sort of information sought* (e.g., book titles like Robert Thouless's cracked afterlife code *Black Beauty*). Similarly, near-death researchers claim that NDErs are *already able to provide precise veridical visual information inaccessible to the normal senses* during their experiences—again, just not (so far) under controlled conditions (e.g., Holden, 2009). So

what's at issue here is a *historical* question: have survival researchers been able to provide evidence for putative discarnate personal survival that meets the standards of scientific rigor required in, say, pharmaceutical research—or not? My concern is not with “how a parapsychological test or experiment will turn out” (future tense), but rather with how such tests *have in fact turned out* (past tense).

As with any scientific test, Braude et al. are quite right that “[participants might] focus on something more personally meaningful or . . . some minor feature of the target, thereby making it difficult to distinguish near hits from misses.” This is undoubtedly another source of frustration, but one that *does not change the requirements of scientific rigor*. If survival researchers are unable to obtain rigorously vetted evidence for their claims, how is that *science's problem*, rather than *survival researchers' problem*? In any case, a practical solution is to *keep trying*, varying the test conditions as much as possible, at least until the accumulated test failures convince survival researchers that this line of research is unlikely to bear fruit whatever the conditions. At the moment, for more than a century such tests have utilized notes in envelopes, audio cassettes, brief musical fragments, encoded messages in various languages, combination locks, static and animated hidden visual targets of various forms, colors, and brightness, thermal, magnetic, and electromagnetic field detectors, visible, infrared, and ultraviolet light sensors, strain gauges, and the behavior of kittens, other animals, and human “sensitives.”¹³ Is 121 years of varying the test conditions not enough time to work out the kinks?

It's also worth noting that, contra Braude et al., direct tests of survival do not even require their subjects to “elicit psi on demand.” Subjects simply have to identify or influence their targets in an apparently anomalous way on *one occasion per test* (though across multiple tests to replicate any effects). For example, the hypothesized discarnate Thouless potentially had countless opportunities in the decades between his death in 1984 and the cracking of his second postmortem cipher in 2019 to supply some living person, *any living person*, with the name of the poem “The Hound of Heaven.” Hypothesized discarnates like Stevenson, whose uncracked keys have yet to be revealed (whether through a living person, an electronic device, or a spontaneous assembly of clouds into words), are still “participants” in an ongoing and potentially never-ending experiment *to this day*. Braude et al. raise the initially reasonable possibility that “perhaps they're simply not particularly good at it.” But is it reasonable for an *empirical survivalist* taking mental mediumship to provide the best evidence of ostensible survival, say, to also believe that *all* of the several hundred hypothesized discarnates who agreed to such tests during life have been unable or un-

willing to communicate with any living person—and only in the cases when the conditions are this controlled, mind you? Is it reasonable for such an empirical survivalist to alternatively or concurrently believe that all of the living persons who could have been—and still could be—recipients of such a communication (the cumulative human population over several generations, potentially) were unable to receive one? Perhaps “the failure of OBErs and NDErs to succeed in formal or controlled tests” is not “clear enough for us to conclude that the subjects totally lack the ability being tested,” but it is certainly strongly suggested by the fact that the purported ability is supposedly able to manifest so long as such tight controls are *not* in place.

It might well be the case that “the demands of the experimental setting tend to frustrate the quest for positive results”—no less for survival researchers than for pharmaceutical company CEOs who are nevertheless expected to take steps to overcome such difficulties and, regardless, demonstrate the safety and efficacy of their drugs by established scientific standards. Indeed, “test conditions might inhibit performance” (not necessarily irreparably), require us to treat “both experimenters and subjects as psychological stick figures,” or ignore “the option that the tests were psi-inhibitory”—no less in drug studies than here. But none of this is relevant to whether or not a positive existential claim has been rigorously established in adherence with long-standing scientific principles. The possibility of (likely uncontrollable if real) psi-inhibitory effects not only undermines “whether we can ever confidently assess success or failure in any parapsychological test,” but whether we can trust *any* scientific experiment (or series of them).

After all, Braude (2003) hypothesizes a form of psi that has *unlimited* capabilities regardless of its source: living, dead, or inanimate. As my interlocutors note, “if real, [that] could apparently subvert any experimental control” because then “we have no idea what’s really going on in a parapsychological experiment”—or *any* scientific experiment, for that matter. For precognition or clairvoyance that can extract information from any time or place whatsoever, or PK that can do anything, would no less sabotage “any experiment . . . in any branch of science.” Braude et al. *themselves* thus come “uncomfortably close to” saying that “the results of [science] experiments should be rejected as long as [psi] is possible,” substituting their words parapsychology and fraud with my words science and psi, respectively.

Do consistently negative results from direct tests of survival indicate the absence of psi (whatever its source)? No, we’re told, because in such cases “Augustine doesn’t consider the option that the tests were psi-inhibitory.” Braude et al. elaborate: “researchers too often assume, tacitly and naively, that subjects will use only the psychic ability being investigated, that they will use that ability only

after the experiment has begun, and that experimenters, judges, and mere bystanders will use no psychic abilities at all to influence the outcomes.” Indeed they do, and for good reason—because one cannot do *any* experimental investigation in any science without such assumptions. Braude et al. would have us take seriously the bare possibility that the psi of the hypothesized discarnates might be exactly counterbalanced by the counter-psi of mediums or skeptical experimenters (or any other living persons, near or far, as single individuals or in combination), producing a net zero “amount” of psi displayed. This bare possibility duly noted,¹⁴ if no psi effect is found in a particular test, then we can reasonably presume that no psi was present in it. Otherwise we open the door to “psi-inhibitory” properties of sealed glass (or any other potential control) to explain why PKrs cannot move an object for any distance behind sealed glass, or subconscious counter-psi from the PKr’s long-lost high school classmate—or perhaps even that of a demon. The assumptions that Braude et. al. eschew here are *necessary for doing science*; without them, we are doing pure metaphysics.

It is notable here that while it is conceivable that “the evidence for a properly-conducted experiment or investigation outweighs the evidence for fraud,” the same cannot be said for Braude (2003)’s psi without limits. It could be physically impossible for fraud to have occurred, for example, in the way that it is physically impossible for the suspect to have committed the murder if he was 1,000 miles away at the time—but only so long as one takes for granted that an all-powerful PK does not exist. Otherwise, if we allow for such extravagant possibilities, how could we *ever* conceivably falsify *any* hypothesis? Since surviving actual falsification attempts is what provides positive evidence for a hypothesis in the first place, and unfalsifiable hypotheses cannot be tested—let alone survive tests—allowing psi without limits would render science of any kind (including parapsychology) impossible, since no hypothesis could ever be supported by any data under such a metaphysical scheme, where survivable falsification attempts are not even possible.

The hypothesis that psi without limits exists is little different from the hypothesis that you *could have been* created 5 minutes ago with all of your present memories implanted, or that Descartes’ evil demon is consistently trying to deceive you that there’s a physical world that other minds partake in when, really, no physical objects or other minds exist at all. But as Karl Popper famously noted, a hypothesis that is compatible with every conceivable piece of evidence—like the hypotheses of Freudian psychoanalysis—doesn’t really explain any particular piece of evidence. Taken to its natural conclusion, unlimited-capabilities psi is not a scientific hypothesis *at all*, but a metaphysical one.

And unlike the possibility of fraud, which can be ruled out at least *sometimes*, to various degrees, *unlimited-capabilities psi—like an intervening God—can never be controlled for*, undermining *all* scientific conclusions.

As we've seen, in *every* scientific investigation, scientists regularly assume the nonexistence, powerlessness, or at least absence of influence of Braude's (2003) psi without limits, whether conscious of this or not, because they *must* do so to engage in empirical investigation at all. But those assumptions justify themselves, for in adopting them science has de facto been able to advance our knowledge of the world. They should be no more controversial than the assumption that the future is like the past, that cause-effect relationships exist out there in the world and not just as Humean constant conjunctions in our minds, or indeed that there is any external world outside of our minds at all. All of these assumptions are necessary for us to derive (approximations of) any laws of nature at all, and their usefulness warrants us continuing to assume them. Compared to the possibility that scientific knowledge is not possible simply because such enlisted assumptions can always be questioned, C. D. Broad's basic limiting principles start to look at whole lot better than parapsychologists typically take them to be (1949, pp. 293–296).

