



COMMENTARY

How Not To Do Survival Research: Reflections on the Bigelow Institute Essay Competition

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HIGHLIGHTS

An evaluation of essays offering the best evidence for “life after death” finds that the winning entries not only conflicted with well-established biomedical knowledge, but were inconsistent with each other.

ABSTRACT

The recent Bigelow Institute contest rewarding the “best” evidence for life after death epitomizes much of what’s wrong with the current state of survival research, its participants constituting a who’s who list of contemporary survival researchers. Cases that are regularly hyped as among the best evidence for an afterlife are all too often easily susceptible to normal explanations—if only survival researchers would give them a chance. The consistently negative results of 121 years of experimental survival research ought to have spurred soul-searching questions for survival researchers by now. And if we treat discarnate personal survival as a scientific hypothesis, then researchers are rationally obliged to seriously consider biological facts that tell against it, too. Limiting one’s inquiry to attempts to only collect data that might confirm survival is one of the chief hallmarks of pseudoscience, and it’s sadly a feature, not a bug, of the survival literature. This systematic review reveals that survival researchers would better serve science by setting aside their feelings and heeding what the data are telling them, for the probabilities should drive our beliefs, not the other way around. Is discarnate personal survival likely to occur in light of the total available evidence? The overall evidence doesn’t even make personal survival more probable than not.

KEYWORDS

Mind–body problem; neuroscience; psychical research; tests of survival; total evidence requirement

Note: Citations from the BICS prize-winning essays have asterisks after the year (2021*).

Note: The author declares no financial interest in the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies monetary prizes.

Note: Informal logical fallacy names have been bolded.



INTRODUCTION

This journal's former Editor-in-Chief has already commented on the shoddy state of survival research (Braude, 2021a), but as a sympathetic friend his criticisms have been relatively lightweight. From the perspective of an outsider, he goes easy on fellow survival researchers, pulling his punches. I have no such compunction. In what follows, I will call out bad behavior and—more importantly—poor reasoning when survival researchers engage in it.

The recent essay contest funded by the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies (BICS) epitomizes much of what's wrong with the current state of survival research, its participants constituting a who's who list of contemporary survival researchers. Long gone are the days of C. D. Broad, E. R. Dodds, or Gardner Murphy. Though these eminent contributors to the field have had a few comparable successors, it's a pity that they are so few and far between compared to the early decades of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR).

On or about January 21, 2021, BICS announced that it was accepting submissions on the question: "What is the best available evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death?" (Rules & Regulations, 2021, §3). Entrants had until February 28 to apply to be eligible to receive substantial monetary prizes (from \$500,000 for first place to \$20,000 for last), at which point they would be notified if they had been cleared to compete. Submissions were due by August 1, and 29 winning essays were announced on November 24. BICS's six judges were slated to read and evaluate 204 submissions of up to 25,000 words (~50 single-spaced pages) each, excluding references, and then collaborate on how to rank the winning essays. Going by the upper length limit (with no lower limit) and the earliest possible date to apply to be considered (January 26), that tasked the six judges to read, evaluate, and collaborate on potentially as many as ~10,000 pages of text in at most just under 10 months, at a potential rate of 1000 pages per month, or ~33 pages per day, every day.

Of course, most eligible essays would likely be submitted much later than the earliest possible application date, and many would not come near the upper length limit. Nevertheless, this breakdown does raise the question of whether the six judges had enough time to really *evaluate* the submissions that they received. A more pointed question concerns the *aim* of the competition itself. If BICS wanted an *objective* assessment of the state of the survival evidence, why not instead commission an evidence review (not an essay contest) by *independent* judges, such as those in the biomedical field who have *not* published in the survival literature, to avoid potential conflicts of interest?

But these questions are neither here nor there, as I will comment on the content of eight select essays of the 29 winners in order to produce a manageable critique. These include the top three prize-winning essays by Jeffrey Mishlove, Pim van Lommel, and Leo Ruickbie; the two essays by survival researchers who have sought hard *experimental* evidence of personal survival, Julie Beischel and Sam Parnia (with Tara Keshavarz Shirazi); the essay by Arnaud Delorme, Dean Radin, and Helané Wahbeh (hereafter DRW) because they are seasoned experimentalists who propose future studies that could meet this standard of evidence, and because they systematically review the field as a whole; the essay by Michael Nahm because, in addition to evaluating the survival evidence, he addresses the most substantial challenges to personal survival published in recent years (though space precludes me from addressing the latter); and the essay by Stephen Braude, then editor of this journal, because of his command of how to *evaluate* evidence in addition to his knowledge of the survival evidence itself.

IN SCIENCE THE QUALITY OF THE EVIDENCE IS PARAMOUNT

Set aside (for the moment) that **cherry-picking** evidence that might favor discarnate personal survival, while ignoring or cursorily dismissing any evidence against it, is inexcusable. Even in inviting only potentially favorable evidence, BICS contest requirements were conflicting. In one breath entrants were informed that "We are seeking hard evidence 'beyond a reasonable doubt'" (About BICS, 2021), while in the next they are told that sufficient evidence "includes a combination of a wide variety of forms; scientific, experiential, witnessed, repeatable, anecdotal and otherwise persuasive far beyond rules of traditional evidence-based hypothesis tested research paradigms" (Rules & Regulations, 2021, §7). Elsewhere, entrants were told that "BICS will accept evidence and eyewitness testimony supporting the legal requirement that establishes proof beyond a reasonable doubt" (Rules & Regulations, 2021, §9), but then a wide net was cast: "BICS envisions the essays['] focus to be on scientific evidence as well as objective and subjective supported documentation" such as "special cases, including older cases, from very credible witnesses," "photographic or electronic data," "all available literature," "highly validated and authenticated human experiences," and "other relevant sources" (whatever that means) (About BICS, 2021). The quality of the evidence on offer appears less important to BICS than ensuring that the evidence provided ostensibly favors discarnate personal survival, whatever its quality.

The conflicting messages are reflected in the win-

ning submissions themselves. Nahm's entry emphasizes that "In court, a striking agreement of more than 30 eyewitnesses would carry enormous weight" (2021*, p. 19), though one wonders, "agreement about *what?*" Are different witnesses asked about the same events? Or are they just asked to give testimony, leaving it to investigators to then tie together claims made by different witnesses into a common theme? Did investigators ask leading questions, or open-ended ones? Do different witnesses corroborate each other, or do they provide testimony whose differences investigators gloss over to fit a coherent narrative? Are the different testimonies truly independent of each other, or were they intermingled or informed by a common third source? And so on.

Nahm later writes that impartial judges "would take eyewitness testimonies just as seriously as they would do in other contexts" (2021*, p. 66). While Elizabeth Loftus's (1979) seminal research into the reliability of eyewitness testimony provides all sorts of reasons to hesitate to rely upon it so heavily (as survival research typically does), what DRW say about it in their prize-winning essay is more than sufficient:

eyewitness testimony would not convince those who also take into consideration the relevant literature from the neurosciences, clinical, cognitive, and perceptual psychology, and court cases. Research in those disciplines has shown that eyewitness testimony is not as reliable as one might hope because perceptions and memories are easily distorted. (2021*, p. 3)

They cite the Innocence Project, writing:

Of 375 wrongful convictions they investigated, an alarming 69% were due to mistakes in eyewitness testimony. Cumulatively, those innocent people served 5,284 years in prison. In 21 cases, the accused was sentenced to death before being exonerated by DNA evidence, and in at least one case, the accused was executed before DNA evidence proved his innocence. Thus, when it comes to matters of life and death, which arguably includes the question of survival, reliance on eyewitness testimony is both legally and scientifically questionable. Ultimately, we know that eyewitness testimony is not persuasive for many because agnosticism about survival persists despite an abundance of eyewitness reports. (DRW, 2021*, p. 3)

So, although Nahm concludes that "the available evidence for survival of human consciousness after perma-

nent bodily death clearly matches the standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt" (2021*, p. 66), survival agnostics might well note that there's an abundance of eyewitness reports for the existence of the Loch Ness Monster, too, that they find just as unconvincing. For all the talk about courtroom standards of evidence, empirical survivalists have habitually engaged in a hitherto-unacknowledged *evidential* sleight of hand by demanding that the "defense" (survival skeptics) produce their own counterevidence to offset the "prosecution's" (survival proponents') weaker testimonial evidence for personal survival, all the while seeking to rule as inadmissible the defense's much stronger "DNA evidence"—the chiefly neuroscientific evidence that our mental lives cannot be sustained absent a functioning brain. (I will return to this point later.)

Prospective Experimental Tests of Survival

DRW "anonymously surveyed 422 academic scientists and scholars from major universities in the United States" (2021*, p. 26) about ten proposed survival experiments "to see which of those studies, if successful, they would find most persuasive" (2021*, p. 1). This is exactly the sort of controlled experimental research that survival researchers ought to be doing, in the spirit of previously attempted "tests of survival" (or of mind-body separation). Now the only thing that's left to do is actually *perform* these experiments. Despite the logical possibility of living-agent-psi (LAP) interpretations (or other nonsurvivalist paranormal interpretations), most "academic scientists and scholars" would surely be satisfied with, say, replicable positive results from Parnia's AWARE II study. Indeed, DRW go on to note that "The most frequently selected study was a controlled, prospective experiment that would result in veridical out-of-body perceptions during a near-death experience, followed by experiments involving mediumship and reincarnation" (2021*, p. 1).

It's significant that DRW's survival-agnostic¹ academics' most selected experiments have *already been done* and failed to produce the desired results. The actual outcome of several decades of such experiments (over a century's worth for mental mediumship) "continues to frustrate researchers" (Holden, 2009, p. 210) and ought to have spurred soul-searching questions for survival researchers by now. In response to a chapter invitation on historical mental mediumship research, logician Roy Sorensen wittily wrote to me:

Thanks for your invitation! I do not have anything to offer. But you should invite Henry Sidgwick to contribute. He pursued psychical research and saw his death as an opportunity for further

research. To forestall fraud, he arranged codes with his executors. I believe some mediums claimed to be channeling the great philosopher. But none got through the security arrangements. Sidgwick's failure to reply to invitation would be of more evidential significance than mine! (personal communication, April 22, 2012)

Negative outcomes are only frustrating if you want the experiments to come out a certain way. In lieu of remaining frustrated by failing to get the data that you were hoping for (as many pharmaceutical company CEOs surely have been at times), survival researchers would better serve *science* by setting aside their feelings and heeding what the *data* are telling them. One possibility stands out among the rest for its sheer simplicity: perhaps out-of-body experience (OBE) adepts and near-death experiencers (NDEs) cannot describe remote visual targets under controlled conditions because nothing leaves the body during OBEs or NDEs that could perceive them.²

Scientifically, a pharmaceutical company cannot loosen its testing conditions (e.g., by relaxing the blinding of participants during a trial, or by settling for anecdotal evidence instead) until its favored drug produces the results that it had hoped for. Rather, it is expected to *test a different drug*. So, too, empirical survivalists should test another hypothesis when all of the experiments that they have attempted to confirm discarnate personal survival have failed. While some survivalists (e.g., digitalists or "resurrectionists") can abide such outcomes, the failure of such simple tests of survival is incredibly problematic for *empirical survivalists*,³ such as those who herald mental mediumship as providing the best evidence available for personal survival—"no other body of evidence comes close" (Braude, 2021b*, p. 29)—unless we are simply talking about the best of a bad lot (van Fraassen, 1989, p. 143).

Where Have All the Deceased Survival Researchers Gone?

The closest thing to scientific "proof" of an afterlife was pursued over 100 years ago and has continued since, as much survival research involves doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The conclusion of the most recent write-up of a postmortem test of survival speaks for itself:

Eight people made attempts to [psychically] read the [audio] tape in 1996, during his lifetime, but none was judged by Charles to be successful. He died on 29 August 2005, aged 91. Since then, 35 psychic sensitives from all over the world have

taken up Charles's challenge and have been in touch with us . . . Sadly, none of the attempts came anywhere near this wording [of an audio-taped poem], or of the images it conveys . . . We are grateful to Charles for initiating this experiment, and to the many people who have collaborated in it; but it cannot be judged to have been a success. Perhaps Charles lost interest? Perhaps he was unable to "get through?" Perhaps none of the sensitives were in tune with him? Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. (Perry & Fontana, 2009, pp. 11–12)

This is just one of countless attempted direct tests of survival (or of mind–body separation), many of which haven't been written up. And although the outcome of this recent experiment was written up, to my knowledge this essay constitutes the first time that its write-up has been so much as *cited* in any psychical research journal in the 13 years since its publication.

So experimental designs to test survival are nothing new (cf. Carrington, 1957, pp. 131–133; Levin, 1994; Quid & Dallas, 1920, pp. 278–283). A partial list of deceased "participants" in such tests, most of whom were survival researchers in life, includes:

- Frederic W. H. Myers d. 1901 ("no resemblance" found between suggestion and note)
- Richard Hodgson d. 1905 (all attempts to get invented word "stabledelta" were misses)
- Harry Houdini d. 1926 (wife & medium already knew code: "Rosabelle believe")
- Thomas Edison d. 1931 (conveyed name of his hometown wasn't any of ten code words)
- Oliver Lodge d. 1940 (piano notes CEGEDFEDCEGEDEC)
- Grandmother of Judith Skutch Whitson d. 1971
- T. E. Wood d. 1971
- J. Gaither Pratt d. 1979
- Clarissa Mulders d. 1982
- Robert H. Thouless d. 1984
- Arnold Barber d. 1989
- Susy Smith d. 2001
- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross d. 2004
- Charles Fryer d. 2005
- Frank C. Tribbe d. 2006
- Ian Stevenson d. 2007
- Arthur S. Berger d. 2016

(Anonymous, 1989; Bauer, 2017, pp. 316–317; Berger, 1988, p. 106; Berger & Berger, 1995, p. 141; Cohen & Skutch, 1985, pp. 47–50; Dunninger, 1935, pp. 69–79; Fox, 2007; Gay et al., 1955; Lodge, 1905; O'Shea, 2018; Price, 1975, p.



