



COMMENTARY

A Guardian Angel Gone Astray: How Not to Engage in Scientific Debates

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HIGHLIGHTS

A previous critique of key aspects of an award-winning essay on postmortem survival arguably failed to meet the standards of objectivity, impartiality, and scientific responsibility required in academic debates.

ABSTRACT

In a recent commentary on an essay competition regarding the best evidence for the survival of human consciousness, Keith Augustine prominently criticized the award-winning essay I submitted to this competition. As demonstrated in the present article, Augustine's critique is specious as evidenced by specifically two aspects of it: 1) On multiple occasions, Augustine misrepresented contents of my essay by attributing statements to me I never made and by presenting quotes out of context and contorting their original meaning. Due to Augustine's misrepresentations of my essay's content, it is unavoidable to conclude that his entire commentary is permeated by biased reasoning. 2) Although Augustine caviled at numerous formulations he drew from all over my essay, he did not mention that I singled his work out for profound criticism on numerous pages of my essay. He did not even attempt to counter my critique of his arguments on factual grounds. In conclusion, Augustine's commentary is a good example of a bad contribution to the survival debate.

KEYWORDS

Misrepresentation and suppression of content; misinformation; quoting out of context; reincarnation cases; survival of consciousness

The summer issue of this journal contained a special section about the Bigelow Institute of Consciousness Studies (BICS) essay competition regarding the best evidence for human survival. It featured a lengthy commentary by Keith Augustine (2022a) on chiefly eight selected essays, a response to Augustine by a team of authors (Braude et al., 2022), and a lengthy final reply by Augustine (2022b). After I learned that Augustine selected my essay for this competition (Nahm, 2021) along with that of Delorme et al. (2021) for most prominent critique of all 29 award-winning essays in his commentary, I became intrigued. Of all prized BICS contestants, I was the only one who explicitly criticized Augustine's writings, specifically his explanatory model for cases of the reincarnation type (CORT).¹ Hence, I wondered how he responded to my criticism. But reading his commentary turned out to be disappointing for three reasons. First, Augustine barely responded to my factual critique of his explanatory model for CORT but rather quibbled with numerous statements he drew from all over my essay. He did not even mention that I singled out his work for pages-long critique. Second, I became increasingly surprised when noticing that Augustine, a fervid skeptic who styled himself as a guardian angel of objectivity, impartiality, honesty, and scientific integrity in his commentary, contorted contents of my essay on multiple occasions in always the same decrying spirit, misleading his readers by attribut-



ing statements to me that I never made. Third, the basics of the arguments Augustine advanced in his critique, but also of counter-arguments, were already familiar to me from the literature (e.g., Augustine, 2016; Martin & Augustine, 2015a; Matlock, 2016a, 2016b). Now, he merely applied his usual way of arguing to the essay contest, and it seemed as if he rated all essays he considered as equally nonsensical and reprehensible. Overall, I barely learned anything new. I would have liked to see a more nuanced, comparative, and structured critique of the essays, evaluating for example differences in their methodological approaches, the rationales behind them, some of their strengths and weaknesses, etc. Apart from that, I often found Augustine's arguments inapt, and I largely concur with Braude et al.'s (2022) appraisal of his commentary. But because Augustine (2022b) found their arguments likewise inapt, it is very likely that the debate which covered already 57 (!) pages by Augustine (2022a, 2022b) plus 13 pages by Braude et al. (2022) would merely continue in the same vein in case I would now explain why I consider his arguments inapt. We would simply continue to explicate why we continue to disagree, which would not produce much of noteworthy value in addition to what has already been said. Therefore, and also because of space limitation, I spare the readers an analogous loop of mutual disagreement but will chiefly highlight another level of Augustine's commentary that has not yet received the attention it deserves: I demonstrate how on several occasions he disseminated misrepresentative notions concerning statements he criticized. This conduct is objectively verifiable and therefore not a matter of mere disagreement. Moreover, it raises serious concerns from a superordinate perspective about the overall manner in which he seems to devise his arguments.