The assumptions necessary to do empirical survival research are not nearly as warranted by their usefulness as the ones listed above, whose utility is clear. Indeed, on the face of it, the assumptions needed to do empirical survival research are almost certainly *baseless* (Sudduth, 2016).¹⁵ They are nevertheless quite necessary for survival research to proceed empirically. Without them, one could just as well drop the adjective *empirical* from the term *empirical survivalist* and adopt a faith-based belief in discarnate personal survival.

So it's *undoubtedly* true that "those who originally designed encrypted message or combination-lock tests were making various assumptions about what it's like to survive death" (Braude et al., 2022; cf. Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 226). But so what? The aim of my BICS critique overview of such tests was not to attempt the virtually impossible task of *justifying* those evidently unwarranted assumptions (cf. Dodds, 1934, pp. 169–170; Sudduth, 2016), but to make clear what the evidential status of the survival evidence obtained would be *if* we took those assumptions for granted. Why those assumptions, and not others? Because those who claim to have empirical evidence for discarnate personal survival *already make them* whenever they claim, for example, that Mrs. Piper's GP control sometimes provided genuine communications from the deceased Pellew. True, making *other* assumptions might well lead to *different* conclusions about what character of evidence we should expect to find. For example, if persons persist after death

discarnate, but are unable to communicate or interact with the living in any way, then we would expect to see *no evidence* of discarnate personal survival *even if it occurs*.¹⁶ Or we might not be able to empirically distinguish between information coming from living persons, inanimate objects, or discarnates given the possibility that *both* LAP and otherworldly psi are examples of psi without limits. (For us to be able to distinguish between them, discarnates would have to be capable of psi feats that living persons cannot pull off.) Attempting to distinguish between them in a world where *all* psi is unlimited would be akin to trying to empirically distinguish various live options in the interpretation of quantum mechanics—potentially something that simply cannot be done.

By empirical survivalists' own standards, then, the rigorous *experimental* evidence for discarnate personal survival is *abysmal*. It does not favor discarnate personal survival even *when we grant empirical survivalists' assumptions*. True, "test failures would at best only disconfirm a particular *model* of personal survival"—indeed, a *testable* model of survival. But that's true for *anyone* evaluating survival research. After all, we don't *know* that discarnates even exist, whether they can interact with our world at all if they do, what capabilities they may or may not have, and so on. We can only *guess* at these things—and there is no empirical evidence that can help us decide between equally possible opposite answers to such questions. Any attempt to appeal to other survival evidence would simply **beg the question**—that is, merely assume what one is trying to show. But *these free parameters are empirical survivalists' problem*, for they are the ones claiming to have positive evidence of ostensible discarnate personal survival, and thus assume the burden of showing what they claim. And even if it is not *possible* for them to meet that burden for their assumptions, they still have the burden to show the next best thing—that *once their assumptions are made* (though we can't justify these guesses), *then* we can have stringent scientific evidence for ostensible discarnate personal survival. And that is a burden that empirical survivalists theoretically *could* meet, but have not in fact met, because the *evidence itself* has thwarted their efforts to meet it.

Given that *no* assumptions can be justified about unavailable discarnates (unlike cryptids that we *could* conceivably get our hands on), why is proceeding from the assumptions of those survival researchers who sought to directly test discarnate personal survival out of bounds?

One final comment about direct tests of survival cries out for reply. Braude et al. ask whether I would concede that replicable positive results from such tests would constitute evidence for discarnate personal survival. Were it not for their prejudice that I would not,¹⁷ the answer would be obvious. For my initial critique was quite explicit that I

thought that such tests were “exactly the sort of controlled experimental research that survival researchers ought to be doing” since “most ‘academic scientists and scholars’ would surely be satisfied with, say, replicable positive results from Parnia’s AWARE II study” (Augustine, 2022). There are several caveats to that answer laid bare above, but perhaps a direct response will ease their anguish about “how open-minded” I am.

It’s also worth pointing out the pernicious **misdirection** involved in asking the question. The crux of the debate is not the *psychological disposition* of any particular person or tribe, but *the state of the survival evidence*. What’s at issue in the BICS contest is whether or not survival researchers have delivered the kind of *evidence* that would give *the scientific community* reason to think that there is something in this research in need of novel kinds of explanation. What *scientific conclusions* does the evidence warrant? The consensus of Delorme et al. (2021*)’s 422 survival-agnostic academics is a better measure of that than the view of any one skeptic, and the consensus of the scientific community as a whole is a better measure of it than that of the coveted survival-agnostic academics.

Thus there’s no call for making any of this *personal*. Indeed, if Braude et al. really think that in my critique I’ve committed as many obvious epistemic “sins” as they accuse me of, it would be counterproductive for them to waste time (and lose face) on pretend or presumed ones. The issue was never about what any particular person believes, but about how discarnate personal survival could move from an item of personal belief to an item of scientific *knowledge* (empirically justified true belief and more).

Until survival researchers produce evidence of the sort that replicable positive results from properly controlled tests of survival *would have* provided, the rest of the world is quite justified in responding: “Call me when a medium gets even *one* hit out of dozens of vetted attempts to get an afterlife code, or when an out-of-body NDEr has actually identified a visual target in the latest installment of the AWARE study. *Then* I’ll be keen for replications. Until then, *tend to your own garden.*”

Setting the Record Straight

Whether they were intentional or not, it’s unwise to leave mischaracterizations of your points uncorrected, otherwise your silence risks further leading readers astray. One big mischaracterization in Braude et al. reads: “This is a good example of how unverified, controversial assumptions can be enlisted when convenient. What’s the basis for Augustine’s claim italicized above?” The claim in question was: “On the face of it, *if one can really remember aspects of an even older past life, then one should (usually) also*

be able to remember aspects of a more recent (and perhaps half-a-century-long) intermission period between that life and the current one, all else held equal (assuming that before-life memories function like those already known to exist, anyway)” [emphasis *theirs*] (Augustine, 2022).

This comment was made in a criticism of Nahm for enlisting *untestable* assumptions to derive his reincarnationist “predictions.” The criticism was that one can’t predict *anything* from the reincarnation hypothesis simpliciter, and therefore a particular piece of evidence does not constitute evidence for reincarnation. To spin it as *evidence* for such, one has to *amend* the hypothesis with various *uncheckable* auxiliary assumptions to make it count as a “prediction.” This would be a legitimate move *if the auxiliaries added were themselves confirmed*—but in Nahm’s case they *were not* because *there was no way to confirm (or falsify) them* in principle. The best that one could do was simply assume them *without justification*.

My meaning *should* have been clear from that context, but just to be sure, I added the caveat in parentheses precisely to avoid any misunderstandings. But no matter. To be absolutely clear, the assumption enlisted was merely *floated* as an example of an alternative assumption to that made by Nahm that readers would presumably find more plausible than Nahm’s simply because it extrapolates from the known to the unknown, rather than just throwing a dart at the logical space of possible assumptions. Had I used a less plausible *example* of an alternative assumption, my interlocutors surely would have jumped all over *that*. Heads they win, tails you lose.

Absolutely, though: we don’t really know *how* discarnate memories work if we don’t even know that there *are* discarnates to have memories! Hence *why* the parenthetical comment is structured “assuming that X is true, anyway,” which should make clear that the assumption floated indeed *need not be made*. So I was not criticizing Nahm for making *false* assumptions, as *there are no knowable truths* about the characteristics of potentially fictional entities (apart from how authors “paint” them). Insisting that a particular contingent characteristic be taken as fact would be like demanding that a tachyon have a particular mass. Such assumptions cannot be justified precisely because we have no way to confirm their truth, and therefore they obviously can only be stipulated by fiat.