25; Roach, 2005, pp. 163–164; Schwartz & Russek, 2001, p. 82; Smith, 2000, p. 236; Stevenson et al., 1989, pp. 330–331; Tribbe, 1980; Verrall, 1906, p. 252)

While some mediums were asked to describe the contents of sealed envelopes or provide auditory information, most direct tests of survival involve asking living persons to posthumously reveal to a medium key words, phrases, or mnemonic devices, ostensibly unknown to any living person, that would decipher encrypted messages or open user-set combination locks (leaving it to living researchers to transpose key words into numbers). About 24 combination lock tests (some included in the list above) are in the possession of the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies (Greyson, 2009). Berger reported having the encrypted messages of “a hundred or so participants” nearly 40 years ago (Cohen, 1984, p. 94). On Smith’s defunct Afterlife Codes website, cryptologist Craig P. Bauer reports: “[T]he fate of the messages enciphered through it is uncertain. It is known that there were about 1,000 people registered” (2017, p. 345). Two decades ago, Smith herself wrote: “There are vast numbers of people registering their secret messages with us. Surely codes will begin to be broken” (2000, p. 214). After 121 years of such simple tests, only undeniably fraudulent mediums (Spraggett & Rauscher, 1973) or cryptologists (Bean, 2020; Gillogly & Harnisch, 1996) have ever been able to solve them. Perhaps the “telephone to the dead” under development by Beischel’s mentor (Gary Schwartz) will function better than *Theranos*’s Edison device—but I’m not holding my breath (SoulPhone Foundation, 2020).

Moreover, experiments to detect OBEs’ “astral bodies” (Alvarado, 1982b; Blackmore, 1982/1992, pp. 213–224; Irwin, 1985, pp. 232–235; Stokes, 1997, pp. 46–47) or have them identify visual targets (Alvarado, 1982a; Blackmore, 1982/1992, pp. 189–199; Irwin, 1985, pp. 235–236; Stokes, 1997, pp. 46–47) were systematically conducted from the late 1960s to early 1980s without proffering convincing evidence of either. There have also been some half a dozen target identification experiments during out-of-body NDEs since (Beauregard et al., 2012; Greyson et al., 2006; Holden & Joesten, 1990; Lawrence, 1997, pp. 158–159; Parnia et al., 2001; Parnia et al., 2014; Sartori, 2004). As with cipher and combination lock tests of mental mediumship, history repeated itself in the hype ahead of the *results* of the AWARE study (Parnia et al., 2014). Despite dubious *anecdotal* claims of successes (Abbott, 1908, p. 32; Burkhardt, 1921; Greaves, 1967; Myers, 1903, pp. 182–185; Rivas et al., 2016, pp. 29–55; Salter, 1958; Stevenson, 1976, p. 219; Underhill, 1885, p. 435), collectively there have been quite a large number of attempts to demonstrate discarnate personal survival and/or mind–body separation using a variety of

controlled experimental designs over a long stretch of time, and yet their outcomes have been underwhelming.

This raises an obvious question: If communication with the dead occurs, as the vast majority of empirical survivalists evidently believe, then why have we heard *nothing* from any of these deceased psychological researchers, many of whom were dedicated to providing “proof” of discarnate personal survival during life? Why can’t a single one of them “authenticate” their continuation (or come as close to that as possible) by providing their “passwords” to a medium (or as an ostensibly reincarnated child—à la Berger, 1991—or via EVP/ITC, for that matter)?

In her prize-winning BICS essay, Beischel does not mention such tests directly, but does seem to try to preempt questions about them, writing:

During any research reading, we need to ensure that we only ask the mediums to report the types of information they usually report. Since this does not include winning lottery numbers, combinations to locks, or what color shirt the sitter should wear tomorrow, I didn’t ask for any of those things in my experiments. Additionally, although in your physical life you are regularly known by your personally-identifiable information (PII), like your name, date of birth, social security number, address, and phone number, these are not the types of information mediums are regularly observed reporting, so I didn’t ask for those during research. (Beischel, 2021*, p. 23)

This is disingenuous. Postmortem tests of survival never concern requests of the deceased for winning lottery numbers, *numerical* combinations, or fashion advice. Rather, they concern requests for simple information akin to the last name of a deceased person purportedly haunting a location. More to the point, the fact that mediums do not provide such information is not a *reason* why they do not provide it (or cannot provide it). Elsewhere, Beischel *has* speculated about such reasons: maybe “the combination to the lock holds no interest or has been forgotten. Perhaps not all types of stored memories are retained after death. Maybe the medium’s consciousness filters out information for which she does not have a personal reference” (2007, p. 62). Countless possibilities are *imaginable* here, but surely the most parsimonious explanation is that the deceased simply have not survived as conscious individuals who could convey the keys.

Moreover, if we can telepathically/clairvoyantly retrieve information—whether from the living, the dead, or the inanimate—why have such tests bore so little fruit? Their failure gives the scientific community good reason

to doubt the existence of extrasensory perception (ESP) of any sort akin to why many scientists doubt the existence of psychokinesis (PK): if it's real, why can't anyone demonstrably move an object for any distance behind sealed glass? If seers can provide accurate specifics about future events that defy chance, then why have premonition registries (Ruickbie, 2021*, pp. 48–51), which securely document precognitive claims *before* prophesied events, produced hits less than 1% of the time (Shadowitz & Walsh, 1976, pp. 116–117), if at all? (West, 1948a, p. 268). The question is particularly pointed today, when just about anyone can preregister predictions online to validate their timing through chain of custody safeguarding or distributed blockchain records. As the late magician Christopher Milbourne points out: “Many brilliant men have investigated the paranormal but they have yet to find a single person who can, without trickery, send or receive even a three-letter word under test conditions” (1970, p. 37). Berger himself wrote:

Those who urge these theories must explain why there have been no successes by psychics not only to discover the Thouless keys but also the secret keys of other people who set locks, such as Pratt, or enciphered messages, such as that of the deceased Clarissa Mulders of the SRF [Survival Research Foundation]. Or, for that matter, the living Susy Smith, also of the SRF, who has issued challenges [to ‘read her mind’ while she’s still alive] in this country and abroad, so far not met, to anyone to try to get the secret keys she used to encipher her messages. As cogent explanations have not been offered, the lengthy and growing list of failures diminishes the ‘Super-ESP’ and other hypotheses. (1996, pp. 48–49)

“Other hypotheses” include interpretations of replicable positive results in terms of telepathy solely among living agents (whether “super” or not), their paranormal access to psychic reservoirs or place memories, demonic/interdimensional/extraterrestrial influences (e.g., Hales, 2001, pp. 342–344), and, of course, discarnate personal survival. Put differently, the perpetual failure of direct tests of survival would seem to indicate that neither LAP nor “otherworldly psi” (Stoerber, 1996, pp. 1–2) exist.

WHAT DOES THE TOTAL AVAILABLE RELEVANT EVIDENCE TELL US?

When assessing the prospects for discarnate personal survival, failing to countenance the evidence favoring the dependence of consciousness on the brain commits the **cherry-picking fallacy**, which one may define (ironi-

cally following E. F. Kelly) as “preventing accumulation of evidence favoring any opinion one happens not to like” (2016, p. 593). There is a great deal of data from neuroscience, behavioral genetics, and evolutionary psychology, among other places, that constitutes much stronger evidence against discarnate personal survival than the parapsychological evidence offered in its favor. Ignoring such counterevidence, or waving it away by reinterpreting it so that it never counts in one’s evaluation, is the true “a priori dismissal” (Tart, 2007, p. 251) here—and hardly constitutes a *scientific* approach. Nothing about requiring psychological researchers to consider the *totality* of the evidence, not just the particular evidential corner that interests them, involves maintaining that survival is “‘impossible’ in an aprioristic way” (Nahm, 2021*, p. 4). Well-supported beliefs must be proportioned to *all* of the available relevant evidence, giving more weight to stronger sources of evidence when different sources conflict.

Those survival researchers who address “empirically-grounded indicators of extinction” (Lund, 2009, p. 24) rarely challenge the *reliability* of such evidence, so I will limit my comments to their attempts to reinterpret it away. It’s easy to show that the chiefly neuroscientific data constitutes *evidence* against discarnate personal survival (and strong evidence at that). Imagine two mail bins, one labeled “outgoing mail” and the other labeled “incoming mail.” Relabel them “individual consciousness requires brain functioning” and “individual consciousness does not require brain functioning.” Concisely state on paper strips some *representative*,⁴ agreed-upon facts that scientists have discovered about the mind’s link to the brain, such as:

- Minds mature as brains mature
- Childhood mental development halts when childhood brain development halts
- Minds degenerate when brains degenerate (due to old age or traumatic brain injury)
- Creatures with simple brains have simple minds
- Creatures with complex brains have complex minds
- Sickening/injuring the brain sickens/injures the mind
- Mental dispositions can be inherited from one’s parents
- Mental desires can be induced or eliminated by brain stimulation
- Mental disorders can be cured by altering brain chemistry with drugs
- Mental disorders can be brought on by altering brain chemistry with drugs

Now task everyday persons (undergraduates, perhaps)

to complete the following exercise. Take each paper strip (datum) and place it a bin (hypothesis). Each strip has to be placed in one or the other bin, not both or neither, as *prima facie* the evidence at hand is relevant to *which* of the two is true. There are no additional bins (hypotheses) because the proposition “either a functioning brain is required for this, or one is not” is a tautology (i.e., is necessarily true so long as individual consciousnesses and functioning brains exist), and the truth of one of those disjuncts entails the falsity of the other. Finally, assume that organisms’ minds operate uniformly (in the same general way) across individuals. Given these stipulations, if ordinary people *had* to pick one or the other bin, in which bin would these representative, agreed-upon facts be placed, nine times out of ten? That is, under which of the two hypotheses (required, or not required) would the listed facts be *more expected*?

Putting the question this way countenances the trivial point that one can always contort any hypothesis to fit any facts, just as one can hammer at a square peg to force it into a round hole. The key to assessing degree of evidential support is to start with what the most basic version of each hypothesis predicts. What do their *simpliciter* versions—the hypotheses unamended with auxiliary assumptions, or at most only amended with agreed-upon/confirmed auxiliaries—lead us to expect?⁵

Consider one of the symptoms of long COVID: “brain fog.” Why should the mental processes of an independent mind, one capable of functioning after death at least as well it did during the pinnacle of life, be vulnerable to something as clearly biological as a viral infection? Such biological vulnerability makes sense if mental activity is realized by underlying biological processes in the brain. But it makes little sense otherwise. Or consider Curt Ducasse’s proposal that mental capacity (or the need for it) causes brain complexity, rather than the other way around:

[T]he parallelism between the degree of development of the nervous systems of various animals and the degree of their intelligence . . . is alleged to prove that the latter is the product of the former. But the facts *lend themselves equally well* to the supposition that, on the contrary, or at least in equal measure, an obscurely felt need for greater intelligence in the circumstances the animal faced brought about the variations which eventually resulted in a more adequate nervous organization. [emphasis mine] (1951, pp. 456–457)

The idea that a line of giraffes could “strive” to reach higher tree tops for their leaves, subconsciously “willing” a change in their descendants’ genotype to allow them to

develop longer necks, has long been discredited. Variation in a population of organisms—some giraffes have longer necks, others have shorter ones—is more than sufficient to account for evolutionary change without postulating Lamarckian “striving” or Ducasse’s “obscurely felt need”: if longer necks increase fitness, then longer-necked giraffes will tend to live long enough to reproduce and pass on their genes more often than shorter-necked giraffes, leading to an increase in neck length over the generations. If the data of evolutionary biology do not “lend themselves equally well” to classical Lamarckism as they do to Darwinian natural selection, how does the comparable idea that a pre-existing mind mysteriously “strives” to become more intelligent, and an animal’s neural architecture responds to this yearning, fare any better? Is the biological consensus in either case mere prejudice, or is it justified?

The idea that minds could unwittingly impel a considerable degree of neural development is certainly less credible than the idea that greater neural resources simply enable greater mental proficiency. On the face of it, it certainly *seems*—to an awful lot of people—like brain development is the engine pulling the train. After all, no one believes that the significantly developmentally delayed will ever be able to simply “concentrate” or “meditate” themselves out of mental retardation, but modifying their neural architecture directly would be promising if only we knew enough to be able to produce intended improvements without producing disastrous unintended consequences (as lobotomies once did). For, although we can do both to some degree, we can affect a person’s mind much more *profoundly* by manipulating his brain chemistry than we can affect that person’s brain chemistry by manipulating his mind.⁶ This *empirical* discovery is what warrants taking the brain to be primary and the mind secondary, regardless of one’s preferred mind–body theory. To all appearances, significant mental development tracks significant brain development, not the other way around.

It’s thus unwise to **jump on the** empirical survivalist **bandwagon** and declare of the dependence of consciousness on the brain: “Its widespread acceptance in Western cultures is merely socioculturally conditioned” (Nahm, 2021*, p. 66). Its *discovery* is no more Western imperialism than is the replacement of the ancient demonic theory of disease with the germ theory. It’s simply scientific progress. Accepting it as highly probable requires no “prior—and even cherished—antisurvivalist metaphysical commitments” (Braude, 2021b*, p. 51), or “materialist dogma” (van Lommel, 2021*, p. 17), *at all*. To say that dependence thesis proponents “regard survival ‘impossible’ in an aprioristic way” (Nahm, 2021*, p. 66) merely attacks a **straw man**, probably because it is easier to defeat a caricature than their actual arguments.⁷

Neuroscientist Sam Harris eloquently argues:

Science is not in principle committed to the idea that there's no afterlife, or that the mind is identical to the brain, or that materialism is true. Science is completely open to whatever in fact is true, and if it's true that consciousness . . . can be dissociated from the brain at death, that would be part of our growing scientific understanding of the world, if we could discover it. And there are ways that we could in fact discover that, if it were true.