Braude et al. (2022) have apparently made similar observations, blaming Augustine for straw-man reasoning such as charging survivalists with positions they do not hold (p. 409). To my amazement, Augustine responded to them with this bold challenge: "Find just one direct quotation of a single instance where I explicitly attributed a position to a BICS essay contest winner that the winner did not advocate. Otherwise, mind your accusations" (2022b, p. 430). Because it is very easy to find such examples in Augustine's commentary, and because it is generally worthwhile to be aware of the methods that can be used to create devaluing distortions and fictions concerning a treatise under examination, I present a selection of seven examples that show how Augustine proceeded in misrepresenting contents of my essay. I furthermore highlight why such practices are not only egregious per se, but also point to a much deeper problem for scientific debates. In the second part of this paper, I pick up some lines of critique of Augustine's work I advanced in my BICS essay. However, in order

to optimally understand the meaning and context of the following sections, I strongly recommend that readers of this article read my BICS essay as well, and then carefully compare its content with the critique Augustine offered against it.

PART 1: THE ART OF MISLEADING READERS. SEVEN EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE

Example 1: Attributing a position to an author on grounds of a gross misunderstanding and discrediting the author on these grounds.

I begin with an example that illustrates how Augustine constructed an alleged discrepancy between two formulations contained in my essay, misinterpreting what I wrote in a remarkable way. On page 391 of his article, Augustine wrote:

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?

There is no double standard and also nothing incredible here—apart from Augustine's failure to notice that I wrote very obviously about proof *in a negative sense on both occasions*. In paraphrase, they convey the following meanings:

- 1) We cannot prove from a logical perspective that brain chemistry produces consciousness, which is why even many modern neuroscientists speak of "neuronal correlates" to conscious experience (Nahm, 2021, pp. 3, 66) (Note: I wrote specifically about the *production hypothesis* but not about a more general "dependence thesis" as Augustine mistakenly claimed).
- 2) We usually do not speak of proof in sciences like psychical research because the concept of proof is generally problematic in this field.

The reason why these two statements are perfectly accordant is simple: In contrast to for instance mathematics, one should principally not speak of obtaining proof in natural sciences including psychical research *and* neuroscience because it is virtually impossible to obtain 100% "proof" for something in these areas from a logical perspective. In case there should be any doubt about my position, I quote from an email I sent to the BICS staff on June 28, 2021, after

I was informed that I have to frame my essay explicitly in context of the legal concept of “proof beyond a reasonable doubt”—a requirement that I was (and am) not too happy with.

I suppose it would be difficult to deal with such legal requirements properly because it is not clear what exactly “proof beyond a reasonable doubt” is even in court, and also because “proof” is a concept generally avoided in the [natural] sciences. The term usually used is ‘evidence.’

Example 2: Misleading readers by attributing statements to authors they have never made, simple version.

On page 381 of his article, Augustine claimed in an apparent attempt to discredit near-death experiences (NDEs) that I would have “conceded” that “cross-cultural comparisons of NDE reports [. . .] are characterized by more differences than similarities (Nahm, 2021, p. 18).” I have not “conceded” anything like that in my essay, let alone on page 18. Rather, I wrote on page 14: “Although they are marked by cultural influence, NDEs share a common core structure featuring several elements.” Evidently, I highlight the contrary here, namely that NDEs share overall communalities *despite* their being culturally influenced.

Example 3: Misleading readers by attributing statements to authors they have never made, inflated version.

On page 379 of his article, Augustine claimed two times that I deemed the CORT of James Leininger to be the “second best” before-case in my essay (before-cases refer to cases in which a child’s statements about a previous life were documented *before* a previous personality that matched these statement has been identified).² The rationale behind Augustine’s particular emphasis on Leininger’s case is obvious: He believes— —mistakenly—that it has been debunked by Michael Sudduth (2021; but see Matlock, 2022a, 2022b). Hence, stressing repeatedly that I considered the allegedly flawed Leininger case to be the “second best” will evidently cause correspondingly great damage to my arguments in favour of this case—and of CORT as a whole.

However, I have not stated anywhere that I deemed Leininger’s case to be the “second best” before-case. Contrarily, I treated it only very casually. In the main text of my essay, I referred to it exactly *once* (p. 26): “Further well-documented American before-cases are those of James Leininger and Rylann O’Bannion.” Then, there is a four-line footnote that provides additional information and references to these two cases. Finally, the case is in-

cluded in Table 2 in which I listed 15 important before-cases. The reason why Augustine claimed repeatedly that I considered Leininger’s case the “second best” before-case is that it is found in the second line of Table 2, after the case of Ryan Hammons. It is beyond my comprehension how somebody can regard the order of the cases in Table 2—and consequently, also in the subsequent Table 3?—as a ranking of the “best cases.” The most striking aspect of the two Tables’ arrangement of cases is that they are primarily and visibly sorted according to geographical regions and countries. Why, for example, should I consider Leininger’s case, which I characterized as an “impressive” case in Table 2 (line 2) and mentioned just once and casually in my essay, and the case of Rylann O’Bannion (line 3) which I likewise mentioned only once and casually (see above), to be “better” than the “exceptionally well-documented” case of Gnanatilleka Baddewithana (line 5), which I introduced and summarized very prominently on pages 26 and 27, and the significance of which I highlighted on two additional occasions?