If there is any remaining doubt about my intended meaning, consider this: I’m (obviously) skeptical that discarnate persons *actually exist*. So I’m not invested in demanding that they be characterized in any particular way. From my perspective, any logically possible characterization is just as good as any other for what is, as far as we know, an *imaginary entity*. My interlocutors might as well have scolded me for demanding that we search for the Fountain

of Youth at a particular set of GPS coordinates. At best, such debates are no more than speculative flights of fancy.

So, here at least, it's clearly false that "Augustine once again understands and criticizes the way survivalists often import unstated and undefended assumptions into the debate, but he apparently misses his own frequent deployment of the same strategy." *Not guilty as charged, your honor. My interlocutors either miss the point, interpret me uncharitably, or both. (And for the record, I have never endorsed Paul Edwards' population objection to reincarnation or any variation on it, in either my BICS critique or anywhere else.)*

Rising to the Neuroscientific Challenge

Braude et al. (2022) think that I believe that the chiefly neuroscientific evidence "puts survivalists in an awkward position empirically, because they can't explain away a large and respectable body of neuroscientific data suggesting that survival is impossible." First of all, I've always characterized this evidence as rendering discarnate personal survival *highly unlikely*, not impossible, since that's the most that any evidence can do for any hypothesis.¹⁸ Second, the issue is not that empirical survivalists *cannot* reinterpret away such evidence—it's that, if they wish to proceed scientifically (rather than pseudoscientifically), they *ought not* reinterpret it away. More on why below.

My interlocutors say that they aim to "respect the evidence" and that I'm "justified in insisting that survivalists confront the challenge posed by the evidence of mind-brain correlations." "But"—which is always interjected when one wants to cling to one's position in the teeth of the evidence—"what are they evidence of? Augustine's anti-survivalist position is only an option . . . [one] compelling primarily to those antecedently committed to, or caught in the grip of, a prevailing conventional scientific view of the world." Well, at least *here* they didn't invoke physicalism, or reductionism, or whatever other **red herring** empirical survivalists habitually lean on. If by "prevailing conventional scientific view of the world" they mean the same scientific consensus that rational people grant when they conclude that long-tested vaccines are largely safe and effective, or that anthropogenic climate change is occurring—then yes, I concede that such conclusions might not be compelling to antivaxxers or climate change deniers, and I regard their recalcitrance as *their problem*, not mine. My point was simply that empirical survivalists are no better than other purveyors of pseudoscience in this respect. Little wonder that one can find in their writings the exact same tactics found among young-Earth creationists.

Having self-validated how much they respect the evidence, Braude et al. (2022) go to ask, "who is actually guilty

of claiming that neuroscientific evidence is inadmissible?" Survival researchers only need look in a mirror. Nahm, for one, is pretty explicit about dismissing any *conceivable* evidence for the dependence of consciousness on the brain *prior to even looking at the data*: "it is principally impossible to prove that brain chemistry produces consciousness" (2021*, p. 3) since "it is impossible to prove it from a purely logical perspective" (2021*, p. 66). This is just another way of saying that no evidence could ever count in favor of mind-brain dependence *in principle*—rendering one's own independence thesis *unfalsifiable*—which is one way to render unwelcome data inadmissible.

Other survival researchers either ignore or blithely dismiss such data with bumper sticker slogans, or else attempt to consistently reinterpret *all* such evidence away so as to be able to dismiss it *en masse* rather than weigh it. Consider that in Sudduth's (2016) groundbreaking probabilistic evaluation of classical empirical arguments for survival—though this is not his point—*not a single argument from the most discerning empirical survivalists in over a century begins with a less than 50% antecedent probability of discarnate personal survival*. That is, every single one of them begins their evaluation of the *overall* probability of discarnate personal survival in light of the parapsychological evidence *alone*, as if contrary evidence from elsewhere reducing its overall probability doesn't even exist. If that doesn't rig the results of an evidential assessment, then what *does*? A *fair* evaluation would weigh the *total* available evidence relevant to the truth of discarnate personal survival, period. Survivalist presuppositions are so entrenched in this literature that even parapsychologists unsympathetic to survivalist interpretations of the parapsychological evidence (Irwin, 2002) fail to even *mention* the neuroscientific and other evidence *against* discarnate personal survival in their textbook overviews of the subject (Irwin, 1999, pp. 175–277), let alone try to assess it. Such a huge oversight is akin to biology textbooks that fail to mention, in an alternate imaginable universe, independent geological estimates of the planet's age that consistently date it to be too young for biological evolution to have occurred on the planet.

Braude et al. (2022) claim that "its admissibility is precisely why survivalists make the effort to find viable alternative accounts of the data!" I'll get to why the qualifier "viable" makes their reinterpretation efforts self-defeating shortly. But first, let me reiterate what I had already asked in the critique: what *justifies* empirical survivalists' reinterpretation of such evidence, *across the board*, "so that it never counts in one's evaluation" (Augustine, 2022) when one weighs the *total available* evidence? *That question was neither rhetorical nor a straw man*. Conducting an *empirical* investigation in this manner is akin to tipping the scales by simply never adding any opposing items to the opposite

scale. If that's not rendering evidence inadmissible, then nothing is.

For one thing, it is possible to weigh evidence that straightforwardly favors a hypothesis against evidence that straightforwardly undermines it without all of this dodgy reinterpretation. The reinterpretation strategy is *particularly* suspect when one has to unfalsifiably invoke auxiliary assumptions that are *untestable in principle* for it to work, such as "disordered brains impair minds *only when persons are incarnate*"—my specific restatement of J. M. E. McGartgart's general auxiliary "the brain is essential to thought [*only*] while we have bodies" [emphasis mine] (1906/1930, p. 106). The more untestable assumptions that one adds to a hypothesis, the more metaphysical (or less empirical) it becomes, inching it closer and closer to becoming purely a matter of faith.

So how might one go about straightforwardly determining whether a particular datum favors (or disfavors) a hypothesis? One can follow C. S. Peirce and Elliott Sober, for one, and make an inference to the best explanation (as I did). Common sense tells us that this is possible. For if there were not sometimes straightforward reads of the evidence—reads where alternative interpretations are *logically possible, but still less probable* than consensus reads—then we would have no reason to favor general relativity over a massively "bulked-up" Newtonian physics unparsimoniously amended with all manner of untestable auxiliary assumptions. Physicists *could have* contorted classical Newtonian physics enough to develop an increasingly clunky neo-Newtonian physics artificially forced to "predict" the relativistic effects that naturally fall out of general relativity. *But they didn't.* Neither should psychical researchers contort the independence thesis so much that it becomes observationally indistinguishable from the dependence thesis simpliciter merely to avoid having to countenance adverse neuroscientific data in their probabilistic assessments:

For if drastically diminished mental functioning following severe brain damage provides just as good evidence for the independence thesis as subsequently unaffected or considerably enhanced mental functioning would have provided (as predicted by the independence thesis simpliciter and filter theory, respectively), it is hard to see how the independence thesis can stake a claim as an empirical hypothesis at all. It parallels the unfalsifiable Omphalos hypothesis that God created the world to *look like* it had an enormous prehistoric past, but really is less than ten thousand years old. (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 246)

Do Braude et al. really want to say that the consensus of climatologists should not be "privileged" over the alternative beliefs of climate change deniers, since with enough unparsimonious maneuvering, the latter can always be forced to fit the facts, too?¹⁹ If no matter what neither view is any better or worse than the other, why investigate matters empirically at all?

Early on it might be reasonable to try to save one's pet theories²⁰ from unfavorable evidence in order to avoid their falsification (or at least a reduction in their overall probability). The data themselves might have been bad, for example. But as more unfavorable evidence accumulates—and from a variety of independent, reliable sources—at some point it becomes unreasonable to continue to cling to one's theories in the face of the evidence. All that I ask is that psychical researchers adhere to the same standards that other scientists do.

Braude et al. (2022) posit that empirical survivalists should reinterpret away why mental states "*seem* in so many respects to be bodily dependent" by potentially "arguing that the brain is merely one kind of physical *instrument* for expressing mental activity." Note the **weasel word** "expressing." What does it *mean* to say that the brain is an "instrument for expressing mental activity"? What is the *definition* of the technical term "express"? What hypothesized *relation* between mind and brain is signified by the term? No empirical survivalist ever says.