The problem is there are very good reasons to think it's not true. And we know this from 150 years of neurology where you damage areas of the brain and faculties are lost, and they're clearly lost, it's not that everyone with brain damage has their soul perfectly intact [and] they just can't get the words out, everything about your mind can be damaged by damaging the brain. You can cease to recognize faces, you can cease to know the names of animals but you still know the names of tools . . . I mean the fragmentation in the way in which our mind is parcellated on that level of the brain is not at all intuitive, and there's a lot known about it. And what we're being asked to consider is that you damage one part of the brain and . . . something about the mind and subjectivity is lost, you damage another and yet more is lost, and yet if you damage the whole thing at death, we can rise off the brain with all our faculties intact, recognizing grandma and speaking English. (Harris, 2011, 1:10:39–1:12:18)

Here philosopher of mind Colin McGinn poses a fair question: "Why does brain damage obliterate mental faculties if minds do not owe their existence to brains?" (1999, p. 27). For a less direct, but no less relevant kind of evidence, consider my paraphrase of philosopher Mathew Iredale's upshot: "The greatly enhanced mental powers of human beings, compared to those of our primate cousins, are a clear result of the enlarged brains that we possess but that they do not. But then how could human minds retain their impressive mental faculties in the complete absence of brain functioning after death?" (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 232). Even former SPR President C. D. Broad acknowledged that tight mind-brain correlations

strongly [suggest] that minds depend for their existence on bodies; in which case, though survival may still be abstractly possible, it is to the last degree unlikely. At death there takes place

completely and permanently a process of bodily destruction which, when it occurs partially and temporarily, carries with it the destruction of part of our mental life. The inference seems only too obvious. (1925, p. 533)

Was Broad mistaken that the *empirical* conclusions of Harris and others are "only too obvious"? If so, *why* was he mistaken? The *actual* arguments of dependence thesis proponents are much more powerful than empirical survivalists typically let on. Even some of their own have acknowledged as much:

A homunculus residing in a separate mental world, and able to survive the death and destruction of the brain, would, presumably, not be itself impaired by the brain damage: *its* mental universe would be left essentially intact. The damaged brain would be unable to respond as fully to the action of the homunculus upon it, and this impairment would result in problems in communication, and control, and in the reciprocal action of sensing. But the representation of the afflicted part would not disappear from the patient's mental universe itself, as is suggested by the evidence: the patient should not be *puzzled* to discover that there is a left arm connected to his body; the patient should "know" that he has his left arm, even though he has recently been deprived by brain damage of the ability to directly sense or control it. (Stapp, 2009, p. 139)

In this very journal, in fact, developmental biologist Michael Levin pointed out that facile analogies with television sets (e.g., Sheldrake, 1991, p. 117) don't even begin to do justice to the *actual* evidence that neuroscience has uncovered about the mind's relationship to the brain: "If, when one pulls out a certain transistor, the TV show does not stop but rather shows the protagonist start to walk on his hands for the rest of the program, one starts to suspect that some important aspect of the fundamental information content was indeed directly related to the hardware that was removed" (Levin, 2005, p. 634). Appeals to casual soundbites like "correlation is not causation" are not serious responses to this evidence (e.g., Grossman, 2008, pp. 231–232), and distinctions between "functional dependence" and "existential dependence" (e.g., Carter, 2010, pp. 20–21) make no difference since both rule out *discarnate* personal survival (Swinburne, 1997, p. 310).

The irony of Nahm's statements on the matter should not be lost on us. In one breath he quotes former SPR President Hans Driesch, who represented the last gasp of vital-

ism in biology, that we “must look for exceptions, because exceptions are the best means for avoiding dogmatism” (2021*, p. 64). In another breath, he regurgitates the Jamesian argument “that it is *principally impossible* to prove that brain chemistry produces consciousness” given that “all we can observe are ‘concomitant variations’ of brain states and states of consciousness” [emphasis mine] (2021*, p. 3). The fact of the matter is that such concomitant variations *are* evidence, no matter how staunchly empirical survivalists fight to the death to pretend otherwise. We use them *all of the time* to infer causation, whether the inference is that smoking causes lung cancer, radiation exposure causes leukemia, large greenhouse gas concentrations cause global warming, or brain functioning causes mental functioning. Science is not cafeteria Catholicism, where you get to pick the empirical conclusions that you like and toss out the rest. There are *principled* reasons for when one should infer causation from correlation (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, pp. 204–211; Weisman, 2015, pp. 102–103), and it is **special pleading** to pretend that those reasons do not apply when the causal inference is simply not to one’s liking. Science proceeds in the interest of probable truth, not that of validating one’s personal proclivities.

According to *what principled reason*, then, can we rule the neuroscientific evidence as inadmissible? Not wanting to deal with powerful counterevidence is not an epistemic principle, but a fallacy (**confirmation bias**). Failing to deal with it shirks one’s epistemic responsibilities; it is merely aiming to confirm what one wants to hear, not seeking the truth. Braude, at least, grants as much elsewhere, writing that “physiological evidence apparently casts doubt on the survivalist position” (2005, p. 245). But he immediately follows that up with the caveat that “good survival evidence has a theoretical pull in the opposite direction and poses an apparently comparable *prima facie* challenge to the anti-survivalist” (2005, p. 245).⁸ The key word here is “comparable.” The fact that the reliability of the evidence itself is the focus of critics of psychical research, but *not* the focus of critics of neuroscience, suggests that the two cases are anything but comparable. And, like other survival researchers, Braude himself opts to instead focus on the *interpretation* of the neuroscientific evidence (Braude, 2006), widening the opening for **motivated reasoning** to drive his conclusions rather than the evidence itself.

If empirical survivalists insist on maintaining that, as a matter of science, individual human consciousness is “beyond the brain” (Mishlove, 2021*) in the sense of not requiring brain functioning *at all* in order to exist/occur, they should at least *try* to show (not merely assert) that (1) the dependence thesis does not predict this evidence, or else that (2) the independence thesis would lead us to expect

the same evidence just as much. Neither is plausible. Long ago, C. S. Peirce defined a prediction as an observational consequence, *derived from* a hypothesis, that would be “a matter of course” were that hypothesis true, but surprising otherwise (1903/1974, p. 117). Philosopher of science Elliott Sober formalized the concept thus:

The Surprise Principle describes when an observation *O* strongly favors one hypothesis (H_1) over another (H_2). There are two requirements:

- (1) If H_1 were true, you would expect *O* to be true.
- (2) If H_2 were true, you would expect *O* to be false.

That is, (1) if H_1 were true, *O* would be unsurprising; (2) if H_2 were true, *O* would be surprising. (2012, p. 30)

This is the basic idea behind inference to the best explanation that improves upon the old hypothetico–deductive method. That known mind–brain correlations are “a matter of course” under the dependence thesis, but surprising under the hypothesis that mental processes are independent of brain functioning, has already been amply demonstrated in my response to Ducasse and in the quotations from Harris, Stapp, and Levin above, among other places (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 234; Olson, 2021, pp. 90–91).

In the near-century since Broad’s (1925) classic, why is the late Douglas M. Stokes the *sole* psychical researcher to press the evidence *against* personal survival, rather than try to dispose of it as quickly as possible? As Stokes himself observed, “At times, it seems that it is almost a definitional requirement that parapsychologists believe in psi or personal survival” (2016, p. 184). One should not have to sign a doctrinal statement of faith that he will affirm personal survival, or at worst be completely agnostic about it, in order to commensurately contribute to psychical research. If researchers aim to treat discarnate personal survival as a *scientific* hypothesis, then they are rationally *obliged* to seriously consider facts that tell *against* it. If you claim to be doing *science*, you cannot limit your inquiry only to attempts to collect data with the potential to confirm survival, or at worst only fail to provide evidence in its favor.⁹ Doing so is one of the chief hallmarks of *pseudoscience*, and it’s sadly a feature, not a bug, of the survival literature. In *empirical* inquiry, one must *also* consider evidence that *lowers* the probability of discarnate personal survival well below 50–50 odds—*particularly* when that evidence is stronger than any potentially favorable evidence:

All inductive reasoning, including explanatory reasoning, is subject to a total evidence requirement. It's relatively easy for facts to offer evidential support for any hypothesis or theory. Every instance of the fallacy of **stacking the deck**—only considering the evidence that favors one's preferred theory—demonstrates this truism. And it's just as easy for any evidential status to diminish with the acquisition of new facts. For this reason, we have to consider as many salient facts as possible, especially facts that (greatly) lower the plausibility of a hypothesis. (Sudduth, 2021, p. 945)

The BICS contest exemplifies the worst of this pseudoscientific tendency, rewarding those who can provide evidence that would "prove" *that* personal survival happens, not those who can provide evidence that would determine *whether* personal survival happens. After all, BICS was openly founded "to support research into both the survival of human consciousness after physical death and, based on data from such studies, the nature of the afterlife" (About BICS, 2021). Clearly, those promoting research "into" the survival of human consciousness and what the afterlife is like have already decided that there *is* an afterlife to have a certain character. If their organizational statement of purpose isn't explicit enough for you, consider *their* characterization of the competition itself: "The goal of the essay contest is 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). The answer having already been decided, go forth and back it up with whatever you can find.

But this is not science; antivaxxers and climate change deniers can appeal to some small subset of the total relevant evidence, too, and ignore any evidence that contradicts their beliefs. Would it go uncommented upon if an "evidence-based" contest asked: "What is the best available evidence that the Holocaust did not happen?" Any essay meeting that requirement would have no obligation to address the (substantial) evidence that the Holocaust was a genuine historical event. If Holocaust deniers are not within their epistemic rights to make this sort of move, neither are empirical survivalists. Alternatively, imagine a parallel universe where *independent* geological estimates of the age of the Earth happened to date the planet much younger than the time necessary for biological evolution to occur. Would we tolerate the omission of such a fact from biology textbooks, on the grounds that biologists don't do geology? Not if they were promoted as scientifically authoritative.

RANKING THE SURVIVAL EVIDENCE

DRW rank nine categories of "survival evidence" according to their assessment of the evidential strength of each, from the strongest to weakest sources of ostensible evidence for discarnate personal survival. They evaluate this evidence using a classroom "grading system, where the grades provide criteria for the credibility of the evidence," ostensibly emulating "several established ways for evaluating the efficacy of pharmaceutical drugs, medical interventions, and other forms of observational or empirical evidence in the life sciences," such as scoping reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses (DRW, 2021*, p. 8). Their systematic review was designed to be both scoping and systematic, "scoping in that it considered a wide-ranging overview of the relevant evidence, and . . . systematic in that we developed a grading system that was uniformly applied to each of the evidential categories." In addition, DRW aimed to evaluate "representative examples of evidence rather than attempt to examine all possible studies or methods within each category" (2021*, p. 8).

The evidentiality of a source could be rated as strong (A), good (B), suggestive (C), unclear/conflicting (D), poor (E), or no evidence (F). While most classroom grading in the US doesn't distinguish between E and F, the difference is moot since in practice the authors rate the categories between a B+ at best (mental and physical mediumship) and a C at worst (spontaneous and induced apparitions, after-death communications). Cases of the reincarnation type (CORT) and NDE reports come in second with a grade of B-, followed by electronic voice phenomena/instrumental transcommunication (EVP/ITC) and reports of deathbed visions at a C+. Notably, although none of the nine sources are rated as unclear/conflicting (D), some likely would be so rated even by other psychological researchers sympathetic to survival—for example, reports of EVP/ITC or of induced apparitions ("scrying"). Presumably the authors only consider spontaneous memories of previous lives in the section on reincarnation, saving comment on those induced under hypnosis for the "Induced Experiences of Survival" section, for this very reason. DRW conclude that section with the comment: "The evidential grade assigned for induced experiences is C because nearly all available evidence is anecdotal, and none is prospective" (2021*, p. 23).

In most classroom settings, A indicates "excellent," B indicates "good," C indicates "satisfactory," and D indicates "poor" or at least "needs improvement." If DRW are really emulating medical standards for evaluating efficacy, one would think that any source deemed to be nearly all anecdotal and none prospective would come in at a D at best. And reported NDE content across cultures (and even within them) certainly warrants the conflicting characteriza-

tion (Augustine, 2015b, pp. 542–550; Belanti et al., 2008; Groth-Marnat, 1994; Lester, 2015, pp. 645–646). Moreover, if we take these different sources to be evidence about the character of an actual afterlife, there are telling conflicts *between* the sources about that character. For example, is “going discarnate” so lucid that it’s impossible to forget, as suggested by OBEs and NDEs who ostensibly “return to the body,” or are discarnate memories immediately/gradually suppressed once normally embodied, as suggested by CRT? Such conflicts cast doubt on Nahm’s purported “interrelatedness of the different survival phenomena that lend support to each other” (2021*, p. 65, Fig. 4). And they are all the more telling because Nahm, at least, *concedes* them, concluding: “the *qualitative strength* of NDEs [B- in DRW] is ‘relatively low’ (2) because most are subjective experiences that take place during times of unconsciousness, and they are clearly culturally influenced,” adding that claims of veridical paranormal perception during “critical brain conditions” are weak because “there are usually only a few eyewitnesses who can support the statements of the experiencer in an unambiguous manner” (2021*, pp. 16–17).

But these are quibbles. On the face of it, using longstanding medical principles to evaluate evidence is an encouraging way to parse the issue (cf. Augustine & Fishman, 2015, pp. 206–208, 278n9). And DRW are wise to avoid distinguishing LAP from survivalist interpretations of this evidence here, as the age-old LAP–survival debate looms large as a *distraction* from assessing the state of the survival evidence itself. A better approach, or at least one more congenial to the researchers outside of psychical research that DRW seek to engage, is to wrap all paranormal interpretations into a single umbrella paranormal hypothesis (Augustine, 2015a, p. 35, 41n43) and compare *that* to conventional explanations of the survival evidence. Whether we should interpret that evidence in nonsurvivalist paranormal terms instead of discarnate personal survival is best left for a separate discussion (in DRW, 2021*, pp. 34–35).¹⁰

One final methodological concern: using letter grades to signify the evidentiality of each of the nine sources of survival evidence is helpful, but the underlying criteria used to assign those grades are questionable. For example, DRW’s grade criteria decision matrix includes problematic criteria like “No plausible materialistic (psychology or neuroscience) explanation” (2021*, p. 11, Table 2). As Sudduth (2021) has shown, cases that are regularly hyped as among the best evidence for survival are all too often easily susceptible to normal explanations, if only survival researchers would give conventional explanations a chance. It’s also often unclear how to validate the reliability of this structured grading system given that the authors speak of

general lines of evidence from each source, rather than, say, evaluating the evidential features of the (heralded) best cases from each of the sources considered (as Gauld, 1982, pp. 32–108, 178–182 does for mental mediumship and CRT, and Sudduth, 2016, pp. 47–133 does for OBEs and NDEs, mental mediumship, and CRT). DRW’s appeals to dubious examples of supposed evidence for survival will make both concerns clear in what follows.

As we proceed through each type of survival evidence, keep in mind that when assigning specific letter grades to the credibility of particular evidential claims, DRW determined that “none of the categories achieved an A level,” defined as “strong evidence” (2021*, p. 10, Table 1). The overconfident claims of other winning contestants of having “unequivocally disprove[n] the modernist view that consciousness ends with bodily death” (Mishlove, 2021*, p. 93), or that “the statistically significant scientific evidence described above, collected under randomized, controlled conditions in order to address falsifiable hypotheses, meets if not surpasses what could be considered proof beyond a reasonable doubt in a court system” (Beischel, 2021*, p. 62),¹¹ stand in stark contrast.