Example 4: Misleading readers by attributing statements to authors they have never made, plus utilizing this claim several times.

On page 380 of his article, Augustine wrote:

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? [. . .] To be a genuine prediction, a particular item has to be derived from a hypothesis in some way. [. . .] 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.

Thereafter, Augustine added a critique about what is wrong with some of my “predictions” (see also Augustine, 2022b, p. 422). But “survival researcher” Nahm did not “call” or “declare” anything to be a “prediction” in the context Augustine referred to. It was Augustine alone who retroactively declared some aspects of my introductory overview of empirical findings concerning CORT to be “predictions.” Because he did not inform his readers about his move, they are led to erroneously believe that I used this prominent scientific catchword inappropriately on sever-

al occasions. In reality, I perfectly agree with Augustine: What he declared to be Nahm's "predictions" are no predictions at all—albeit for very different reasons than those he offered.

Example 5: Misleading readers by quoting an author selectively and out of context.

On page 372 of his article, Augustine wrote:

To say that dependence thesis proponents "regard survival 'impossible' in an aprioristic way" (Nahm, 2021, p. 66) merely attacks a straw-man.

Again, what I "said" was actually something quite different: "Impartial court members [. . .] would not regard survival 'impossible' in an aprioristic way." This statement harkens back to my essay's beginning in which I introduced three guiding principles for the adequate study of psi phenomena suggested by Hans Driesch, the first being "Do not regard any fact 'impossible' in an aprioristic way" (Nahm, 2021, p. 4). Although I do hold the opinion that some "dependence thesis proponents" are heavily prejudiced and some have in fact declared survival to be impossible in an aprioristic way (e.g., Vollmer, 2017), I nowhere proclaimed the sweeping generalization "dependence thesis proponents regard survival impossible in an aprioristic way" in my essay. Perhaps, Augustine inferred that I intended to proclaim this allegation. But selling inferences for facts when quoting selectively from an author, thereby attributing statements to them they did not make, is misplaced in scientific debates.

Example 6: Misleading readers by quoting an author selectively and out of context.

This example concerns a section of my essay in which I evaluated the evidential strength of 10 different survival phenomena including mental mediumship. Overall, I rated the evidential value of mental mediumship rather high, only CORT attained a higher score (Nahm, 2021, p. 20). With regard to my evaluation of mental mediumship, Augustine emphasized an alleged inconsistency in my arguments:

Given the weight that both [Delorme et al. (2021)] and Nahm give to historical trance mediumship, readers may be surprised to read Nahm's overall assessment: [. . .] "The qualitative strength of mental mediumship cannot be regarded as 'high.'" (Augustine, 2022a, p. 378).

First, it is wrong that the quote Augustine selected concerned my "overall assessment" of mental mediumship. Rather, I evaluated five different criteria of survival phenomena separately, their *qualitative strength* being one of them. It is the sum of these five criteria that represents my overall evaluation of a given survival phenomenon. Augustine selected a quote that only referred to the qualitative strength of mental mediumship, and by claiming it would represent my "overall assessment" he put it into a false and inflated context.

Second, my statement that the qualitative strength of mental mediumship cannot be regarded as "high" does not mean that it is "low," as readers will erroneously infer from reading Augustine's selected quote and from his additional creation of an alleged "contrast" (ibid., p. 378) to the evaluation of Delorme et al. (2021) who assigned the evidential value of mental mediumship a relatively high grade. But just like these authors, who rated mental mediumship "good" albeit not "strong" (their maximum grade), I rated the qualitative strength of mental mediumship "relatively high" albeit not "high" (my maximum grade). We even did that for pretty much the same reasons. The "contrast" Augustine constructed via quoting misleadingly from my essay does not exist.

Example 7: Misleading readers by suppressing relevant information, plus quoting an author selectively and out of context, plus using drastic language to simulate authority.