In normal parlance, to *express* a thing means to show or display it, so *expressing* a person's mental activity usually signifies one's thoughts, desires, and so on being accurately conveyed by one's behavior (e.g., your hand rising because you willed it to rise rather than due to some sort of spasm). The way that former SPR President Broad interpreted Braude et al.'s "instrument for expressing mentality," the instrument theory is inadequate to our own inner experience:

We will suppose that a man is injured in the head; that before the injury he was of a cheerful and benevolent disposition; and that after the injury he is morose and liable to attacks of homicidal mania. Are we to say that the injury has made no difference to his mind; that this [man] remains cheerful and benevolent; but that the change in his brain compels him to *express* his cheerfulness by scowling and his benevolence by attacking other people with carving-knives? This is scarcely plausible. And, if we accept it, we shall not be able to stop at this point. We shall have to conclude that it is impossible to tell what the character of anyone's mind really is. Lifelong philanthropists may be inwardly boiling with malice which some peculiar

kink in their brains and nervous systems compels them to *express* by pensioning their poor relations and giving pennies to crossing-sweepers. Once more, *the mind will be reduced to something with no definite traits of its own*, such as benevolence or peevishness, *but merely with certain very general powers to express itself in various ways according to the body with which it is provided*. It seems to me that *what is left of the mind when we try to square the Instrumental Theory with the known facts is so abstract and indefinite that it does not deserve to be called a "mind."* [emphasis mine] (1925, p. 535)

The failure of what he characterizes as “the instrumental theory” led Broad to propose an alternative “compound theory.” But unfortunately for empirical survivalists, any “compound of two factors neither of which separately is a mind” stops existing when one of its parts—a functioning brain—no longer exists (1925, p. 536). For the traits that characterize our individual *human consciousness* “depend jointly on [the traits] of the [hypothesized] psychic factor [the separable part of us] and on those of the material organism with which it is united” (Broad, 1925, p. 536). So much for Frederic Myers’ “human personality and its survival of bodily death.”

Alternative survivalist analogies to (or interpretations of) an “instrument for expressing mental activity” fare worse, for they imply that brained minds are *profoundly different* from brainless minds. Discarnates unencumbered by pesky brains would have to be so radically different from their brained selves that we could not truly say that the *same* mind survived as a discarnate. Worse, given just how many mental capabilities brains de facto contribute to our incarnate minds (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, pp. 274–276), whatever mental remnants might persist once all of our brain-enabled capacities are stripped away hardly deserves to be called a *mind* at all. Whenever empirical survivalists get more specific about their theories on the mind’s relation to functioning brains, they are forced by the facts to concede that the functioning brain changes our mental functioning *through and through*. Thus it is as if we are never really *ourselves* when we are incarnate. The corollary of this implication is that who we are *now* in a substantial or “thick” sense will not survive death even if some mere *part* of us becomes discarnate. Some abstract impersonal part (not all that different from our bones) might “survive” biological death—perhaps with the mind of a paramecium—once the brain activity that sustains *human* consciousness during life drops away. But that is not *personal* survival.

By now most empirical survivalists have at least moved from vague talk about “expressing” consciousness

to talk about “filtering” it. Unlike the **weasel word** *express*, at least we have some semblance of what a *filter* does that might clarify the role in mental functioning that empirical survivalists hypothesize for a functioning brain. Unfortunately for them, how varying brain functioning de facto affects mental functioning is *not in any way analogous* to what a filter actually does to groundwater (say), but rather *the opposite* of it:

If the mind is “not generated by the brain but instead focused, limited, and constrained by it” (Kelly et al., 2007), the filter theory entails that a brainless mind will be expanded, less limited, and unrestricted by brain function. Since no brainless minds are available to clinicians for study, this is not a falsifiable prediction in itself. But it does have falsifiable consequences, most obviously that the greater the disruption in brain function, the “freer” the mind will be from its neural confines, and hence the clearer one’s cognitive function will be. For example, we would expect the progressive destruction of more and more of the brain’s “filter” by Alzheimer’s disease to progressively “free” more and more of consciousness, and thus increase Alzheimer’s patients’ mental proficiency as the disease progresses. Just as removing sections of a dam would increase the flow of water going through it, the degenerating “filter” would become increasingly ineffective in limiting consciousness as more and more neural pathways were destroyed. (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, pp. 230–231)

But Braude et al. (2022) prefer a different analogy: “How, then, can survivalists argue for the superiority—or just the adequacy—of their point of view? According to McTaggart, one strategy would be to offer competing analogies that are [allegedly] at least as weighty as analogies apparently favoring the anti-survivalist.” To assess whether their preferred alternative is either superior to, or at least no worse off than, other analogies, we must first discern the apparent analogues in McTaggart’s analogy:

If a man is shut up in a house, the transparency of the windows is an essential condition of his seeing the sky. But it would not be prudent to infer that, if he walked out of the house, he could not see the sky because there was no longer any glass through which he might see it. (McTaggart, 1906/1930, p. 105)

If a mind is shut up in a body, the functioning of

the brain is an essential condition of his possessing mental capacities. But it would not be prudent to infer that, if he “left” the body, he could not possess them because there was no longer any brain through which he might possess them.

To be clear, the analogues seem to be: man = mind; house = body; the transparency of = the functioning of; the windows/glass = the brain; perceiving/seeing the sky = possessing (active) mental capacities; and walking out of the house = ‘leaving’ the body.

Set aside (for now) that this is a *poor* analogy since it does not do justice to the *actual* neuroscientific data (which is what Henry Stapp and Michael Levin were getting at in my initial critique, and what I point out in my critique of the filter theory above). There is a more basic point to underscore. All of these analogies are *illustrative* analogies, not *argumentative* analogies. None of them actually *argue* for empirical survivalists’ views on exactly what brains are for; rather, they merely *state* or *assert* those views. Thus, contra Braude et al. (2022), they cannot be used to support *either* the superiority or the evidential adequacy of empirical survivalists’ analogies.

Consider: A bowling ball–rubber sheet analogy *illustrates* what general relativity *states* is the relationship between massive objects and spacetime, but it is not part of any evidential argument that general relativity is probably (approximately) true. To convey an *argument*, an analogy has to be part of a larger argumentative form:

1. X has (relevantly similar to each other) features a, b, c.
2. Y also has features a, b, c—plus feature d.
3. d is relevantly similar to (not relevantly dissimilar to) a, b, and c.
4. ∴ X probably also has feature d.²¹

The basic idea of an *argument from analogy* is that X is known to be like Y in certain ways, therefore X is probably like Y in other ways, too. If it’s an inductively *strong* argument, then these ways will have many relevant similarities, and few relevant dissimilarities, between them.

If we look at McTaggart’s analogy, we can see that it *cannot be* an argument from analogy, for then the basic concept would have to be that windows are like brains in certain ways, brains *also* have this other feature, all these ways are similar to each other, and therefore windows probably have this other feature, too. McTaggart only lists *one* feature of transparently windowed houses that’s supposed to exist in functioning-brained bodies (so the former would have to fill in X), leaving any additional features said to be relevantly similar to that one feature to be part of

functioning-brained bodies (Y). So, given that McTaggart’s final position is that functioning-brained bodies are only necessary for possessing *any* mental capacities (or at least additional non-perceptual ones) when one is incarnate, this is the closest that we could ever come to making his analogy out to be part of an *argument* from analogy (using mathematical comprehension as a specific example of a non-perceptual mental capacity):

1. Transparently windowed houses are required for sky-perception only when a man is housed.
2. Functioning-brained bodies “also” are required for sky-perception only when a mind is incarnate, *plus* they are required for mathematical comprehension only when a mind is incarnate.
3. Being required for mathematical comprehension is relevantly similar to (not relevantly dissimilar to) being required for sky-perception.
4. ∴ Transparently windowed houses probably also are required for mathematical comprehension only when a man is housed.