After explaining their procedure, DRW go on to evaluate their nine types of survival evidence in order from best evidence (B+) to worst (C). They cite the long-heralded mental mediumship of Mrs. Piper (but cf. Dodds, 1934; Gauld, 1982, pp. 109–118; Moore, 1981, pp. 82–101), drop-in communicator cases like that of Runki’s leg (cf. Braude, 2003, pp. 43–51; Moore, 1981, pp. 115–126; Sudduth, 2016, p. 97, 97n17), the use of proxy sitters in historical trance mediumship, and the Pearl Curran/Patience Worth case (cf. Braude, 2003, pp. 170–173; 2021*, p. 30; Diliberto, 2010) before characterizing Beischel’s contemporary triple-blind laboratory mediumship research as having used “rigorously controlled protocols [that] have demonstrated that some mediums can accurately gain information well beyond chance expectation” (DRW, 2021*, pp. 13–14). However, in making this determination, they cite sources written prior to or simultaneously with an independent assessment of that research that I commissioned (Battista et al., 2015), and thus are not responsive to its criticisms, which I previously paraphrased:

[T]he contributors canvass how Beischel and Schwartz use two different ways to describe the same data in order to overstate the force of their results, their use of statistically invalid analyses and concepts that render their results “statistically meaningless,” their failure to disclose the only statistically meaningful data that they have, their use of procedures prone to “inflate the rate of false positives,” the openness of their experi-

mental design to merely “collecting data until positive results emerged,” and how optimizing the differences between sitters’ actual readings and their control readings “essentially rigged the experiment to produce the result that they wanted” (pp. 619–625). While Matlock believes that the statistical flaws present in their triple-blind study “appear to be corrected in a follow-up quintuple-blind study,” there is no way for anyone to know since “the details of its implementation have never been published . . .” (Augustine, 2016, pp. 230–231)

Beischel has yet to respond to these criticisms or release the requested raw data to allay these concerns (in either her triple-blind or quintuple-blind study), either in print or on the Windbridge website.

The sources that I cite above (like those below) argue that the evidence in the other ostensible survival cases that DRW cite is weak. The confounding cross-correspondences are also summarized, though the likelihood that the investigators, not the deceased, are the ones fitting these pieces together into a pattern is not acknowledged (cf. Braude, 2003, pp. 95–99; 2021*, p. 34; Moore, 1981, pp. 102–114; Moreman, 2003, 2004). Christopher M. Moreman’s defense of his replication using pseudoscpts is telling:

[M]y study was designed to find whether the patterns and meanings detected in the original scripts might or might not be the result of chance combined with the ingenuity of the investigators. Certainly, the design that I used permits more than one conclusion, though the results of my study have demonstrated only one. *If my scripts had not produced similarly striking patterns to the original C-Cs, then the conclusion would have been quite different.* [emphasis mine] (2004, p. 60)

Here, too, restricting who can access the raw data seems to be an issue:

E. J. Dingwall, in a recent “blast” at psychic researchers, claimed that the Society for Psychical Research refused to permit adequate access to independent investigators in the matter of the famous cross-correspondences. He claims that people who want to know details of those cases will still meet every sort of obstruction, evasion, and refusal of requests to verify details of the stories in question. If I had the knowledge of Mr. Dingwall, I might have been even more troubled by Gauld’s acceptance of the reports on cross-

correspondences and related matters at more-or-less face value. I reiterate my disappointment in the lack of adequate discussion of such matters in this book. (Dilley, 1984, p. 68)

DRW also mention supposed instances of xenoglossy/glossolalia (cf. Thomason, 1984) and the manifestation of previously unmanifested skills (cf. Braude, 2003, pp. 117–118) as potential evidence for personal survival. Nahm similarly lists “the following three facets of mental mediumship [that] are often regarded most compelling”:

- Astonishing quality and quantity of accurate information conveyed by seemingly purposeful communicators via extraordinarily gifted mediums
- Drop-in-communicators
- Cross-correspondence (Nahm, 2021*, p. 11)

Nahm adds that, on some (not all) occasions, Mrs. Piper “was even observed secretly by private detectives to ascertain that she didn’t acquire her knowledge via mundane information channels” (2021*, p. 12). Here DRW’s “No plausible materialistic (psychology or neuroscience) explanation” criterion rears its ugly head, particularly the qualifier “plausible.” Context is important, too; the fact that historical trance mediums’ accurate statements must be fished out of reams of twaddle (James, 1909, p. 115) is surely relevant to any plausibility assessments here, as is the agreed-upon fact that a significant proportion of the entities that they claimed to contact were undeniably fictitious constructions of the mediums’ own minds. Certainly the latter more than offsets any gain provided by appealing to the “never caught cheating” card, which is hardly conclusive in any case since Mrs. Piper had access to gossip within a large web of her community connections (Gauld, 1982, pp. 36–37). (And empirical survivalists seem more willing than others to overlook instances where mediums *have* been caught cheating anyway.) Like Old Testament miracles conveniently tucked away from the prying eyes of modern television cameras, Nahm acknowledges that “for many decades, extraordinarily gifted mediums, drop-in communicators, and cross-correspondences haven’t been investigated, presumably because suitable mediums and researchers were simply not available,” and thus despite the potential for rigorous scientific investigation of trance mediumship today, “the investigability of the most compelling aspects of mental mediumship is only ‘relatively low’” (2021*, p. 13). Given the weight that both DRW and Nahm give to historical trance mediumship, readers may be surprised to read Nahm’s overall assessment:

However, because all communication with ostensible interlocutors from the beyond must be conducted via a medium serving as intermediary, and because these mediums are often in trance, even veridical information provided by these ostensibly deceased individuals is still prone to being attributed alternatively to 1) the retrieval of latent forgotten knowledge, or 2) a psi-conductive dissociated state of the medium that enables the retrieval of information clairvoyantly or telepathically, but without entailing a factual deceased communicator. Therefore, the qualitative strength of mental mediumship cannot be regarded as “high.” (Nahm, 2021*, pp. 13–14)

By contrast, DRW conclude:

The evidential grade assigned to mediumship is B+ because these cases represent some of the most compelling evidence for survival, including studies with objective data, multiple independent researchers reporting similar results that do not require statistical arguments, and effects that are observable in real-time. While some mediums were found to be fraudulent, others studied for decades were not. The reason mediumship does not achieve an A grade is that one could argue that the results could be achieved through forms of [psi-in-the-lab] or [psi-in-the-wild]. (2021*, p. 15)

It’s notable that although psychical researchers often take suggesting the possibility of fraud to be the refuge of scoundrels (e.g., Carington, 1940, p. 265; Sidgwick, 1882, p. 12), the fact that it does pervade the history of mediumship ought to spur them to reconsider. Moreover, fraud would mimic psi pretty precisely, since it is purpose-made to do exactly that in these contexts (e.g., Spraggett & Rauscher, 1973), and the most dramatic examples of psi-in-the-wild not only fail to rule it out, but sometimes even *detect* it (see below).

It’s therefore rather surprising that DRW also assign a high B+ grade to the evidence from physical mediumship since it serves as an exemplar of fraudulent phenomena. They dash through the history of fraud in this setting, the fact that the 19th-century physical medium Daniel Dunglas Home was never definitively exposed to be engaged in fraud, and the suspect Scoble sittings in the 1990s. On Scoble, they oddly write that “no one has been able to demonstrate how this series of events could have been accomplished by fraud” (2021*, p. 16). In fact, however, it is *well-known* that a great deal of positive evidence of fraud was uncovered in these sittings (e.g., Cornell, 1999, p. 402), and

thus that no “psychokinetic effect on photography” need be invoked *at all* to account for the “detailed text [that] was produced on film” kept in a padlocked box (DRW, 2021*, p. 16). For one, the characteristics of that very text are one of the key pieces of positive evidence of fraud (Cornell, 1999, p. 398; Gauld, 1999, pp. 413–414). For another, the box was found to be easily opened by normal means (Gauld, 1999, pp. 404–405), after which it was replaced with secure envelopes and then a secure box, both controls curiously having the effect of preventing any further text from appearing on film (West, 1999, p. 393). The more recent and similarly suspect Felix circle sittings (Braude, 2014, 2015, 2016; Nahm, 2014, 2015, 2016) are unmentioned. DRW also inform us that “Fraud was never detected in” the early 20th-century Kulski molds (wax casts of human hands), even though plausible normal ways of producing them are not hard to come by (Polidoro, 2009).

The history of exposures of fraud in these investigations, the typical need for darkness in order for the phenomena to manifest (Cornell, 1999, p. 403; West, 1999, p. 394), and the likely use of skills to help produce effects, all of which DRW note (2021*, p. 17), “ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind” (Hume, 1748/2000, p. 89). In light of its history, DRW’s conclusion comes off as outright Pollyannaish: “The evidential grade assigned to physical mediumship is B+ because of the striking nature of the legitimate phenomena and multiple witnesses. However, there are fewer than ten highly credible cases, so confidence in these cases is not sufficiently high to rate an A” (2021*, p. 17). Contrast their take on what they deem “the legitimate phenomena” with that of late poltergeist investigator A. D. Cornell:

One must nevertheless take into account the possibility that they were so enthralled by the dramatic performance of it all in the dark that they accepted without questioning enough whether it could have other than a paranormal explanation. Alan Gauld has shown how in the dark the padlocked Alan box could be opened and closed in a matter of seconds. The Dragon film images were all taken from an easily available book and displayed clear signs of how they could have been produced by normal means. The same applies to the Ruth film handwriting, which has all the appearance of a photographed hand-traced copy of the reproduction, slightly reduced in size, of the original page corrections in Christie’s Catalogue. In view of the normal explanation that could be given for many of the phenomena, one is bound to ask whether a high proportion if not all were wrongly interpreted . . .

What better way could the claims of the Scole Group be verifiably presented (and those of any other physical séance circle) than to have a replayable continuous infra-red video record verifying some of the physical effects for the whole world to see? The fact that such promises are repeatedly made by physical mediums but never come about, or are side-stepped at the last minute (as has been my experience several times), may well indicate that no such record is likely to be made. Such reluctance to allow what is really going on in the dark to be seen in every detail may well indicate a recognition that it would reveal too much and could sound the death knell of its practice. (Cornell, 1999, p. 398, 403)

If DRW mean to include the Scole sittings and the Kulski molds as examples of “legitimate phenomena” and “highly credible cases”—and why else would they summarize them here if they do not—then their grading system, though promising in concept, is fundamentally flawed in execution. Too much subjectivity is introduced when the letter grade that one assigns relies on contentious criteria like “No plausible materialistic (psychology or neuroscience) explanation” or “Not likely fraud” (DRW, 2021*, p. 11, Table 2), since one’s judgment on those matters relies on faith in how hard survival researchers have worked to look for such alternative explanations while simultaneously aiming to find evidence for discarnate personal survival, which undoubtedly disincentivizes them from looking too hard (cf. Braude, 2021b*, pp. 29, 31–32; Sudduth, 2021).

The absence of clear-cut permanent paranormal objects (Beloff, 1990, pp. 191–202; Polidoro, 2009; Tort, 1991) produced by physical mediums should clue in any reasonable person of the dubious reliability of this phenomena as a source of evidence for the paranormal in general, let alone for discarnate personal survival. And of course 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.

DRW assign CORT a B-, mainly because “there are no prospective studies, and this phenomenon does not lend itself to strict controls” (2021*, p. 18). While both of those features indeed reduce the evidential value of such cases, their conclusion is nevertheless somewhat surprising since, like Nahm, most survival researchers tout CORT as constituting “the best” of the survival evidence. Against the grain, Braude’s prize-winning essay gives good principled reasons to rank CORT as less convincing evidence than historical cases of mental mediumship—namely, the failure of CORT investigations to rule out conventional explanations in practice and their reliance “on evidence that’s

dauntingly difficult to investigate and evaluate” (2021*, p. 34). As a result, Braude concludes that CORT “are too often hobbled by investigative intricacy, psychological superficiality, and a failure to deal in an empirically-informed way with challenges from the Unusual Suspects” (2021*, p. 48), such as the dissociative skills and latent abilities that can fully account for the mental mediumship of Pearl Curran/Patience Worth in conventional terms.

While Braude’s assessment of CORT is consistent with DRW’s ranking, it’s unlikely that DRW were aware of these reasons, for Braude only expressed his change of heart about the evidential value of CORT recently, in his contemporaneous prize-winning essay itself, and largely due to the then-unpublished findings of Sudduth (2021), which exposed the sloppiness of the investigation of a long-overhyped CORT (one ranked as the second-best “before case” by Nahm).¹² It’s notable that, in contrast to DRW’s ranking and Braude’s evidence-based change of heart, Nahm makes CORT central to his case for discarnate personal survival, going so far as to characterize it as “the *core evidence* for survival,” labeling the remaining three types of survival evidence that he looks at more deeply—after-death communications (ADCs), NDEs, and mental mediumship—“ancillary evidence” (Nahm, 2021*, p. 65, Fig. 4).

DRW note that “In a number of these cases, alternative mundane explanations could not be found” (2021*, p. 17). That’s undoubtedly true, but *why*? Could the absence of credible conventional explanations of CORT be an artifact of the fact that they were not investigated deeply enough? This is not some mere possibility; Sudduth (2021) has already *demonstrated* an example of it in what Nahm deems to be his second-best before-case (2021*, p. 28, Table 2), which Nahm characterizes as “impressive” (2021*, p. 28, Table 2), indeed “quite remarkable” (2021*, p. 26n12), and even “well-documented” (2021*, p. 26). Moreover, this was evidenced for purportedly one of *the best* kinds of CORT, those “before-cases in which the statements had already been recorded *before* the families met and there was [supposedly] little chance to add correct information” (Nahm, 2021*, p. 17). Nahm primes us to believe that “Retrospective tampering is much more difficult and unlikely in these cases”—of which there are 31 out of over 2,500 total CORT (~1%)—“thereby rendering their essential features much more authentic” (2021*, p. 24). From this flawed assumption, Nahm extrapolates much more than the evidence can support:

Because of this information exchange between the families, one would expect a higher percentage of correct statements given by the interviewees in CORT when statements were recorded only *after* they interacted (“after-cases”)—compared

to those in before-cases in which the statements had already been recorded *before* the families met and there was little chance to add correct information. Furthermore, one would expect the total number of correct, incorrect, and unverified statements to be lower in before-cases.

In a study comparing both types of CORT, however, they yielded approximately equal percentages of correct statements. The average overall number of statements was even *higher* for the before-cases. (2021*, p. 47)

This would be impressive only if normal/conventional sources of information for ostensibly anomalous knowledge were not present in before-cases, and we already know that they *have been*.¹³ In the absence of (1) a list of all of the alternative mundane explanations that were considered and (2) a detailed explanation of how each of these were definitively ruled out, what more can someone approaching this evidence with an evaluative eye profitably say?¹⁴ While the use of leading questions certainly creates “a problem assessing the information provided under direct questioning” (Braude, 2021b*, p. 30), this methodological concern pales in comparison. DRW’s “No plausible materialistic (psychology or neuroscience) explanation” criterion isn’t some minor worry, but the *crux* of any evidential assessment here. The boggle factor for CORT requires the assumption that there is no normal source of any (nonspurious) factual correspondences. That element of mystery has to be maintained for these cases to warrant further parapsychological investigation; otherwise, as soon as a conventional explanation surfaces, a case loses interest.