On page 392 of his article, Augustine complained that I performed an "inexcusable conflation" of the two terms living-agent psi (LAP) and super-psi, buttressing his claim by using the following quote from my essay: "The living-agent psi model is also called the 'super-psi' model."

To begin with, Augustine conspicuously omitted the beginning of the sentence in the quote above, thereby concealing that this quote explicitly referred to history and tradition: "Traditionally, the living-agent psi model is also called the 'super-psi' model" (Nahm, 2021, p. 49, emphasis added). To check if this statement implies an "inexcusable conflation" of the two terms, it is instructive to read writings of Michael Sudduth and Stephen Braude, the authors who published the most important treatises on super-psi and LAP.

In one of his earlier publications, Sudduth commented on "living agent psychic functioning, *the so-called Super-ESP hypothesis*" (Sudduth, 2009a, p. 399; emphasis added) and termed his first major publication on this matter "a defense of the super-psi hypothesis" (ibid., p. 401). In this treatise on LAP, Sudduth explained that "advocates of the super-psi hypothesis contend that [evidence for survival] may be at least equally explicable in terms of living agent psi as by

personal survival” (Sudduth, 2009b, p. 168). He also maintained that “the term ‘super-psi’ is laden with unwanted and misleading connotations” but stressed that he will nevertheless “follow the *traditional terminology*” for much of his paper (ibid., emphasis added). Similarly, Braude stated that the position according to which survival phenomena could be explained by “psychic functioning among the living [. . .] is often, but unfortunately, called the super-psi hypothesis” (Braude, 2013, p. 26).

Hence, from a tradition- and terminology-oriented perspective, my opening sentence on LAP is obviously correct as evidenced by the quoted statements. More could be added. Conceptually, however, I am well aware that especially Sudduth’s theorizing regarding LAP has increasingly departed from the earlier theories on super-psi. In this respect, I am thankful to Augustine for making me aware that I did not distinguish properly between tradition and terminology on one hand and conceptual advancements on the other hand. But regardless of that, I have *not* conflated the contemporary concepts of super-psi and LAP. By contrast: I explicitly defined how I *distinguished* and used both terms in my essay:

[The term “super-psi”] points to the fact that psi of an enormous quality and quantity is required to explain all facets of survival phenomena. In my definition, it is a quantitative attribution that denotes a difference in psi degree, not one in nature, similar to distinguishing “stars” from the rarer but more impressive “super-stars” in show business. The related term “living-agent psi” is a qualitative attribution similar to saying that a star or super-star can be a “music star” or a “movie star.” It stresses that the psi or super-psi required must be attributed to living beings but not to deceased agents. (Nahm, 2021, pp. 49f)³

Augustine suppressed my explicit differentiation of the two terms completely. Worse: He actually quoted from it—but again in a selective manner that not only concealed the differentiation itself but additionally contorted my statements. Insinuating that I referred to a super-psi-inclusive version of LAP, he quoted only a small excerpt of the differentiation cited above, namely: “This term points to the fact that psi of an enormous quality and quantity is required to explain all facets of survival phenomena,” and he built several lines of critique on this quote. He even stressed that “Sudduth’s neutral term LAP doesn’t imply anything about how ‘much’ psi [. . .] is required to explain the survival evidence” (Augustine, 2022a, p. 393). But as anybody can read above (and in my essay), this is exactly how I characterized and used the concept of LAP as well.

Hence, the arguments that Augustine advanced against my essay on the basis of my alleged “conflation” of the terms super-psi and LAP are once again pointless—apart from their demonstrating how somebody can construct a seemingly powerful but fictitious straw-man using a few trivial tricks: 1) Suppress the presence of important information contained in a text and claim that it is in fact conspicuously lacking, 2) select a quote, pull it out of context, and contort its original meaning to use it as a substantiation of your wrong claim, 3) use drastic formulations such as “inexcusable” to raise the impression that the criticized author was misbehaving in a very evident and stupid way—because otherwise, one would not be daring to use such drastic formulations.⁴

CONCLUSIONS FROM PART 1

Straw-men eternalized in print can be exposed via pertinent examination. But unfortunately, authors who fabricate them will nevertheless get away with them all too often. Most readers simply have no time and desire to double-check every claim authors make, especially if they come in the disguise of knowledge and authority. Speaking from my experience, however, I found that publications written in a cynical, scornful, holier-than-thou style gushing with quasi-religious zeal and preachy emphasis on the importance of true science are likely to contain distortions and fictions. Hence, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that publications written in such a style deserve a particularly critical read.