Of course, conclusion 4 makes no sense and is not McTaggart’s view. But suppose that the imagined argument is *not* that functioning-brained bodies are like transparently windowed houses because they both have feature a, functioning-brained bodies also have feature b, and therefore transparently windowed houses probably have feature b, too—but the other way around. That is, suppose that the imagined argument instead is that transparently windowed houses are like functioning-brained bodies because they both have feature a, transparently windowed houses also have feature b, and therefore functioning-brained bodies probably have feature b, too. In *that* case, the imagined *conclusion* would make sense, but not the imagined *premises*:

1. Functioning-brained bodies are required for sky-perception only when a when a mind is incarnate.
2. Transparently windowed houses “also” are required for sky-perception only when a man is housed, *plus* they are required for mathematical comprehension only when a man is housed.
3. Being required for mathematical comprehension is relevantly similar to (not relevantly dissimilar to) being required for sky-perception.
4. ∴ Functioning-brained bodies probably also are required for mathematical comprehension only when a mind is incarnate.

Here conclusion 4 is McTaggart’s view, but the premises that yield it are not viable. Imagined premise 1 begs the

question since it's contentious that discarnate minds could visually perceive anything without a visual cortex, let alone without eyes—and argumentative analogies start with facts that are not in contention. But more importantly, the second clause in imagined premise 2 is obviously false. The reason that none of this makes any sense is because *McTaggart's analogy is not part of an argument from analogy at all, nor any other evidential or probabilistic argument.*

Thus the appeal to McTaggart's analogy fails in two respects. First, it is not part of any argument that, probably, brain functioning is *not* required for (some or all) mental functioning to exist/occur. Second, it does it not even show that such an independence thesis is no less probable (given the neurophysiological data) than its negation, which is what I take McTaggart's (and my interlocutors') aim to have been. In what follows, I will elucidate how the late great philosopher William Rowe might have argued this second point, putting some meat on the bones of his contention that “against McTaggart, the evidence seems to show that the relation between our bodies and our mental life is enormously more intimate and complex than that between a human being and a room in which she happens to be enclosed” (2007, p. 159).

To show that the dependence and independence theses are evidentially on a par, Braude et al. (2022) would have had to have *shown* (not merely asserted) that either the dependence thesis would not lead us to expect my bulleted agreed-upon facts, or else that the independence thesis would lead us to expect them *just as much*. But they did *neither*. My accessible inference to the best explanation inspired by Peirce and Sober went unrebuted, despite my having indicated exactly *how* one could go about rebutting it. But that's just as well, as it's probably not *possible* for them (or anyone else) to rebut it (correctly) *since the evidence itself constrains one's maneuvers* here, as Rowe recognized. Empirical survivalists would do well to consider whether in neuroscience they have hit a wall rather than simply an obstacle.

Independence thesis proponents may one day come up with a conceivable analogy to the mind–brain relationship that, unlike their attempts thus far, *does justice to the neuroscientific data*. But the fact that it's so difficult to think of a merely illustrative analogy that's not so vague as to be vacuous—and is true to the facts—underscores the lengths to which empirical survivalists must go to re-interpret this evidence in some way, *any way*, to force it *not to count* against discarnate personal survival. So much for Braude et al. (2022)'s promise of “competing analogies that are at least as weighty as analogies apparently favoring the anti-survivalist.”

With or without analogies²², one can derive observational consequences from both the independence and

dependence theses (in amended or unamended forms). These derived *predictions* either match what neuroscience (plus other science) has in fact uncovered, or they do not. Whether unamended, or amended as it has been thus far, what the independence thesis predicts that we will find contradicts what “neuroscience-plus” has in fact uncovered, whereas what the dependence thesis predicts matches it. We thus have pretty compelling evidence that having a functioning brain almost certainly is necessary for human mental processes to exist/occur. The desperate last resort that a functioning brain is a necessary condition for possessing (nondormant) mental capacities *only when minds are incarnate*²³ is never supported by any arguments or evidence—nor could it be. The italicized auxiliary is *logically possible*, to be sure, but nothing in the body of neuroscientific *data* warrants *adding* this limitation.²⁴ And since it cannot be scientifically tested even in principle (and thus can never be scientifically confirmed), its addition comes at the expense of lowering the parsimony—and thus (all else held equal) the overall probability—of the independence thesis. For the more unconfirmed auxiliaries that one attaches to one's “bulked-up” hypothesis, the more ways there are for it to be mistaken, and there is no way to compensate for that widening risk by using only confirmed auxiliaries, since untestable auxiliaries can never be confirmed.

For the sake of greater understanding, let me put the point another way. Since my inductive arguments are evidential, the *bare possibility* that the independence thesis could still be true despite the strong evidence against it **misses the point**. For in such cases a *probabilistic* assessment is what's called for. It's nowhere near sufficient, then, to say that alternative interpretations of the neuroscientific data are *possible*. To defeat my arguments, they also have to be *likely* given other things that we know—and *that* is only possible if they are testable and confirmed. It's no less logically possible, after all, that fossils of simpler organisms are found in older geological strata than those of complex ones *because God created the fossils that way all at once 10,000 years ago* (rather than due to biological evolution). Just as no evolutionary biologist takes such “alternative accounts of the data” seriously, no neuroscientist should take a “dependence-looking independence thesis” seriously, either. If all signs from reliable sources of evidence point to existential or functional dependence, then we should tentatively take such evidence to indicate exactly what it seems to indicate (barring forthcoming, comparably reliable bodies of evidence that suggest otherwise—but we are here talking about *available* evidence).

To sum up: McTaggart's analogy, like other ones, merely *illustrates* what the independence thesis *asserts*; it argues neither that the chiefly neuroscientific facts make

the independence thesis more probable than its negation, nor that the independence thesis is just as adequate to the data as the dependence thesis. So it is not part of any evidential argument, nor any adequate critique of one, *at all*. Why, then, do Braude et al. (2022) bring it up in the first place?

Once we substitute McTaggart's illustrations with their analogues, it's plain to see that his "subtle re-framing of the issues" is nothing more than a restatement of the old pilot-vehicle analogy that even René Descartes admitted was inadequate to the known facts *in his day*:

Nature also teaches me . . . that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I . . . would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. (1641/2017, p. 64)

Mind you, McTaggart does not *explicitly* advocate anything so naïve as the pilot-vehicle picture of the mind-brain relationship. But it is *implied* by his holding steadfast that *there is nothing essential to individuality that brained minds can do, that brainless minds cannot also do*. If everything essential to our individuality can persist "soul-side" after death, then it *has to be* the soul that possesses—and thus preserves—all of those individualistic mental traits.²⁵ That is, for discarnate personal survival to occur, individualistic mental traits would have to be "located in [their] own [soul] substance with its own principles of operation" (McGinn, 1996, p. 26) in order to be carried along with the enduring soul—and *not* inhere "in"²⁶ the brain that dies. But if we really didn't need a functioning brain *at all* in order to possess such traits,²⁷ then they would be (largely) impervious to such things as the actual effects of brain damage on mental functioning. In matter of fact, such traits are *anything but* impervious to brain damage (Gennaro & Fishman, 2015).