Nahm masks his **hasty conclusions** with a number of qualifiers, such as “Given these cases are authentic . . .” (2021*, p. 44). Presuming that conventional explanations have really been ruled out is an important example, but there are others, and they are representative of the hasty conclusions of other prize-winning essays. Consider that, even if CORT have entirely psychosocial origins, there will be patterns in the data that one has collected about them (as there are in, say, alien abduction experiences). Survival researchers can easily sift through some data, find some patterns, and then retroactively declare these patterns to be “predictions” of the reincarnation hypothesis. But are they really its predictions? A simple thought experiment provides an answer: prior to having reviewed any data, would you have said, based on the reincarnation or simple survival hypothesis alone, that you would have *expected* to find some particular datum? Can you honestly say that in hypothesizing reincarnation you would have predicted

(pre-Stevenson) that we should find feature X prior to collecting any CORT, back when you had no idea whether or not X was actually present in CORT?

To be a genuine prediction, a particular item has to be *derived from* a hypothesis in some way. It has to either be deductively entailed by the hypothesis (as the phenomenon of falling apples is logically entailed by Newton’s theory of universal gravitation), or else made at least more probable than not by the truth of that hypothesis. There are ways to show that a particular outcome would be more probable if a hypothesis were true than if it were not (such as the previous section’s endnote *argument from analogy* comparing the mind and brain to software and hardware, respectively, to derive which facts would be more expected on the dependence thesis than on its antithesis). But *some* inductive argument has to be given for *why* we should expect a particular fact to be found were a particular hypothesis true, and one must show that it is a *good* argument (e.g., by showing that there are more relevant similarities than dissimilarities between analogues). If one cannot do that, then there’s no reason to call a particular outcome a *prediction* of a hypothesis. Anyone can just mold a hypothesis to fit whatever data one has at hand, in what philosophers of science deride as *accommodation* rather than hypothesis-derived *prediction*.

Nahm’s reincarnation hypothesis “predictions” are paradigm cases of accommodation. First, he argues that “cases involving young children who speak spontaneously about past lives are most compelling because they are less prone to being created artificially than cases involving adults, be it purposefully or involuntarily” (2021*, p. 17). The existence of play with imaginary friends and other kinds of pretending suggests otherwise, and there are undeniably “artificially created” childhood CORT (Chari, 1978, pp. 317–319; Cook et al., 1983, pp. 133–134; Stevenson et al., 1988, pp. 22–26). Second, Nahm regards as supporting evidence the fact that “about 20% of CORT subjects report having memories of events that occurred during the intermission between their death in the previous life and their birth into the current life” (2021*, p. 18), given that there could have been *none at all*. But this commits the **fallacy of understated evidence**. In assessing rival hypotheses,

one should use a more specific evidence statement that one knows to be true instead of a less specific one whenever different results would be obtained by doing so. For example, when comparing the hypothesis that Mona intends to harm Lisa to the hypothesis that she intends to benefit her, one might seek to determine how probable it is (antecedently) on each of the two hypotheses that Mona is bringing a butter knife to her meeting

with Lisa. To ignore this more specific knowledge and focus instead just on the more general knowledge that Mona is bringing a knife (of some sort) to that meeting would commit the “fallacy of understated evidence.” (Draper, 2020, pp. 179–180)

Here Nahm disregards the *absence* of reports of intermission memories in the vast majority (~80%) of CORT. That is, in taking the existence of any intermission “memories” to be evidential, he disregards the more specific issue of why there are so few of them. 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). Third, Nahm presumes that the birthmark evidence supports the reincarnation hypothesis, but never shows us *how* that hypothesis—when unamended with numerous *untestable* auxiliary assumptions that do the work of yielding that “prediction”—leads us to expect “physical features such as birthmarks or birth defects that can contribute to the identification of a matching previous personality” (2021*, p. 19). It’s worth noting that here Nahm also appeals to the number of eyewitnesses interviewed, as if the sheer quantity of witnesses tells us anything about the evidentiality of their testimony. As I previously wrote about reports of veridical NDEs:

Their value ultimately depends on how well they can be corroborated by *independent* testimony (i.e., testimony where agreement between witnesses is not simply the result of witnesses having talked among themselves before an investigator interviewed them, or the result of independent witnesses gleaning congruent information from the same third party). [emphasis mine] (Augustine, 2019, p. 595)

One last thing is worth noting about Nahm’s assessment of CORT. He’s unimpressed with Stevenson’s critics, asking rhetorically:

Was Stevenson, a trained psychiatrist who had even published a book on psychiatric examination in 1969, really so naïve that he exposed himself to all this stress and danger for four decades without ever realizing that every case he investigated rested on misinterpretation and fraud, as some of his critics presume? (2021*, p. 22)

This fails to take into consideration the power of **motivated reasoning**, which is transparent in Stevenson in other places. For example, on cross-cultural comparisons of NDE reports, which Nahm concedes are characterized by more differences than similarities (2021*, p. 18), Pasricha and Stevenson wrote of reports of encounters with others in NDEs: “For Americans this is usually a deceased relative or friend; for Indians it is usually the messengers (Yam-doots) of the god of death. The variations in the persons of the ‘next world’ do not weigh against (or for) their reality” (1986, p. 169). Some NDE content variations do carry such weight (Augustine, 2015b, pp. 549–550), but more to the point, those less invested in Stevenson’s mission—such as those agnostic scientists that DRW aim to persuade, or the suicidologist David Lester (2015, p. 639)—might see these comments as instances of wishful thinking.

More surprisingly, DRW rank NDE reports as providing the same degree of evidential support for personal survival as CORT, grading them at an equivalent B-. Such equivalency might be justified if it based solely on the similar lack of (successful) well-designed prospective studies of paranormal perception or influence in OBEs or NDEs, and the concomitant inability to rule out normal sources of information or influence in anecdotal cases. And indeed, this at least seems to be a factor, as DRW acknowledge that “from a strict evidential perspective, the degree of confidence that can be assigned to them is low” given the absence of strong evidence for veridical paranormal perception under controlled conditions: “There are no cases of OBEs associated with NDEs that could be verified under strictly controlled, *planned* conditions” (2021*, p. 19). In contrast to DRW, psychical researchers have tended to hold up CORT and historical mental mediumship as among the best sources of evidence for personal survival, typically giving much less evidential weight to OBEs or NDEs. Braude, for example, concludes that “the case for survival receives very little *independent* support from OBEs, NDEs, and apparitions” (Braude, 2003, pp. 280–281), and Nahm considers them “ancillary” rather than equivalent to CORT in terms of their evidential strength (though for Braude, this is only secondarily due to the weakness of the evidence itself).

For Braude, even if we *had* an evidentially ideal OBE/NDE or apparitional case, it’s less clear that personal survival is what such a case would be evidence of (compared to an ideal CORT or mental mediumship case). It’s thus not without reason that the three classics (Braude, 2003; Gauld, 1982; Sudduth, 2016) assessing the overall survival evidence produced in the last 40 years concentrate on the evidence from mental mediumship or CORT even though there is an equally old and large psychical research literature on apparitions and astral projection/remote sensing

(going back to the early days of the SPR).

However we compare them to the other sources, the evidence for personal survival from OBEs/NDEs is weak. Mishlove is seemingly unaware of how awkward the evidence that he cites for a survivalist interpretation of NDEs becomes. A single NDEr self-reports (after the fact, of course) having accurately learned the outcome of a future presidential election and a Superbowl game during her NDE (Mishlove, 2021*, p. 25), and along with some second-hand reporting from van Lommel, the case for prophetic NDEs rests. But it shouldn't, as Kenneth Ring systematically investigated prophetic visions (PVs) during NDEs in the early 1980s, concluding: "at least some of the specific predictions that have been made by near-death survivors who have reported PVs have been *wrong*. Another [salient feature] is that, to my knowledge, there are only retroactive claims of successful predictions" (1982, p. 66). As noted in an earlier section, in the age of the Internet there's no excuse *not to* preregister predictions online in order to securely validate their timing—unless, of course, one doesn't really possess knowledge of future events.

Nahm argues that "evidence favoring the notion that brain chemistry cannot fully account for OBEs and NDEs comes from their occurrence in indistinguishable manners under conditions ranging from optimal oxygen supply in the brain to virtually no oxygen supply" (2021*, p. 15; cf. Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 82; van Lommel, 2021*, p. 7). Simply substituting Nahm's "OBEs and NDEs" with "realistic hallucinations" in that sentence makes plain the shakiness of the argument. It's also undermined by the discovery of even more hypnagogic-like dreamlets than classic NDEs during cardiac arrest:

Although the AWARE study was designed to vindicate the view that NDEs are not hallucinations, the results ironically have had the opposite effect. The study found that of the fifty-five reported cardiac arrest experiences, forty-six (84 percent) were clearly dreamlike hallucinations, with the remaining classic NDEs constituting only 16 percent (nine of fifty-five) of the total (Parnia et al., 2014). These results alone are sufficient to refute premature arguments that it is simply impossible for the brain to generate any experiences during cardiac arrest, and thus NDEs cannot be brain-generated hallucinations (see, e.g., Greyson, 2010; van Lommel, 2006). They also raise the possibility that classic NDEs are simply a subset of these dreamlike hallucinations. Perhaps the more coherent of the dreamlike narratives simply get labeled as reports of NDEs because they happen to have an otherworldly theme (because expectation of im-

minent death during cardiac arrest calls up after-life imagery at the time). (Augustine, 2019, p. 595)

Contra Nahm, the crucial evidence for veridical OBEs (during NDEs or otherwise) is also weak. OBEs that can be timestamped as occurring when brain activity is not "sufficient to enable the accurate perception of events," Nahm argues, "provide considerable evidence for the notion that in these situations, human consciousness operates independently of brain states" (2021*, p. 15). But where are these simultaneously veridical *and* timestamped experiences? On the one verifiable recalled event during the AWARE study, Parnia and Shirazi write: "the recalled experience relating to actual events occurring in the resuscitation room was verified as being accurate, correct, and *consistent with* real events that had occurred some 3–5 minutes after the heart had stopped and when the brain was *expected to be* either severely disordered or not functioning" [emphasis mine] (2021*, p. 49). First, note that a detail can be "consistent with" an event without referring to it (e.g., Sudduth, 2021, p. 1006); and second, that the claim that the brain is (effectively) offline during the "consistent" event is just a *conjecture*, not a *fact*.¹⁵ Compare Braude: "Even those sympathetic to NDE research would probably admit that this body of evidence is not the best evidence of survival . . . NDE studies face the notorious problem of accurately timestamping the NDEr's experience—something that can only be attempted after resuscitation" (2021b*, p. 48). Even if we could accurately timestamp *when* an NDE occurred, Braude adds, we still face an *additional* problem noted by Cook et al., (1998), namely: "If we don't know the physical or physiological conditions required for ordinary cognitive functioning (much less optimal cognitive functioning), we should be wary of drawing conclusions about the significance of the evidence" (Braude, 2021b*, p. 49). In other words, there's an inherent Catch-22 in Nahm's argument that "neurophysiological models cannot account for conscious awareness during apparent states of unconsciousness such as in critical NDEs or Juan's evident coma" (2021*, p. 15). Namely, if neuroscience cannot accurately determine when we should be consciously aware, then near-death researchers cannot argue that awareness occurred at a time when it would be neurally impossible, and thus is anomalous.

Nahm seems oblivious to yet another Catch-22, writing: "it is intriguing that blind people, even those blind from birth, report having NDEs that include visual imagery *comparable to that in [the] NDEs of those who can see*" [emphasis mine] (2021*, p. 15). This immediately recalls a famous thought experiment in the philosophy of mind (Byrne, 2020; Shoemaker, 1982) and raises the question: how could we possibly know whether congenitally blind

NDErs actually “see” what sighted NDErs see? Without any frame of reference for what constitutes *sight*, congenitally blind NDErs might *report* experiences comparable to those reported by sighted ones, coopting the same language that they picked up from the sighted. But what reason could we ever have to believe that their visual language refers to actual *visual experiences*? Whatever experiences congenitally blind NDErs are referring to when they use visual words, they almost certainly are not referring to *vision*. Harvey J. Irwin picks up on this point, writing:

A very short note . . . reiterates the proposal that while blind NDErs and OBErs may depict their experiences in terms of visual impressions, this tendency simply involves the unwitting reformulation of an experience of mindsight in terms of constructs that the experient herself or himself can comprehend. This concluding chapter might better have given more emphasis to the most fundamental implication of the project’s finding of NDEs in congenitally totally blind people, namely, that *the perceptual-like impressions in NDEs and OBEs evidently are not perceptual at all*. [emphasis mine] (2000, p. 112)

To overcome the main difficulties with the state of the evidence itself here, we need (1) replicable positive results from experiments designed to test veridical paranormal perception during OBEs/NDEs under *controlled* conditions in which (2) the experiences can be definitively time-stamped to a period when brain activity is virtually nonexistent, such as during the deepest hypothermia of cardiac standstill. But we lack cases meeting *either* requirement, let alone both (e.g., Beauregard et al., 2012; Horizon Research Foundation, 2010), so questions about how to best interpret such purely hypothetical cases are moot.

DRW next assign EVP/ITC a C+ grade, which seems overly generous. They note that “misinterpretation of signals from mundane sources is an obvious problem,” but the most prevalent factor is likely “substantial noise, giving rise to auditory pareidolia, the tendency to subjectively perceive meaning in randomness” (a factor obviously exploited in paranormal reality television). As seasoned experimentalists, DRW rightly propose that, for those who find this research worthwhile, “independent judges should be asked to assess, under blinded conditions, if they hear the same material” and that “objective methods, like spectrographic analysis of purported voices, should be performed” (DRW, 2021*, p. 20), noting that the latter was reported in at least one study (MacRae, 2005). Other studies have found little reason for parapsychologists (unlike psychologists) to pursue this line of research (Barušs, 2001; Ellis,

1978). DRW’s conclusion:

The evidential grade is C+ because in most cases (not all), claims of voices or messages are determined subjectively, and even in cases where there is some objective evidence, the effects could still be attributable to [psi-in-the-lab], [psi-in-the-wild], or to mistakes of perception. (2021*, p. 20)

Indeed, perceptual misinterpretation seems sufficient to account for such phenomena even to fellow psychological researchers. In their recent overview of the subject, Mark R. Leary and Tom Butler write that “some debunkers do not seem to recognize the fallacy of concluding that all purported EVP are due to mundane causes simply because some of them clearly are” (2016, p. 347). The flip side is that some EVP investigators do not seem to recognize the fallacy of **shifting the burden of proof** in claiming that there are unknown paranormal processes, over and above known normal ones, involved in EVP. He who makes a claim assumes the burden of showing what he claims, period.

