

EDITORIAL

One of the most valuable features of the early years of both the *Proceedings* and *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research was the frequent publication of intriguing (and often scrupulously investigated) anecdotal reports. Indeed, the enterprising early SPR researchers produced some mammoth reports based on such material, including its 400-page “Report on the Census of Hallucinations” (Society for Psychical Research 1894) and the monumental *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886).

The pioneers of psychical research were shrewd enough to realize that apparent spontaneous occurrences of ESP and PK, and phenomena suggestive of postmortem survival, could provide valuable clues as to the nature of psychic functioning, and that the collection and careful study of this material was an essential precursor to doing serious theoretical work in the area. Sadly, that lesson seems not to have entirely survived the gnawing tooth of time, as more and more would-be psi researchers, in a misguided attempt to appear conventionally scientific and curry favor with mainstream science, confined their activities and attention strictly to the laboratory, having little familiarity with or comprehension of the day-to-day apparent eruptions of phenomena that drove earlier researchers into the lab in the first place.

I mention this now because this issue of the *JSE* features a contribution by Russell Targ to the material suggestive of postmortem survival—two incidents pointing to the survival of his daughter Elisabeth. The two incidents are considerably more intriguing than most, and they highlight what is probably the most recalcitrant issue in the debate over survival—namely, the apparent standoff between the survivalist and living-agent psi (LAP) interpretations of the evidence.

Because *JSE* readership has a wide range of interests beyond topics in parapsychology, I hope psi veterans will indulge me if I review briefly, primarily for the benefit of others, just what the relevant issues are here.

We should observe first that the type of postmortem survival at issue is more interesting and personal than the scenario envisioned by some Eastern religions: a kind of merging with the infinite or being-in-general. That might count as a kind of *life after death*, but that form of continuance would obliterate whatever is distinctive about us. By contrast, *survival* of death is typically considered to preserve some kind of *identity* between an ante-mortem individual and a postmortem individual. That’s why those

who wonder about survival also wonder about such things as whether *they* will be able to meet up with their deceased relatives, communicate with the still-living members of their families, or enjoy a postmortem existence in which they simply get their hair back.¹ In general, they wonder whether *they* will continue to exist in some form or another after bodily death. And they wonder whether that future individual bears something like the same relationship to their present self that their present self bears to their physically and psychologically remote infant self. And it's why those who consult mediums or study reincarnation cases look for evidence that some deceased person's knowledge, traits, or skills continue to manifest.

Now as I'm sure all *JSE* readers are aware, there are many types of cases at least superficially suggesting postmortem survival. But for all of these there are non-survivalist explanatory options which any clear-headed appraisal of the evidence must consider seriously and which those favoring survivalist explanations must strive to rule out. The first wave of non-survivalist explanations would be in terms of what I've called the "Usual Suspects"—namely, malobservation, misreporting, hidden memories (cryptomnesia), and (of course) fraud (see Braude 2003, 2014). These can be easily ruled out in the most interesting survival cases, and so the debate over the evidence naturally turns to the next wave of non-survivalist explanations, in terms of what I called the "Unusual Suspects"—namely, rare or abnormal processes, such as a combination of dissociation and latent creative capacities, or exceptional (e.g., "photographic") memory, or something analogous to extreme or rare forms of savantism. Although these at least seem to be ruled out fairly easily in the strongest cases, some argue that they are more difficult to reject than many writers on survival have appreciated. Moreover, as I mention below, there are purely logical reasons why these Unusual Suspects may be difficult to dismiss.

But even when the Unusual Suspects seem unable to account normally for the evidence, a more intractable non-survivalist explanation remains—what most misleadingly call "super psi" but which Michael Sudduth more accurately dubbed "living-agent psi" (see Sudduth 2009, 2014, 2016). The reason why survivalists must take this seriously is easily illustrated in terms of a typical good case of mediumship. No matter how obscure the information provided by a medium, if that information can subsequently be verified normally, then in principle it can also be explained in terms of the medium's ESP. One of the earliest and most significant writers to take this issue seriously was E. R. Dodds (Dodds 1934). Similarly, in reincarnation cases one can appeal to ESP on the part of either the subject or relevant interested parties (such as family members), or to the paranormal influence they exert (presumably telepathic or psychokinetic).

Some survivalists reject these explanatory strategies because (they say) the LAP hypothesis posits psychic functioning of an implausible degree, and more than that for which we have evidence outside of survival cases (see, e.g., Almeder 1992, Fontana 2005, Lund 2009). However, others counter that survivalist line of argument by claiming that it's confused on two grounds: first, because there's no clear standard for evaluating the magnitude of psychic functioning, and second (and most important), because the argument overlooks a crucial (and ironic) logical entailment of the survivalist position—namely, that survivalists are committed to positing comparably impressive psi on the part of the deceased or the living, simply in order to explain how evidence suggesting survival was manifested in the first place.