To see this more clearly, note that, definitionally, on the independence thesis simpliciter, mind and brain are simply two independent things that cross-interact. But as personal identity theorist Eric T. Olson points out, on this picture "[w]e should expect the functioning of the body and the soul to be as independent as the functioning of a drone and its operator, contrary to our experience with general anaesthetics and head injuries. Imagine a human being who could not remain conscious even for a moment unless the drone she controls is intact. That would be mysterious" (2021, p. 91)—nonsensical, even. So while mind-brain in-

dependence is *conceivable*, absent amending auxiliaries, it predicts mind-brain correlations already known to be false:

[T]his natural analogy with two independently existing things in two-way interaction makes no sense of *actual* mind-brain correlations. For if a remotely controlled vehicle were captured, no amount of fiddling with the vehicle's circuitry by its captors could debilitate the capacities of its remote operator, miles away. At worst, the vehicle's captors could cut off "sensory data" coming from the vehicle by disconnecting or destroying its camera, microphone, or transmitter, or disable the operator's control by disconnecting or destroying its motor functions or receiver. But the captors would be completely powerless to remotely affect the operator's ability to do math, recognize undistorted faces, or understand language. Yet permanent or transient changes to brain structure or chemistry can produce exactly such results. (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 234)

Bear in mind that the drone analogy is not merely some "preferred" analogy "apparently favoring the anti-survivalist." It is an analogy that simply maps what the independence thesis simpliciter says that brains do (or don't do). That is, the analogy is faithfully *derived from* the thesis. Even those sympathetic to discarnate personal survival have at times put their finger on (at least part of) the problem. Since my initial BICS critique already quoted Stapp and Levin realizing it, compare the late survival researcher Hornell Hart:

The TV actor is affected very little by what happens to any individual receiving set. Even the piano on which the musician learns to perform affects him relatively little as compared with the profound ways in which the growth and development of a given 'I'-thinker is affected by the structure, the chemistry and the functioning of the brain through which he observes and acts. (1959, p. 220)

To be sure, some of these survivalist commentators misidentify the *source* of the problem as faulty analogies. But simple illustrations like the operator-drone or musician-piano analogy often merely *reflect* the actual source of the problem—the *independence thesis itself* (at least when various untestable auxiliaries are not added to unparsimoniously bulk the thesis up, which would exact the toll of lowering its overall probability). The problem doesn't lie with the unfaithfulness of the illustration so much as with *what the analogy illustrates*. That is, the problem is not that

such analogies aren't true to empirical survivalists' theories—the problem is that empirical survivalists' theories are not true to the facts. If an analogy illustrates a theory that makes false predictions, then the analogy will make false predictions, too.

Conclusion: Reframing Facts Does Not Change Them

Rather than defend or retract their exposed fallacies, Braude et al. (2022) shift the focus of their reply from their BICS contest-winning essays to my supposed missteps in evaluating them.²⁸ I suppose that this should not be surprising given that their own work was on the line, but still I had hoped for better given how systematic my initial critique had been. For in their haste to defensively condemn it, they left the question of the adequacy of the arguments found in the BICS essay competition unresolved. Instead of killing the messenger with the *ad hominem tu quoque* fallacy, they would do well to step back and reflect on whether they should stop making fallacious arguments going forward so that their contributions aren't so easily vulnerable to attack.

In redirecting attention to whether my position is tenable (by their lights), Braude et al. missed an unparalleled opportunity to groundbreakingly weigh the survival evidence on one scale against the chiefly neuroscientific evidence on the other. Many of those skeptical of personal survival—both in academia and in everyday life—regard the neuroscientific evidence as decisive. Thus readers might expect my commentators to give the task of disputing a novel statement of the neuroscientific case against discarnate personal survival the utmost priority, particularly since the parapsychological case for survival has been done to death many times over. Sadly, they don't even try to say anything new here. In lieu of lazily regurgitating what they had said on the issue many moons ago, they'd better serve advancing the survival debate by meeting my novel criticisms with novel responses. Hopefully future commentators will rise to the challenge.

But perhaps this is asking too much. If one pits the survival evidence as empirical survivalists construe it against the neuroscientific evidence as neuroscientists construe it, it's no contest. As those in disciplines other than psychical research will attest, the quality of the evidence grounding the neuroscientific case against survival, regardless of its conclusiveness, far exceeds that of the data purportedly supporting the survival hypothesis. My initial BICS critique and reply to my interlocutors simply make the reasons why explicit.

While it's natural to characterize that case as anti-survivalist because of its implications, motivationally it is

more accurately characterized as pro-scientific. After all, in this sense the well-supported hypothesis that having a functioning brain is a necessary condition for having a human mind is no more “anti-survivalist” than the well-established descent-with-modification hypothesis is anti-creationist, or heliocentrism is anti-geocentric. Our knowledge of the mind's relationship to the brain, as imperfect as it is, nevertheless renders discarnate personal survival highly unlikely in light of the totality of our best evidence. This revelation is not necessarily a welcome one to mortal creatures who can contemplate their own extinction, but it is honest.

After all, even everyday people notice the clear effects of brain damage (among other things) on mentality first, and then hypothesize the dependence of consciousness on the brain to make sense of them. That is why Sam Harris' line of reasoning was so persuasive to his applauding audience. Much to our chagrin, the dependence thesis happens to severely undercut the prospects for discarnate personal survival. And many hope against all odds to find relief in some evidence, any evidence, that might give us some out from Philip Larkin's “sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always. Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true” (“Aubade,” lines 17–20). That we might be reincarnated as a cork to “stop a beer-barrel” or seal “a hole to keep the wind away” (*Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1, lines 209–216) has never been an attractive prospect (#CancelShakespeare). But reality does not bend to our will.

When evaluating the totality of the evidence, it's reasonable to presume that things are exactly as they seem in the presence of diverse, independent sources of reliable evidence corroborating each other, and in the absence of counteracting reasons to think otherwise. No doubt survival researchers will claim such reasons, but we've seen that their evidence does not really stand up to scrutiny, let alone outweigh our everyday experience of the biological fragility of our own minds. Their evidence is not exactly nothing, but neither is it particularly compelling. Perhaps that's because death is exactly what it seems to be—for us no less than for any other living thing.

I thus stand by my original conclusion: given the evidence as a whole, discarnate personal survival is not even minimally more probable than not. For all the ink that my interlocutors spilled, it's notable that they never actually dispute that conclusion—perhaps because it is indisputable.

A final caution. Braude et al. accuse me of cherry picking “unsuccessful efforts to get OBEs and NDEs to identify remote targets.” If they had some comparable successful experimental evidence for ostensible survival to offer, perhaps they would have a point. But none was mentioned (or even cited) because they do not. So what specific exper-

imental evidence of survival could I have possibly excluded in cherry-picking the evidence? Accusations of fallacious reasoning are easy to make, but harder to demonstrate, which is why I quoted BICS contestants committing fallacies verbatim and then simply named their fallacies.

Given their financial windfall, if my interlocutors want to fund my (or any other skeptic's) in-depth, paralegal-like document review of the details of Braude's personal hobby-horse—the physical mediumship of D. D. Home and/or Eusapia Palladino—then we can talk about their showmanly challenge. Until then, I'm about as incentivized to do so as Braude et al. are to review a dossier of the last 50 years of testimonial evidence for Bigfoot, which similarly has nothing to do with ostensible evidence for discarnate personal survival.

In their final **tu quoque**, Braude et al. write that “although he charges survivalists with straw-man reasoning, that's something he often does himself, either by describing the opposing survivalist position in perhaps its least plausible form, or by simply charging survivalists with positions they (or at least the best of the lot) don't hold.”

So I'll issue a simpler challenge that doesn't require an institutional grant to justify undertaking it: find just one *direct quotation* of a single instance where I explicitly attributed a position to a BICS essay contest winner that the winner did not advocate. Otherwise, mind your accusations.

NOTES

¹ Braude et al. (2022)'s failure to simply cut the reference to “some form of the identity theory or epiphenomenalism” from Braude (2005)'s familiar arguments is particularly egregious. An entire section of my critique made plain *why* these (and other) mind-body theories are irrelevant to the issue at hand. My interlocutors' choice to reserve their commentary for other sections is fair enough, but if you are not going to dispute what I said in that section, you could at least extend the courtesy—and have the wisdom—of not repeating the errors laid bare in it. Contemporary philosophers of mind have been highly critical of *both* the identity theory and epiphenomenalism *for more than half a century*, and my arguments do not require one to assume either anyway, as *I had emphasized*. Anyone who bothered to review this literature would quickly discover the lengths to which the vast majority of contemporary philosophers of mind have gone to *avoid* epiphenomenalism—e.g., as a *nonnegotiable* requirement in both Jaegwon Kim's causal exclusion argument and the critical responses to it. And the threat of epiphenomenalism is *already avoided* if one assumes identity theory, for under it the mental causation that philosophers of mind by far aim to preserve would

just *be* physical causation. Adopting *either* reductionist identity theory *or* epiphenomenalism would effortlessly *dissolve* the problem posed by Kim's causal exclusion argument (see Moore, 2022, §g & §i). And yet that problem remains vexing—fueling newfound interest in varieties of Russellian monism as a potential solution to it (ever since Chalmers, 1996, pp. 153–155)—because contemporary philosophers of mind are largely skeptical of *both* identity theory (which already avoids causal exclusion) and epiphenomenalism (which seems to self-stultify by denying mental causation altogether). So why do Braude et al. (2022) insist on *retaining* this **straw man** argument among their **talking points**?