DRW grade deathbed visions an equivalent C+ “because all the evidence is anecdotal, and the experience itself, even if partially confirmed by other witnesses, is reported by a living person with impaired functionality” (2021*, p. 21). Citing the famous Osis and Haraldsson (1977) study, Nahm concludes that such visions “display an autonomy of their own that seems largely independent from the mental dispositions of dying individuals and their brain chemistry” (2021*, p. 19). He bases this on four postulates that the study tested (and did not find), but only one of these is more than weak evidence for a survivalist interpretation: “Patients dying rather unexpectedly and in the expectation of recovery should report more visions related to this world whereas patients dying in the expectation of death should report more otherworldly elements including deceased individuals” (Nahm, 2021*, p. 10). The fact that the study didn’t find this is certainly interesting, but could easily be an artifact of the selective response or selective memory of the medical practitioners who provided the second-hand reports of the visions—that is, those who witnessed counter-to-expectation incidents might have been more likely to respond to the questionnaires than those who did not, or those who witnessed both might have been more likely to remember, years later, the more dramatic counter-to-expectation incidents than the incidents that would confirm this natural expectation.

The remaining three sources—apparitional experiences, induced experiences, and ADCs—received DRW’s lowest assigned grade, C. On apparitions, DRW conclude that “despite a few cases with multiple witnesses, the rest of the available evidence is anecdotal and there are numer-

ous potentially mundane explanations,” such as that (in addition some witnesses priming others) “the perceived [collective] apparition may be explained by group exposure to environmental factors that correlate not only with feelings of anxiety and/or disorientation but in extreme cases with hallucinations” (2021*, p. 22). Ruickbie more optimistically quotes Myers’s 1886 conclusion that crisis apparitions (those within 12 hours of death) “are perceived by their friends and relatives with a frequency which mere chance cannot explain” (2021*, p. 28). This is often inflated to the specific claim that crisis apparitions occur 440 times more often than would be expected by chance (Sidgwick et al., 1894, pp. 247–248), but the mathematical reasoning behind that figure is dubious. Apparitions researcher G. N. M. Tyrrell concluded that he could not “attach any importance to [that] numerical conclusion” (1943/1953, pp. 19–20), and West’s later investigations could not corroborate a single crisis apparition report (1948b, p. 196; 1990, p. 200). Even experimental designs utilizing observers or instruments as apparition detectors might mistake for anomalous common expectations about which locations are eerie, or simply detect drafts, changes in air pressure, pollutants, static electricity, infrasound, or artificial or natural sources of electromagnetic radiation (Stokes, 1997, pp. 175–176). Other features of apparitional experiences outright signal a conventional explanation (Augustine, 2015a, pp. 20–22).

As broadly as DRW define ADCs, quoting Susan Kwilecki—most often being ambiguously constituted by “an intuitive sense of presence, in vivid dreams, or in meaningfully timed appearances of birds or butterflies” (2021*, p. 24)—it’s not surprising that these would rank as one of the weakest sources of survival evidence. When Mishlove reports that “Uncle Harry actually visited me in a dream when he died” (2021*, p. 6), I’m reminded of awkward Bible study questions like “Did God come to Abimelech in a dream, or did Abimelech simply have a dream about God?” (re: Genesis 20:3; cf. Hobbes, 1651/1994, p. 247). And while Nahm gives ADCs their due—“All cultures had or still have their seers, healers, or shamans who communicate with the deceased” (and notably with nature spirits, angels, demons, and gods, too)¹⁶—he concurs that the evidence that ADCs are nonillusory is weak:

Obviously, the conditions of observation as well as the witness testimonies of ADCs are often not satisfactory. ADCs frequently come as a complete surprise, even on the sickbed. Also, most are only reported by a sole witness, or at best by a few individuals. And even in these collective cases, the witnesses may report divergent observations: Tom may report having seen a bright light, but

Jerry may in addition report having seen a human shape in this light. Hence, ADCs imply a degree of subjectivity even in collectively perceived cases, which impedes the formation of an objective judgment about the witness testimonies. These aspects of ADCs are also relevant for their interpretation in terms of survival. On theoretical grounds, it is often not easy to determine whether an apparition perceived only fleetingly was created by the deceased individual him- or herself or was a hallucination of the living percipient. All this contributes to rendering the qualitative strength of ADCs “relatively low.” (2021*, p. 11)

THE MIND–BODY PROBLEM, BOTCHED

Far too often, empirical survivalists’ statements about the mind–body problem betray a stunning lack of familiarity with basic philosophy of mind, including material that would be typical of a freshman-level introduction to philosophy (PHIL 101) *unit* on the philosophy of mind, to say nothing of material from philosophy of mind *courses* (or textbooks). Statements made in some of the BICS contest-winning essays are no exception. In his third-place essay, Ruickbie briefly quotes philosopher and neuroscientist Alva Noë verbatim: “Consciousness does not happen in the brain. That’s why we have been unable to come up with a good explanation of its neural basis” (Ruickbie, 2021*, p. 63). Now admittedly, that’s not a bad **quote to mine** for one who maintains that consciousness can function completely independently of brain activity. But context is important. On Noë’s next page we read: “At present, we have no better understanding of how ‘a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules’ might give rise to consciousness than we understand how supernatural stuff might do the trick” (2009, p. 6). Since by “supernatural stuff” Noë means Ruickbie’s preferred alternative, this statement is telling. Noë is saying that the current neuroscientific understanding of consciousness is woefully inadequate because it’s hardly any better than *that* antiquated notion! That’s the *opposite* of an endorsement of Ruickbie’s view.

Noë’s actual position is that consciousness does not exist *only* in your brain, but *also* in other parts of the body and in the surrounding physical environment. The reference to “the biology of consciousness” in his subtitle might have been a clue. Noë is quite explicit about it:

Maybe consciousness is like money. Here’s a possibility: my consciousness now—with all its particular quality for me now—depends *not only* on what is happening in my brain but also on my history and my current position in and interaction with the wider world. [emphasis mine] (2009, p. 4)

In this sense, “there is no principled reason not to think of the wristwatch, the landmarks, the pen and paper, the linguistic community, as belonging to my mind. The causal processes that enable us to talk and think and find our ways around are not confined to what is going on in our skulls” (2009, p. 82). This simply expands philosopher of neuroscience Andy Clark’s extended mind/embodied cognition thesis, which maintains that cognitive “operations are realized not in the neural system alone but in the whole embodied system in the world” (2008, p. 14). We could justly call Noë’s view the “extended consciousness” or “embodied consciousness” thesis (cf. Chalmers, 2019, pp. 17–20), as he simply enlarges Clark’s view to include not just cognition, but conscious experience itself. Ruickbie’s use converts Noë’s actual meaning into an **argument from ignorance**: we don’t know *how* brain activity gives rise to consciousness, therefore it must not give rise to consciousness. If the argument were that we don’t know *how* migrating birds navigate, therefore they must *not* navigate, it would not impress. Nor should it here.

Given the abstractness of Noë’s view, Ruickbie’s 180° misreading is perhaps forgivable. Others’ mischaracterizations are much less so. Nahm defines “the physicalist model” as one that is “based on the assumption that consciousness can be explained by physics and its derivate, chemistry” (2021*, p. 5) before conflating materialism/physicalism, like too many other psychical researchers, with the notion that having a functioning brain is a necessary condition for having consciousness (the dependence thesis, Nahm’s Jamesian “production hypothesis” being one version of it). Yet the very philosophers of mind who famously *press* that consciousness cannot be “explained by physics and its derivate, chemistry” simultaneously (and *explicitly*) maintain that it cannot persist in the absence of some underlying physical substrate, either (Chalmers, 1996, p. 121; Koch, 2012, p. 152; Strawson, 2006, p. 7). They thus illustrate that it is possible to hold both thoughts in one’s head at the same time—if only one would try.

Nahm is absolutely right that “nothing in physics and chemistry predicts that protons, electrons, atoms, or molecules will produce something like consciousness” (2021*, p. 3), if by consciousness one means the qualitative experience of “what it’s like” to, say, taste chocolate. And yet consciousness nevertheless seems to be as much a part of the natural world as anything else; it is found across the animal kingdom in varying degrees, strongly suggesting that it is a ubiquitous *biological* phenomenon, rather than something altogether different in kind (just consider how biological the feeling of pain or desire is). If that’s right, then consciousness cannot survive biological death. It **does not follow** from the inability to explain *how* consciousness arises from matter that it does not so arise, and in fact its

ubiquitousness throughout the biosphere positively suggests that it does (though see McGinn, 1999, pp. 89–95 and Nahm, 2021*, p. 64 for ways to get around this). And the distinctively *individual* consciousnesses necessary for *personal* survival almost certainly so arise.¹⁷

At one point, Braude subtly hints that “reductive physicalist views about the nature of mentality” are not equivalent to the mind’s “apparent causal dependence on the body or the brain” (Braude, 2021b*, p. 2) by distinguishing them, but says no more about the difference. Where he has said more, he has been less careful, writing about “the lingering lure of physicalism” and citing the survival evidence as a challenge to “reductionistic physicalism and epiphenomenalism” since it “calls into question familiar forms of physicalism” (2005, pp. 241–242). The distinction matters for two crucial reasons. First, many contemporary philosophers of mind have been highly critical, for different reasons and for a long time, of both reductive physicalism and epiphenomenalism (which in the 19th century was a kind of *substance dualism*, à la Thomas Henry Huxley, before emerging as a kind of property dualism). Their often persuasive (if not decisive) criticisms simply *do not touch* the dependence thesis—and so are irrelevant to its viability. Second, there’s a pernicious, subtle misdirection (or **red herring**) involved in changing the subject from the *evidence* for mind–brain dependence to the *metaphysics* of mind, as if one is attempting to render the evidence *against* discarnate personal survival inadmissible by simply redirecting attention away from it. One’s particular theory of mind is irrelevant since some version of *every* mind–body theory is compatible with mind–brain dependence. Attempts to shift the conversation notwithstanding, the issue for discarnate personal survival isn’t about *which* theory of mind one adopts, but rather how *whatever* theory of mind one adopts must be modified to do justice to discovered mind–brain correlations.

DRW fare no better, assuming almost definitionally that rejecting discarnate personal survival “begins with a reductionist materialist ‘you are your brain’ perspective” (2021*, p. 36, Fig. 2 caption). Under this understanding, computationalists and other functionalists are effectively materialists, “materialism” broadly encompassing any mind–body position that excludes the mind’s ability to function independently of the brain—even though functionalists like the late Jerry Fodor were among the first to criticize reductive materialism and offer alternatives to it! They could rightly be called materialists, but certainly not *reductive* materialists. Moreover, computationalists and other functionalists would never say that you *are* your brain; at most, they would say that you are instantiated *in* a human brain, but you could’ve been instantiated in something else—like a silicon network, an extraterrestrial brain, or even an astral body or nonphysical substance (it’s just

that, as a contingent matter of fact, a brain is what happens to instantiate your mind). An empirically *informed* functionalism thus rules out discarnate personal survival, but functionalism itself need not do so.

Similarly, DRW ironically cite “growing academic interest in notions like idealism, panpsychism, and neutral monism” (2021*, p. 33), as if *any* version of panpsychism or neutral monism—or any *informed* version of idealism—would license discarnate personal survival (and the presumed death of “nihilism” that DRW mistakenly think would come with them). Panpsychism and neutral monism exclude the metaphysical *possibility* that consciousness could persist apart from matter *in principle*. Indeed, the *coiner* of the term “neutral monism,” Bertrand Russell, wrote:

Although metaphysical materialism cannot be considered true, yet emotionally the world is pretty much the same as it would be if the materialists were in the right. I think the opponents of materialism have always been actuated by two main desires: the first to prove that the mind is immortal, and the second to prove that the ultimate power in the universe is mental rather than physical. In both these respects, I think the materialists were in the right. (1928/1986, p. 150)

As for panpsychism, even if we posit microexperience at the level of electrons, as panpsychists are wont to do, it won't be *human-level consciousness* that's fundamental. Human-level consciousness will only arise when a number of these microexperiential particles combine in the right way, namely to form a functioning brain (or at least some comparable physical structure). What makes us uniquely us—the “various motives, interests, and other attitudes idiosyncratically appropriate to that individual” (Braude, 2021b*, p. 17)—won't survive the brain's destruction at death even if “experience” in some generic sense persists. As philosopher Josh Weisberg notes, “when the basic substance is configured in the form of a brain, it then realizes phenomenal as well as physical properties. But that need not be the case when the fundamental stuff makes up a table” (Weisberg, 2012, §3g). Discarnate personal survival is *not possible in principle* if any of reductive materialism/type identity, functionalism/token identity (including computationalism), Aristotelian hylomorphism, Spinozic dual-aspect theory, property dualism, or Russellian monism (whether “neutral” or otherwise) are true.

Although it's certainly true that when one rejects reductionist materialism (or accepts it!¹⁸), “then some form of psi can be considered” (DRW, 2021*, p. 36, Fig. 2 caption), it's notable that virtually all philosophers of mind who

reject reductionist materialism (or any other mind–body theory) do so for reasons that have nothing to do with psi; indeed, they are typically either skeptical or agnostic about the existence of psi,¹⁹ discussing only its logical possibility and not its actual reality (e.g., Drange, 2015, pp. 331–332; Kim, 2015, p. 347n2).

Worse still, discarnate personal survival is very likely false *even assuming traditional Cartesian substance dualism, more contemporary non-Cartesian forms, or idealism*, though none of these positions *require* mind–brain dependence.²⁰ David Hume captured this point well without going through our alphabet soup of mind–body theories. Suppose that we grant substance dualism, that *some* sort of pre-existing consciousness is added to the brain during embodiment. Even so, *our* consciousness would not survive the destruction of the brain that enabled it:

[W]e have reason to conclude from analogy, that nature uses [the spiritual substance] after the same manner she does the other substance, matter. She employs it as a kind of paste or clay; modifies it into a variety of forms and existences; dissolves after a time each modification; and from its substance erects a new form. As the same material substance may successively compose the body of all animals, the same spiritual substance may compose their minds: Their consciousness, or that system of thought, which they formed during life, may be continually dissolved by death; and *nothing interests them in the new modification*. The most positive asserters of the mortality of the soul, never denied the immortality of its substance. And *that an immaterial substance*, as well as a material [one], *may lose its memory or consciousness appears*, in part, *from experience*, if the soul be immaterial. [emphasis mine] (Hume, 1755/1987, pp. 591–592)

Brain activity may thus be a necessary condition for having human consciousness on *any* theory of mind.²¹ Enter a non-Cartesian dualist: “Nor should we think it contrary to the self's status as a substance that its existence may be thus causally dependent upon the functioning of another, distinct substance—the brain, or more generally, the body” (Lowe, 1996, p. 41). Given the evidence for such, even an apologist for traditional Cartesian dualism—who believes that *some* immaterial part of us can survive—does not believe that a *discarnate* can have a mental life:

The soul is like a light bulb and the brain is like an electric light socket. If you plug the bulb into the socket and turn the current on, the light will shine.