For example, suppose a medium channels, without prompting and without normal access to the information, the message “Uncle Harry knows you're seriously thinking about quitting your job and becoming a circus clown.” Even for survivalists, some kind of ESP must be posited merely to explain how the medium knows what deceased Uncle Harry is thinking, and how deceased Uncle Harry knows what the sitter is thinking. In each case, those would be examples of direct mind-to-mind interaction—or, in other words, telepathy. Or suppose the medium reports, “Uncle Harry says he's glad you're wearing the necktie he gave you.” In this case, if the medium doesn't know normally who gifted the necktie, survivalists must posit psi involving deceased Uncle Harry to explain how he can be aware clairvoyantly of what the sitter is wearing, and how that information was exchanged telepathically between the medium and Uncle Harry.

We must also note one additional, and very important, introductory point concerning the logic of explanation. Survivalists often maintain that the LAP explanation of cases compares unfavorably to that of the survivalist. They usually support that claim by arguing that the survivalist explanation is simpler, or that it has greater explanatory power, or that it does a better job of predicting the data, than the living-agent psi alternative, or else that the LAP explanation of the data is indefensibly ad hoc. But Sudduth (2016) has noted that this type of comparison of the LAP and survivalist hypotheses seems plausible only in virtue of a kind of logical sleight of hand. As noted above, survivalists typically claim that the survival hypothesis explains (or predicts) various strands of evidence. But such explanation or prediction is possible only if one makes a number of *auxiliary assumptions* about the nature and character of the afterlife. For example, in cases of mediumship we find that communications are often trite, confused, or have a dreamy quality, and that at other times they seem quite clear and coherent. We also find that only some deceased people seem to communicate, and then only

for a short time. Why is that, and how do survivalists account for it (and the many other observed features of mediumship)?

On this issue, the literature on survival is too often discouragingly shabby. The problem is this. In order to explain both why the evidence from mediumship has the features we find and why it lacks certain others is to make numerous, *independently unverified* assumptions about (say) whether deceased persons would want to, or be able to, communicate with the living, the means by which that communication is achieved, and whether that communication is difficult or easy (e.g., whether there's "noise" in the "channel"). By contrast, a *simple* survival hypothesis—that is, a mere assertion that consciousness or personality can survive, *in the absence of further assumptions specifying conditions allowing the evidence to take the forms noted in the literature*—can make no specific (much less fine-grained) predictions at all about what the data of survival should actually look like. The same is true, obviously, about the living-agent psi hypothesis, which, in its more robust and sophisticated forms, makes numerous assumptions about (say) dissociative creativity, and the needs and interests of the living, in order to explain why the evidence has certain characteristics rather than others.

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

Now that's not an easy task, and a shoot-out between competing sets of auxiliary assumptions is likely to lead nowhere, at least not conclusively. That's why many feel that a slam-dunk *actual* (as opposed to theoretically ideal) case of survival will leave the survival vs. LAP debate at a standoff (but see Braude [2003, 2005] for a discussion of the significance of ideal cases). Nevertheless, good actual cases (like those described by Targ) still provide the raw material for getting clear on what kinds of auxiliary assumptions are needed (on either side of the debate) to accommodate the data.

So it may well turn out, especially in the absence of anything seriously approaching the ideal cases we can imagine, that our conviction (or

lack thereof) about the prospects of survival will rest on how personally compelling we find the evidence before us. An honest appraisal of the best cases requires that we be clear what we're assuming to be the case for the evidence to have taken the form(s) that it does, and how those assumptions fare against the most reasonable contrary assumptions of others. At that point, it may be that the best we can do is to make an educated guess. Indeed, I'd go so far as to say that those who think we have air-tight scientific grounds for believing in postmortem survival are simply flaunting their ignorance. Still, we can have *defensible* grounds for believing many things which don't admit of compelling scientific demonstration, and survival may simply turn out to be one of them. My book *Immortal Remains* documents in gory detail why a careful survey of the evidence and relevant conceptual issues makes it difficult to reach a confident decision on the matter.² Nevertheless, I concluded that book by asserting that the scales seemed to tilt in favor of survival. Now although my views don't change as frequently as Bertrand Russell's did, that was 14 years ago. So, for the record: As of today at least (I still sometimes waver, I'm embarrassed to say), this chronologically challenged Editor continues to stand tentatively on the side of the survivalist.

Notes

- ¹ Many years ago the famous medium and healer, Olga Worrall, told me she saw my deceased maternal grandfather standing behind me, and she described him as having a beard. I told Olga that my grandfather never had a beard, and Olga replied, "He does now; he can have a beard if he wants."
- ² Sudduth (2016) should also be required reading.

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