² Cf. Tressoldi et al. (2022) to substantiate this assessment.

³ The “Ranking the Survival Evidence” section was more than twice as long as the next largest section, “What Does the *Total Available Relevant Evidence* Tell Us?”

⁴ Of the three most promising contributors that I focused on, only Delorme et al. (2021*) actually systematically ranked the evidentiality of all of the main sources of survival evidence, so I structured my “Ranking the Survival Evidence” section on what they had said first and what others had said second, as is obvious as I go over each source of survival evidence. Since I had to organize a large amount of material on nine sources of survival evidence in some logical way, it made sense to for my progression to mirror that of Delorme et al. (2021*)'s systematic ranking. Typically, I would add what Braude (2021*) or Nahm (2021*) (and later others) said about Delorme et al. (2021*)'s points, or as a contrast to what Delorme et al. (2021*) had said.

⁵ Among those skeptical that the GP control was actually the deceased George Pellew were Pellew's mother and brother, particularly after the GP control could not answer a question that the living Pellew could've answered with ease, leading his brother to conclude: “Whoever it was answering that fellow, whether Mrs. Piper or Phen-uit [*sic*] or anyone else, it was *not George*” (Gardner, 1992, p. 226).

⁶ Richard Hodgson also found evidence of what he took to be the GP control mind-reading the living, such as when “G.P. was factually incorrect in what he described [as having *happened*], [but] his descriptions corresponded to the *intentions or plans of the persons involved*” [emphasis mine] (Sudduth, 2016, p. 81n9).

⁷ And I didn't even mention here mental mediums' “contact” with presumed-to-be-deceased fictional characters in experiments designed to “test the spirits” (Rinn, 1950, p. 136; Tanner, 1910/1994, p. 254), or their “communications” with those whom they believed to be deceased, but who turned out to be alive and well when the sittings took place (Holt, 1919, p. 203; Tart, 2009, pp.

266–267).

⁸ These examples cast Braude et al. (2022)'s acknowledgement that "belief in survival is easy when one ignores relevant detail" in a rather ironic light.

⁹ Though Braude et al. (2022) underscore the GP identifications "repeatedly cited as evidence of [Mrs. Piper's] paranormal abilities by a succession of commentators from Dr. Hodgson onwards" (Coleman, 1998, p. 372), M. H. Coleman points out that conventional explanations of such aspects of her mediumship are too often given short shrift by those who cite them: "[F]or anyone prepared to consider the material objectively, [consider] how much of Mrs. Piper's information could have been obtained from purely mundane sources. Thus it should be remembered that it was not until Professor Hyslop took over the investigation that conversational exchanges taking place in Mrs. Piper's presence were recorded; and even these records did not include significant pauses, changes in facial expression, etc., which convey a good deal of information in normal social intercourse. When these sources are supplemented by subconscious cues provided by her sitters, it is not surprising that she could provide them with personal information, most of it probably obtained by her acknowledged 'fishing'" (Coleman, 1998, p. 372). Others have elaborated on the role of dubious transcription in the GP sittings that so enamor Braude et al. (2022): "At the most important sitting, for example, that at which 'G.P.' made its first appearance (22nd March 1892), Hodgson concealed that he was not present for some 24 minutes, during the one-fourth of the sitting that included the unprecedented spelling of names of several absent friends and of Pellew" (Munves, 1997, p. 143). James Munves also points out that what counted in "identification" was questionable: "Hodgson did not explicitly list failure to recognize as a negative criterion. He did excuse the non-recognition of Sally Fairchild . . . on the grounds of her changed appearance, and of her mother . . . Other non-recognitions, however, were ignored: of Richard Welling, one of Pellew's closest Harvard friends, whom 'G.P.' had repeatedly asked to see. Two other recognitions were dubious: Arthur Carey, and Charles Perkins. 'G.P.' addressed neither by name; but Carey was hailed as 'Arthur' as Piper was coming out of the trance, after 'G.P.' had gone; and 'G.P.' wrote 'Opdyke' and an illegible name before coming up with Perkins, and did not communicate anything to him" (1997, p. 147).

¹⁰ I should make clear that my concern is not so much fraud among researchers as it is fraud performed by their subjects. Prior to their deaths, collusion between living mediums and deceased survival researchers cannot be fully ruled out as a source of potential positive results in post-mortem tests of survival, for example—though that pos-

sibility can be minimized if such results can be replicated across many different deceased survival researchers. But beyond simply acknowledging that it exists, the possibility that survival researchers *themselves* would be in on perpetrating such a hoax doesn't really concern me.

¹¹ If we are going by the legal standard requested by BICS, it's worth noting here that in the recent *Depp v. Heard* (2022) defamation trial in the state of Virginia, actress Amber Heard's therapist's notes, though recorded soon after claimed events, were deemed inadmissible because they consisted solely of unverified testimony, unlike her admissible medical records.

¹² Cf. Robert Almeder (1992, p. 249) and Nahm on the much lower "investigability of the most compelling aspects of mental mediumship" (2021*, p. 13) today since survival researchers cannot produce contemporary mediums willing or able to pull off comparably impressive performances.

¹³ These details are discussed in the literature cited in the "Where Have All the Deceased Survival Researchers Gone?" section of Augustine (2022).

¹⁴ This *bare possibility* is no more a positive reason to believe that *maybe psi was there after all* than is the fact that God *could have* foreseen some overriding good that might emerge in a billion years that would outweigh the evil of the Holocaust, leaving open the bare possibility that apparently gratuitous evil isn't necessarily actually gratuitous evil. Anything's *possible*, but that bare possibility does not change the fact that apparently gratuitous evil constitutes strong evidence against the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God (Draper, 1989, pp. 345–346). For one, we are *justified in tentatively presuming that such forces or entities do not exist until we are given a positive reason to think that they do*, period. More importantly, just as the bare possibility of greater overriding consequent goods is balanced out (or neutralized) by the equally bare possibility of even worse consequent evils, the bare possibility of counter-psi is balanced out (or neutralized) by the equally bare possibility of reinforcing psi doubling rather than neutralizing a *displayed psi* effect.

¹⁵ Making assumptions is a prerequisite for *any* empirical investigation, and the survival hypothesis predicts *nothing* unless it is bulked up with inherently unwarranted, untestable auxiliary assumptions. *In principle*, one cannot claim to have *evidence* favoring ostensible survival without assuming that discarnates have certain unverifiable characteristics. Given that there is no way to *check* whether discarnates have the features that we attribute to them, these assumptions must be *stipulated*, as they can never be *justified*. It's therefore perfectly reasonable to *play along with* empirical survivalists' assumptions and see where that leads empirically/predictively.

¹⁶ In this imaginable world, we could still have *neuroscientific* evidence for *the independence thesis* (the more basic prerequisite of discarnate personal survival): “if greater brain complexity had been found to yield lesser mental acuity, this would have falsified the dependence thesis and confirmed the filter theory. Less obviously, then, the [actual neuroscientific data in our world] constitute potential falsifiers of the dependence thesis that did not in fact falsify it (i.e., its confirmed predictions)” (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 281n33).

¹⁷ Ironically, in the same paragraph where Braude et. al accuse me of committing the same fallacies that I extracted *verbatim* from the BICS essays—which is itself an ***ad hominem tu quoque*** if there ever was one—they add: “Augustine seems to infer not simply that nothing psychic was happening during the tests of OBEs and NDEs, but more likely, given his broad skepticism about things paranormal, that nothing psychic *could* occur.” That’s an odd thing to say of tests that, as a contingent matter of fact, have *historically* failed to reveal any evidence of psi. Apart from an aversion to the principle of charity, what prompts this attribution—the fact that *other skeptics* have expressed this? (e.g., Alcock & Reber, 2019). The reason why “Augustine never clarifies this” is because it exists in their heads, not in my BICS critique.