If the socket is damaged or the current turned off, the light will not shine. So, too, the soul will function (have a mental life) *if it is plugged into a functioning brain*. Destroy the brain . . . and the soul will cease to function, remaining inert. But it can be revived and made to function again by repairing or reassembling the brain—just as the light can be made to shine again by repairing the socket or turning on the current. [emphasis mine] (Swinburne, 1997, p. 310)

Now admittedly, philosopher Richard Swinburne only concedes that the mind depends on the brain in order to function, not to exist. But that is a distinction without a difference, for personal survival is possible for “souls” *only when they are embodied*. So even on his most liberal interpretation of the mind–brain data, a *conscious mental life* cannot exist in the absence of brain functioning. Thus, *even assuming interactionism*, having a functioning brain (or similar physical substrate) is a necessary condition for having a mental life, at least for biological organisms—“and thus conscious experience must end when the brain ceases to function” (Gennaro & Fishman, 2015, p. 105). When even a traditional Cartesian dualist advocates the dependence thesis against discarnate personal survival, empirical survivalists ought to stand up and take note (cf. Braude, 2005, p. 244; Stairs & Bernard, 2007, p. 301; Sudduth, 2016, p. 27). After all, were it not for his prior religious conviction that God will resurrect us with the necessary bodies/brains to save us from annihilation or permanent unconsciousness, Swinburne would be making my case for me.

DRW take one last stab at securing personal survival through a theory of mind:

[I]f consciousness does not emerge from the physical world but the other way around, as proposed by many esoteric traditions and the philosophy of idealism, then the answer to the question of survival is easy: Of course consciousness survives. It was here before the emergence of the physical world, and it will continue afterward. (2021*, p. 33)

But this is too quick. On idealism, the physical world is a mere appearance; only the mental is real. While I see little reason to affirm it (Augustine, 2016, p. 224), it’s worth explaining why not even the truth of idealism could secure personal survival, given the empirical evidence against it.

Idealism describes what we normally think of as physical objects/events/processes as mental objects/events/processes. But this reframing does not change in the slightest the evidential implications of the *observed* correlations between mental processes and brain processes.

Ostensible firewood will still ostensibly burn if placed in an ostensible fire. What fire does to an object—regardless of whether it’s “really” physical, or just seems to be—is governed by laws of nature, our (approximate) knowledge of which are grounded by empirical *observation*. On something like George Berkeley’s idealism, there are *perceived* objects in our individual minds, and then there are—external to us—*perceived* objects in the mind of God. A piece of firewood is ultimately just a perception in the mind of God, a divine perception that we somehow *also* perceive (or represent in our own minds). Our (internal) perceived object represents or is caused by God’s perceived object (which is external to us). It still has an independent/objective existence outside of any of our individual minds (inside of God’s mind), just not as part of a *physical* external world. So the falling tree makes a sound even if there’s no one in the forest to hear it because God “hears” it. An idealist merely substitutes “it falls in the physical world” with “it falls in God’s mind.” The divine mind is what’s fundamental, and our (unfundamental) minds somehow partake in what happens in it. Since our minds are derivative (like the firewood), we could disappear from God’s consciousness (ceasing to exist as individual consciousnesses) just as easily as a dream character can cease to exist when the dreamer stops dreaming about him.

Note that nothing *empirical* has changed in this redescription. Individual brains still exist as external objects in an objective/independent divine mind, and they still stand in the exact same law-like relation to events in your individual mind as they would under realism about the physical world (otherwise one slips into solipsism, which everyone eschews). There is still a natural law—if natural is the right word for a fundamentally mental reality—that determines how your mind (your internal world) and your brain (an external object in God’s mind) interrelate. Materialists track the underlying metaphysical reality in terms of physical laws, dualists in terms of psychophysical laws, and idealists in terms of psychological laws. On idealism, brains may not exist as *physical* objects, but they still exist as objects apart from to *our* own minds, so our minds still stand in a law-governed relation to those separate divine objects that we call brains. The dependence of consciousness on the brain in order to exist/occur is just such a relationship. As survivalist philosopher David Lund points out, if observed mind–brain correlations are “best interpreted as indicative of a natural law that conscious states exist only in association with brain activity, then it is a matter of natural law that we will not survive the destruction of our brains” (2009, p. 19)—even if we construe “brain activity” as activity in the mind of God rather than in the physical world.

Since idealism is pure metaphysics, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that its picture of reality will be empirically



indistinguishable from that of its antithesis, realism. Our daily lives would be like living in a Matrix in which there are never any glitches to reveal the true underlying reality. Idealism is a rather abstract thought experiment, akin to the notion that you might really just be a brain in a vat and mistakenly think that you have a body, or be a victim of René Descartes' evil demon. But it's also a picture that we have no positive reason to affirm. Sure, it could theoretically be true, but if the world appeared and functioned in exactly the same way as it would if it were false, what would it matter?

What all of this means is that there is no general position on the mind-body problem that is inconsistent with the dependence of consciousness on the brain, not even one that denies that brains "really" exist at all. Whatever underlying metaphysics one adopts, all of it is empirically indistinguishable or operationally equivalent. If the destruction of the mental object in God's mind called "your frontal lobe" results in the destruction of a mental capacity in your own mind, then we have empirical evidence that our minds depend upon brains, whatever "brains" ultimately are.

CONCLUSION: NOT MUCH BETTER THAN RELIGIOUS FAITH

Champe Ransom recently wrote: "I admired Stevenson for his effort to obtain some real evidence for (as opposed to merely having faith in) the existence of reincarnation" (Ransom, 2015, p. 574). I share this attitude. I have respect for the project of psychical research in aiming to investigate the survival question scientifically, ostensibly respectful of the evidence. What I take issue with is the execution of that project, which is often (thankfully not always) anything but scientific.

Rhetoric about "scientism's dark shadow" (Mishlove, 2021*, pp. 10–13), how materialists would ask "why bother" if confronted by a drowning child (Tart, 2009, p. 298), DRW's claim that acknowledging that we might not live forever and ever and ever "leads to exaggerations of the worst vices of humanity: envy, greed, and selfishness" (2021*, p. 33), and so on, has no place in science. Survival researcher Charles Tart confesses: "If materialism is really true, my reaction is eat, drink, and be merry (and don't get caught by others if they don't approve of your pleasures), for tomorrow we die—and life doesn't mean anything anyway" (2009, p. 20). Pity that he thinks so little of himself that he believes that he would only behave morally if he could benefit from it in some way, such as in return for some postmortem reward. If that's really true—and I doubt that it is—then it's more of a reflection on the person who thinks that way than on any particular metaphysics. A moral person would help others not for the social

credit it that generates for himself, or to benefit himself in some other way, but simply *for the sake of the other people* helped—regardless of that person's picture of the world. Simply believing in ghosts doesn't make evil people good, and not believing in them doesn't make good people evil.

These are all **arguments from consequences**, and good science can never be built upon a foundation of *fallacies*. Nor is it served by showmanship (e.g., Carter, 2011, p. 48), or transparent **appeals to emotion**:

Materialism tells us that there is no purpose to anything. When we die, we are forever extinguished, and our atoms are recycled into other purposeless creatures. Eventually, all the suns will burn out, the universe will grow cold, and by a random fluke, the whole meaningless cycle might begin again. (DRW, 2021*, p. 33)

Going forward, will survival research be marked by throwing red meat to your base, or by investigating issues dispassionately for *everyone*?

I have seen this all before—in religion, not science. DRW could have easily cribbed their grievances from creationists railing against the ill effects of accepting that biological evolution occurs:

13. Belief in special creation has a *salutary influence on mankind*, since it encourages responsible obedience to the Creator and considerate recognition of those who were created by him.

...

15. Belief in evolution has historically been used by their leaders *to justify a long succession of evil systems*—including fascism, communism, anarchism, Nazism, occultism, and many others.

16. Belief in evolution and animal kinship *leads normally to selfishness, aggressiveness, and fighting between groups, as well as animalistic attitudes and behavior* by individuals. [emphasis mine] (Morris, 1972, pp. vi–viii)

Like acknowledgement of the occurrence of wars, a scientific picture of the world might well be "deeply unsatisfying" to certain people. There might even be "harmful effects of absorbing a picture of reality that children begin to learn as soon as they enter the (secular) educational system" (DRW, 2021*, p. 33)—imagine the horror if we taught them about the Holocaust, too! But that is no more reason to reject a scientific picture than it is to deny the existence

of wars. The religious *neutrality* of, or tolerance of religious diversity in, the public educational system is not the same thing as inculcating materialism. School children do not get days off from school in honor of materialist holidays, and materialists do not overtake school boards. What children and adults are inculcated with is not materialism, but knowledge, and it's not the fault of "materialists" that humanity only has beliefs about, and not knowledge of, spiritual realms. It's not up to those who believe in less than you to defend their absence of conviction. It's up to you to justify your postulation of more than they postulate.

The fact that spirits (or demigods, or whatever) are not among the class of things known to exist is not anybody's fault. Empirical survivalists do their brethren a disservice by so freely falling back on insinuations, the use of loaded terms, and other informal fallacies in place of addressing the actual points made by their opponents. Contra parapsychologist John Palmer, such behavior isn't so much "offensive" (2016, p. 251) as it is annoying, as it requires interlocutors to waste time addressing **non sequiturs** rather than arguments of substance. It's long overdue for tribal commentators to put away childish things and acknowledge that other people are perfectly within their rights to come to conclusions different from your own. You'll survive—I promise.

In any case, if empirical survivalists are going to present themselves as rational empiricists, it would seem incumbent on them to do some survey research to actually find out (rather than presume) the reasons that people have for their skepticism about personal survival. Research, perhaps, like this:

These survey results demonstrate that regardless of current belief in the survival of consciousness, religious or spiritual affiliation, or occupation, there were three experiments whose positive results would be the most persuasive for believing in the survival of consciousness after death: OBE/NDE, mediumship, and reincarnation. Interestingly, our evidential letter grades are reflected in these survey results. That is, academics who were presumably not especially familiar with the survival literature selected experiments that were rated the highest on our grading scheme. [emphasis mine] (DRW, 2021, p. 31)*

Many are thus skeptics of discarnate personal survival simply because the evidence in its favor is hardly compelling. We don't have a SoulPhone yet, after all. Elsewhere, even DRW concede the point themselves: "so far, no category of evidence has achieved a grade of A. This provides ample room for skepticism among those who remain ag-

nostic about survival" (2021*, p. 26). Indeed, the very fact that every single one of the 422 academics whom they surveyed responded positively to seeking replicable positive results from at least one of their 10 proposed experiments testifies to their lack of dogmatism. The idea that others don't believe the same things that you do because they are immovable dogmatists is merely what people who are insecure in their own faith tell themselves to assuage their own doubts. The survey results speak for themselves: "Not surprisingly, the non-religious respondents showed low confidence in survival and paranormal belief. However, they still selected the OBE/NDE experiment as the second most persuasive, and the mediumship and reincarnation experiments as the first and third most persuasive, respectively" (DRW, 2021*, p. 30). The actual presence of immovable dogmatism is unnecessary when using unchangeable **talking points**.

So much for skepticism about survival stemming from some rigid adherence to fundamaterialism, reductionism, scientism, pseudoskepticism, or whatever other pejorative is the word of the day. (One might as well throw in antifa at this point.) On the contrary, there's a stunning similarity between survivalist apologetics and those of fundamentalist Christians.

Tart even goes so far as to create a kind of materialist catechism he dubs "the Western Creed" since there'd be no **windmills** for him **to tilt at** if he didn't invent them himself. He invites readers to "do responsive recitation . . . and then repeat it out loud in a solid, formal way, as if you were pledging allegiance to your flag or reciting a creed in church" (2009, p. 27). What possible purpose could this exercise have other than to encourage readers to reject ideas based *purely on their emotional reactions* to them? One might as well create "the Realist's Creed" in which one makes a mantra out statements like "thousands die horrific deaths in elective wars," "many animals must kill or starve," or "over 99% of all species that have ever lived are now extinct," and then ask participants how they feel afterwards. Pretty bad, no? Well, simply stop believing that depressing facts are true. Climate change solved! In any other context this would be called living in denial. A mere **appeal to emotion** is a rhetorical strategy, not a rational argument, as it does not present any *grounds* for adopting a particular position on an issue.²² Like DRW, Tart goes on to conflate materialistic consumerism with materialist metaphysics.

Empirical survivalists can wag their fingers at those who disagree with them all that they want, but it will be to no avail. Skeptic shaming will never be an adequate substitute for presenting a strong argument or providing clear, genuinely scientific evidence for one's position. While social media may have lowered the bar for online discourse, I expect better of published work. If skeptics pigeonholing

proponents is irritating, set an example by not engaging in the exact same behavior that you decry when those in the other “tribe” exhibit it.

Are we rationally permitted to believe in personal survival? (Braude, 2021*, p. 1). Sure. As Alvin Plantinga has famously argued, we might well be rationally permitted to accept the religious belief system instilled in us in childhood in the absence of evidence, and even have no compunction to ever review the available (historical) evidence relevant to its truth or falsehood even when that could help settle the question for us (2000, pp. 416–417, 420–421). If what rationality permits is the bar, it’s a rather low bar.

A much more interesting question is not whether we *can* rationally affirm personal survival, but whether we *have to* rationally affirm it. Being rationally permitted to believe a proposition is much less compelling than being rationally obliged to do so, since in the latter case it would be positively irrational not to affirm personal survival. I suspect that Braude adopts the weaker standard out of epistemic responsibility because he knows (unlike some heedless, brash, and particularly vocal empirical survivalists) that the evidence favoring personal survival leaves much to be desired; he has, after all, intellectually honestly noted some of the weaknesses in that evidence himself, even while endorsing personal survival.

But what serves the interest of science is trying to get at *what’s likely to be the case*, not merely what’s permissible to believe. The probabilities should drive our beliefs, not the other way around. Does the evidence rationally compel belief in personal survival? It doesn’t even come close. The evidence doesn’t even make personal survival more probable than not.