¹⁸ Discarnate personal survival may well be nomically or even metaphysically impossible, of course, given the true nature of consciousness (whatever that turns out to be). But the issue here is *what we can know*, in the same sense that we can be said to know things about other scientific matters, about the relationship between our individual mental lives and our brain functioning *in light of the total relevant evidence*. Here we can only speak in probabilities, as with all scientific hypotheses. As far as we can ascertain, personal survival does not seem possible, *given the evidence*, without technological or miraculous intervention. But that conclusion is highly probable, not certain.

¹⁹ Even apart from what common sense implies, presumably the answer is “no.” Consider that Braude writes that survivalists’ “enlarged ontology . . . would ordinarily place the survivalist position at a theoretical disadvantage compared to ontologically more parsimonious rivals” (2021*, p. 5). Presumably what is “ordinarily” privileged here is not completely arbitrary, else Braude wouldn’t have made the point. Moreover, there are clear rationales that *justify* our reliance on various theoretical virtues: theories that make fewer assumptions have fewer ways to be in error (*parsimony*), theories that fit rather than conflict with background knowledge don’t require us to reject the large body of evidence grounding that knowledge (*plausibility*), theories that make

testable predictions can be *checked* (*testability*), theories supported by a wide *range* of independent sources are more *representative* of the *total evidence* (*scope*), and so on. If what’s “ordinarily” used for interpreting evidence isn’t warranted, then *any* uncontradicted assumptions could switch out the “privileged” ones when evidential arguments produce unwelcome conclusions. Steering clear of such dodgy reinterpretation is what I mean by *respecting the evidence*. Granted, we *technically* don’t have to respect parsimony—but neither do we have to respect the law of noncontradiction (Braude, 2020), and we won’t be able to conclude *anything* about the world without some guidelines or heuristics. What *should* be at issue for *empirical* survivalists is a *scientific* question: Can we make a case for (or against) discarnate personal survival *taking for granted the same working assumptions that are made in other successful sciences*? Otherwise, how do we ever *distinguish between* when our understanding “homes in on the most likely candidates” or “leads us astray”? (Braude, 2021*, p. 27n34).

²⁰ The term “theory” should be understood as a synonym for “hypothesis” throughout—as Braude et al. (2022) also use these terms—following the conventions of philosophers of science.

²¹ This formalization is adapted for ease of understanding from Velasquez (2017, pp. 268–269) as informed by Burbidge (1990, pp. 11–20).

²² Incidentally, since Cartesian dualist Richard Swinburne (1997) already independently made Charles Richet’s analogy in my critique, regurgitating Braude (2005) on the matter was superfluous.

²³ Also note how far-reaching the consequences of making such a maneuver would be for *all* science: “The move from independent operation to empirical evidence of such, or from interaction to detectable interactive traces, will always be an inferential leap, even if a small and uncontroversial one (at least in other cases of this kind). Thus, as a last resort it can always be called into question, for nothing is certain in probabilistic reasoning. But if we are barred from deriving such straightforward empirical consequences here, then evidently expecting *any* observational differences to emerge between our rival hypotheses is not permissible, and no facts can ever have a bearing on the likelihood that either of our rival theses are true” (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 245).

²⁴ Consider how Galileo confirmed the law of falling bodies (free fall) $d = (1/2)gt^2$ from various experiments with vertical drops (and inclined planes that allowed for easier measurement): “Galileo observed several falling metal balls as they dropped a hundred feet and found that each time they were moving at an accelerating rate” (Velasquez, 2017, p. 400). From such observations he conclud-

ed that objects fall at a constant/uniform acceleration. He *could have* unparsimoniously added that objects stop accelerating after 100 feet, or after 1000 feet, or what have you, since any of these alternative reads of his data were logically possible. But scientist that he was, he *did not*, because nothing in his *data* justified *adding* any such ad hoc limitations.

²⁵ This way of putting things approaches the issue from the perspective of what empirical survivalists *claim is true* about the mind–brain relation. But if we approached the issue from the perspective of what is *known to be true* about mind–brain correlations, the corollary would be: “Once we know *what* the brain does for the mind, we know by process of elimination what the soul *cannot* do for it, given the survivalist requirement that the soul has to be something independent from the brain in order to survive the brain’s death” (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 275; cf. Lakoff, 2003, p. 80).

²⁶ Braude et al. (2022) write that the idea “that memories and mental states generally are *in* the brain or in something else” is mistaken “because memories (and mental states generally) aren’t things or objects with distinct spatiotemporal coordinates.” Here they’ll get no argument from me. Are one’s savings in a particular pile of paper bills in a bank vault (or, once upon a time, in stacks of the gold bullion that used to back up paper money)? Or are they somewhere “in” a series of cloud servers? These are questions about stipulated human conventions like highway speed limits, not states of affairs. As my interlocutors note, the word *mind* can serve as a shorthand “for a class of mental events, just as ‘the weather’ is a general term for the class of meteorological events, and ‘the economy’ stands for a class of financial transactions.” So it’s beyond me why they accuse me of “reifying the mind” when they could have more charitably read me as using the very same terms that *they* use in the same manner that they use them—as shorthand. So, for the record: a memory is a specific instance of the act of remembering, which is more accurately characterized as a mental *process* or chain of mental *events* spread out over time (just as a particular movie theater projection is a physical process or chain of physical events). A “snapshot” of one’s overall mental condition at any particular time is a mental *state*. A mental *property* is a specific aspect of mental states (e.g., being experiential, or exhibiting intentionality). Technically speaking, on the dependence thesis memories are *realized* or *instantiated* by functioning brains, just as a particular implementation of software is realized or instantiated by some running hardware. One could eliminate such figurative language altogether by talking about the *necessary conditions* for possessing mental traits—as my definition

of the dependence thesis does—with the understanding that a “trait” is not a spatiotemporal object, either! The additional comment that “thinking of the mind as an entity—a piece of ontological furniture—surreptitiously tilts the discussion in favor of the anti-survivalist” is odd, too, since traditional Cartesian dualists tend to be the ones who reify minds as irreducible simple substances, and few dependence thesis proponents are Cartesians. In any case, neither survivalists nor mortalists *need* reify the mind, making the whole discussion a giant **red herring**.

²⁷ Contra my interlocutors, Karl Lashley’s futile search for localized memory engrams does not constitute evidence against the dependence thesis since one cannot either deductively or inductively *derive* the existence of localized engrams from the dependence thesis simpliciter. Their existence is thus *not* a prediction of the dependence thesis—at least when it has not been amended with additional auxiliary assumptions that might generate that prediction. Regardless of whether mental functions like memories can be neurologically destroyed (or suppressed) altogether, or merely neurologically degraded, either evidences their instantiation by functioning brains. This is clear because both functional disruptions are paralleled in the disruption of computational processes (running software) by damage to the underlying hardware that everyone grants instantiates running software. Indeed, we would *expect* mere degradation with hardware using parallel distributed processing (Parks et al., 1991). Science reporter Roger Lewin also notes the role of neuroplasticity when brains *are given time to recover* in such examples: “Gross surgical lesions in rat brains are known to inflict severe functional disruption, but if the same damage is done bit by bit over a long period of time, the dysfunction can be minimal. Just as the rat brains appear to cope with a stepwise reduction of available hardware, so too do the human brains in some cases of hydrocephalus” (1980, p. 1233). And however sound Braude (2006)’s critique of trace theories of memory, its “hardware-independent” upshot also makes the critique hardware-irrelevant, for if it suggested that functioning brains could not instantiate memories, then by parity of reasoning, astral bodies or nonphysical substances could not instantiate memories, either. Perhaps trace theories of memory *are* hopeless, but if so, there must nevertheless be *some* substrate-independent account of how memories are laid down, accessed, altered, degraded, and eliminated/suppressed as long as human minds *have* memories.

²⁸ The bluster that “Augustine’s critique could have been written in the 1950s and 60s” was a particularly nice touch for researchers leaning exclusively on Lashley’s neuroscientific research from the 1920s.

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