NOTES

¹ “We selected [US] academics as likely to represent a subpopulation that would be more agnostic about survival than the general population due to their [supposed] immersion in the Western scientific worldview” (DRW, 2021*, p. 28). The **prejudice** that the general US population is hostile to personal survival due to Western inculcation is not evidenced in popular culture, where paranormal television develops a large niche following and usually includes no skeptical commentary whatsoever, since including it would reduce the air of mystery, making such programming less entertaining and hurt ratings. Moreover, if only as much as 10% of the US population identifies as an atheist, skepticism about an afterlife from the “30% to 40% who are unsure or do not believe” is rather unlikely to be due to either “the conviction that philosophical materialism is the only valid way to understand reality” or “a firm commitment to atheism” (DRW,

2021*, p. 2). More likely is that a larger segment of the general population is suspicious of things like mediums’ ability to communicate with the dead due to a widespread perception that mediums are often involved in fraud, which isn’t exactly historically unwarranted (e.g., Nahm, 2015; Spraggett & Rauscher, 1973; West, 1999), or lack experience of anything unequivocally paranormal.

² Cf. Robert Thouless on his innovative cipher tests of mental mediumship: “If . . . all attempts to carry out this and related tests do fail, this will obviously strengthen the case for non-survival” (1984, p. 24), even though “survival is consistent with the possibility that there can be no communication between those still living in their physical bodies and those whose bodies have died” (1984, p. 25).

³ By an “empirical survivalist” I simply mean “someone who both believes in survival and believes that there is empirical evidence that is at least suggestive of survival” (Sudduth, 2016, p. 50).

⁴ I add this qualification because empirical survivalists are constantly on the lookout for *any* neurological outliers that might be taken to defeat this otherwise strong body of diverse evidence unfavorable to survival (e.g., DRW, 2021*, pp. 11–12; Kelly et al., 2007, p. 411; van Lommel, 2021*, pp. 17–18, 26), even when they demonstrably fail to defeat it (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, pp. 248–251; Stokes, 2016, p. 172; Weisman, 2015, pp. 101–102).

⁵ This is key because otherwise the auxiliaries are doing all of the work to yield the predictions that the hypothesis, by itself, would otherwise give us no reason to expect. Moreover, whenever you conjoin an auxiliary to a hypothesis you are reducing its overall probability to some degree because now you are testing two non-100%-probable hypotheses, or three, or however many auxiliaries you add *in addition to* the primary hypothesis itself (which is why auxiliary assumptions are sometimes called auxiliary hypotheses). The reduction in probability can be small if the added auxiliaries are *themselves* highly confirmed (e.g., a 96% probable hypothesis × one 96% probable auxiliary yields a 92% probable hypothesis, all else held equal—though see Plantinga, 2000, p. 402 on dwindling probabilities). But if one’s auxiliaries are untestable in principle, the highest probability than can in fairness be allotted to them is 50% (the same 50–50 odds for the auxiliary as for its negation). This is what makes the upshot of Sudduth (2016) so devastating to empirical survivalists: other Bayesian values held equal, a 96% probable simple survival hypothesis × one 50% probable auxiliary yields a 48% probable “bulked-up” survival hypothesis—that is, one this is not even minimally more probable than not! (p > 50%).

⁶ This is exactly what would be expected if brain activ-

ity underlies mental activity. Liken mental processes to computational processes governed by programming rules (software), but enabled by physical infrastructure (hardware). Even though one could do both, one can disrupt how well a computer program functions much more profoundly by manipulating the underlying hardware than one can disrupt how well the underlying hardware functions by manipulating the computer program (though Stuxnet illustrates the latter well, if we regard centrifuge controllers as part of the hardware rather than supplemental to it). That's because functioning hardware is what grounds/enables the computational processes to occur/exist, just as brain functioning evidently grounds/enables mental processes to occur/exist in biological creatures.

⁷ On this issue, Nahm also invokes a **double standard**, writing of the dependence thesis, "it is impossible to prove it from a purely logical perspective," even though, incredibly, he had *just written* "we usually don't speak of 'proof' in sciences like psychical research" (2021*, p. 66). What justifies Nahm raising the bar for neuroscientific evidence while lowering it for evidence from psychical research?

⁸ Braude is absolutely right that "the very best cases are rich enough to give us pause" (2021*, p. 19), which is notably not the same thing as being rich enough to *overcome* the independent, robust evidence from ethology, comparative psychology, evolutionary psychology, behavioral genetics, developmental psychology, clinical neuropsychology, psychopharmacology, and so on. By any reasonable definition, the findings of these diverse fields are *relevant evidence* here—not a mere "metaphysical axe to grind"—particularly when even the best real-life survival evidence is admittedly "consistently frustrating in one way or another" (Braude, 2021b*, p. 19).

⁹ Cf. scientific *relativist* Paul Feyerabend: "The crank usually is content with defending [his] point of view in its original, undeveloped, metaphysical form, and he is not at all prepared to test its usefulness in all those cases which seem to favor the opponent, or even to admit that there exists a problem" (1964, p. 305).

¹⁰ In contrast to DRW's discussion, all but the last of Mishlove's five reasons for rejecting LAP interpretations of the survival evidence (2021*, pp. 89–91) are substandard. More damning is that there is abundant positive evidence *against* survivalist interpretations of that evidence (Augustine, 2015a, pp. 20–31; Augustine, 2015b, pp. 530–540, 545, 549–553, 556, 558, 561n6, 562n12; Blackmore, 2015, pp. 395–396, 399; Braude, 2003, pp. 24, 66–67; Crookall, 1972, pp. 89–90; Dodds, 1934, pp. 156–162, 171; Fenwick & Fenwick, 1997, p. 41; Fox, 1920/1962, p. 82; Gauld, 1982, pp. 32–33, 109–118, 146,

219, 228; Green & McCreery, 1975, pp. 18, 168–170, 205–206; Grey, 1985, p. 37; Holt, 1919, p. 203; Lester, 2015, pp. 640, 642–643; Lindley et al. 1981, p. 109; Murphy, 1945, pp. 87–90; Sudduth, 2016, pp. 61–62n11, 71, 97, 121, 127, 190–191, 221–223, 231, 273–275; Tart, 2009, pp. 217–218, 266–267). I have in mind here, for example, mediums ostensibly communicating with deceased persons who are later found out to be still alive, but whom the sitters believed to be dead at the time—which is more compatible with mind-reading than communication with nonexistent deceased persons. Swinburne lists: "First, there are no cross-checks between mediums about the alleged present experiences of the dead in the afterlife. Mediums never give independently verifiable reports on this. Second, their reports about the present alleged experiences of the dead are themselves very banal. Yet one would expect because of the total lack of evidence of dependence of the dead on their past bodies, that they would live in a very different world, and that this would emerge in their reports of that world" (1997, p. 303).

¹¹ There's an implicit conflict between Beischel's evidential standards and those of DRW. First, DRW feel compelled to include among the items in their evidential grade criteria decision matrix "multiple independent researchers reporting similar results *that do not require statistical arguments*" [emphasis mine] (2021*, p. 15), presumably because of the perception that purely statistical arguments are too easily manipulated (cf. Huff, 1954). Second, DRW keep in mind the various replication crises that have come to light since Ioannidis (2005) in the social sciences—e.g., "only about 20% of such results are independently reproducible even when these upper criteria [odds of 20 to 1] are achieved"—when noting that much higher odds against chance are *standardly* required to establish the existence of even conventional effects in "harder" sciences: "odds of 1,000 or even 10,000 to 1 may be required to persuade peers that something interesting is going on . . . In physics, where odds of a million to one are required to claim a provisional 'discovery,' it is not uncommon for such discoveries to later be invalidated as a mistake" (2021*, p. 37). So, even if it's true, it might not mean much that the statistical "evidence for psi is comparable to that for established phenomena in psychology and other disciplines" (Etzel Cardeña, in Beischel, 2021*, p. 35).

¹² Granted, this is only one case—but if reincarnation researchers can overlook such obvious conventional explanations in that recent heralded case, why should we have any confidence that they haven't done so in numerous other such cases that haven't been as thoroughly investigated? Moreover, why don't these researchers publish their unedited case reports on the Internet (with

personally identifiable information redacted when appropriate) to allow for *independent* analysis?

- ¹³ So much, then, for Nahm's response to conventional counterexplanations of CORT already noted in the literature: "none of the critiques listed above applies to the strong before-cases in which written documents were made before the previous personalities were identified and the families met" (2021*, p. 40). And I haven't even mentioned how spurious *specific* correspondences between one's life and that of a (supposedly reincarnated) person can be manufactured from whole cloth due to the law of near enough (Sudduth, 2021, pp. 999–1000, 1006; cf. Angel, 2015, pp. 575–578), even when supposed correspondences are *conflicting* (Sudduth, 2021, p. 1022n62).
- ¹⁴ Mind you, contest participants could respond that such details can be found in the outside sources that they cite, but do they really expect the contest judges to track down these sources for further information *in addition* to evaluating the 204 submissions that they received? It seems that, at the very least, an abstract-like summary of (1) and (2) could have been provided.
- ¹⁵ van Lommel writes: "So how do we know for sure that all functions of the brain have ceased during cardiac arrest? Many studies into induced cardiac arrest in both human and animal models have shown cerebral function to be severely compromised during cardiac arrest" (2021*, p. 10). But his cited human and animal studies predate those led by Lakhmir S. Chawla (2009, pp. 1096–1098) and Jimo Borjigin, which found otherwise. Thus Borjigin and colleagues characterize Parnia and Shirazi's equivalent claim that "the brain as an organ loses function within seconds of the heart stopping" (2021*, p. 63) as an "unsupported belief that the brain cannot possibly be the source of highly vivid and lucid conscious experiences during clinical death" (Borjigin et al., 2013, p. 14436).
- ¹⁶ Mishlove seems to regard this as evidential, in which case he's making an **appeal to popularity**: "A belief in postmortem survival of consciousness is common to every culture, nationality, religion, and linguistic group in every region and historical period on Earth. Every single one!" (Mishlove, 2021*, p. 9) As Mark Twain once quipped, "One of the proofs of the immortality of the soul is that myriads have believed it. They also believed the world was flat" (Twain, 1902/1935, p. 379). Mishlove thinks that our "modernist" "current technological era is historically unusual" (2021*, p. 10) in allowing open doubt about personal survival, but as classicist Richard Lattimore points out, "there are several pagan epitaphs in which death is spoken of as an everlasting sleep . . . if it is qualified as ultimate or eternal, then sleep is annihilation; a dreamless sleep is a complete suspension of all sensation" (1923, p. 78). Moreover, such doubt can

be found in the Indian Carvaka, the author/s of Ecclesiastes, ancient Greek poets like Moscus, Taoism founder Chuang-tzu, the towering philosopher Aristotle, the musical theoretician Aristoxenus, the geographer Dicaearchus, the Sadducees, the Epicureans, the Confucian school of Hsün-tzu, the ancient Roman poets Horace or Lucretius, the playwright Seneca, the encyclopedist Pliny the Elder, the first-century Chinese philosopher Wang Ch'ung, the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, the anti-Buddhist Fan Zhen, the medieval Arabic astronomer Omar Khayyám, the 11th-century Syrian poet Al-Ma'arri, the Renaissance playwright Montaigne, the unparalleled dramatist William Shakespeare, and so on. Survivalists have had no more monopoly on culture than they have had on science, even before the Enlightenment, or outside of the West, or both.

- ¹⁷ Note also that if personal survival really did occur for human beings, the continuum of consciousness across the animal kingdom implies that it would occur for earwigs, too (Broad, 1925, pp. 530–532), raising the question of just how many afterlives a survivalist has to unparsimoniously posit in order to maintain a consistent belief system—presumably afterlives not only for the individual members of extant species, but for the members of long-extinct species as well. Upon seeing death in the wild, those reluctant to posit so many "ghosts" might well conclude that the fate of human beings after death is no different than that of any other organism (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:18–22).
- ¹⁸ Similarly, Nahm erroneously assumes that, unlike veridical perceptions during NDEs that could be chalked up to residual brain function (and presumably normal perception), for "veridical accounts of events that occurred in this intermission [between lives] . . . the only option left for physicalists is postulating that these cases are not authentic" (2021*, p. 18). But LAP interpretations (e.g., citing clairvoyance or retrocognition) are as open to "physicalists" as anyone else. To wit: "It should not be thought . . . that all parapsychologists are necessarily committed to a dualist interpretation of the mind–body relationship . . . [M]any exponents prefer to think of psi as essentially a function of the brain, or of some special brain mechanism or process" (Beloff, 1987, p. 586).
- ¹⁹ Like most "physicalists," I refrain from invoking LAP because I'm simply unconvinced of its existence. Nahm believes that I reject all LAP interpretations as "incredibly *ad hoc*" (2021*, p. 59) when it's only *unlimited* LAP—i.e., superpsi—that's problematically unfalsifiable (Augustine, 2015a, p. 33). Nahm's error stems from his by now inexcusable conflation of the two: "the living-agent psi model is also called the 'super-psi' model" (2021*, p. 49). This conflation is **question-begging**: "This term points

to the fact that psi of an enormous quality and quantity is required to explain all facets of survival phenomena" (Nahm, 2021*, p. 49). It's also pernicious, for the **loaded term** superpsi is used to deliberately **shift the burden of proof** off of empirical survivalists and on to their critics by **poisoning the well**. And it seems to **straw man** critics: "ordinary vanilla psi is sufficiently mysterious to account for most, if not all, of the evidence for survival" (Radin, 2008). Why is Radin wrong? If you merely change your vocabulary, you never have to offer a reason why. Sudduth's neutral term LAP doesn't imply anything about how "much" psi (if any) is required to explain the survival evidence, which is the same amount of psi in any case! As Braude notes, "survivalists are committed to positing comparably impressive psi on the part of the deceased or the living" (2017, p. 155). Continuing to conflate the two is thus a mere "logical sleight of hand" (Sudduth, 2016, p. 290). Indeed, Braude notes that this point is so obvious that it's remarkable that so many empirical survivalists have "missed" it: "This is so easy to see, it's quite astonishing that many works on survival fail to acknowledge it . . . Although this is not a difficult point to grasp, prominent writers on survival seem curiously oblivious to it" (2021*, p. 5).

²⁰ Consider that the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, famous for his argument that "death is nothing to us" since we will not exist to experience it, believed in a kind of physical soul that disintegrates at death along with the normal physical body's atoms.

²¹ Ironically, Ruickbie quotes Cyril Burt maintaining that "the brain functions, not as a generator of consciousness, but rather as a two-way transmitter and detector; i.e., although its activity is apparently a necessary condition, it cannot be a sufficient condition, of conscious experience" (Ruickbie, 2021*, pp. 65–66). If brain activity is a necessary condition for consciousness, even if it "transmits" rather than wholly "generates" it, then consciousness cannot exist in the absence of brain activity, as Swinburne notes.

²² And when this is presented in order to persuade an audience to adopt a belief for other than rational reasons, it's a fallacy. Tart adds: "Hopefully there'll be some long-term change in beliefs" as a result of the rote recitation he recommends in his Western Creed exercise (2009, p. 31).

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