Although such conduct is interesting from a psychological perspective, these distortions and fictions are rather troublesome for scientific debates. In addition to merely disseminating misinformation that is often difficult to erase again from the literature, they point to a much deeper problem: Given that authors misrepresent the work of their interlocutors on multiple occasions in the spirit of a denigrating and devaluing agenda, be it consciously or unconsciously—are we entitled to believe that their lines of reasoning are objective and impartial even where they do not misrepresent the material they discuss? I strongly doubt that. Rather, I maintain that authors who habitually misrepresent the work of their interlocutors decryingly in discussions about a controversial topic of their personal interest will principally behave in a biased manner when they choose and evaluate sources to design their arguments. Regarding Augustine, I perfectly agree with Braude et al. (2022) and previous critics of his work who already demonstrated earlier that his manner of arguing is selective and biased indeed (Greyson, 2007a, 2007b; Holden, 2007; Matlock, 2016a, 2016b; Ring, 2007). Moreover, given such authors are evidently unaware of their easily demon-

strable misrepresentations of content according to their bias (“find just one instance,” “mind your accusations”), they are very likely even less aware of their more covert biased practices. They will indignantly disavow pertinent critique and simply continue their blind flight with reinforced verve (e.g., Augustine, 2022b). An advancement of a scientific debate is impossible under such conditions. Regarding the debate on CORT, the main topic of my BICS essay, this deplorable state of affairs is particularly striking. The comparably small amount of literature on CORT that has been published by survival-critics who reject LAP contains a disconcerting amount of scorn, sweeping generalizations, and misinformation (for references to some examples, see my essay), thus revealing that the authors of these publications were anything but well-informed, objective, and impartial.⁵

PART2: THE DRONE OF SILENCE

In the previous section, I showed that what Augustine wrote in his lengthy commentary contains clear evidence of misrepresentation of my essay’s contents and fallacies. It does not meet the standards of scientific debates. In this section, I show that what Augustine kept silent about substantiates this notion from another angle. On pages 37 to 49 of my essay, I prominently criticized the explanatory model for CORT according to which all facets of a case can be explained via mundane means, such as parental coaching, misremembering, misinterpretation, and fraud. Survival and LAP explanations are both rejected in this model. Augustine, a physicalist who maintains not only that mind is positively caused by brain activity but who additionally advocates the peculiar stance according to which all mental processes are brain processes and that the mind is the nervous system (Augustine & Fishman, 2015), is a vigorous proponent of this model (Augustine, 2015).

After an introduction, I listed the various means that Augustine considered to be sufficient for a mundane explanation for CORT. Then, I argued that this model would not apply to strong before-cases, explicitly giving the cases of American Ryan Hammons and Sri Lankan Gnanatilleka Baddewithana as examples (pp. 40f). In his commentary, Augustine (2022a, pp. 380, 392) objected by simply claiming that “normal/conventional sources of information for ostensibly anomalous knowledge” would have been present in before-cases, thereby alleging that the reports of all before-cases are seriously flawed. Effectively, he just re-invoked the supposition I have termed the “somewhere-somewhat conjecture” in my essay already. According to this supposition, all CORT *must* be flawed somewhere, somehow; and this supposition is then sold as an explanation for them. I elaborated why this con-

jecture lacks a scientific rationale and is also insufficient to account for the documented phenomenology of CORT on factual grounds. But rather than taking the opportunity to respond to my charges on factual grounds as well, Augustine stayed silent about the cases of Ryan and Gnanatilleka but merely replayed his somewhere-somewhat conjecture as if nothing had happened. Moreover, as argued already, he preferred to quibble with all sorts of other issues in his commentary while simultaneously remaining suspiciously quiet about my pages-long explicit critique of his writings. Evidently, withholding significant information from readers merely by staying silent about it also belongs to the established means by which they can be influenced according to someone’s agenda. Additionally, Augustine did not even provide a reference to a source that would support his allegation according to which all before-case reports are decidedly flawed. Undoubtedly, he thought about the case of James Leininger as one such example. But this case is unsuited to support his claim (Matlock, 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, I reiterate: Sweeping generalizations without foundation do not qualify as scientific arguments. Rather, they represent paradigm examples of diversionary tactics and immunization strategies, i.e., strategies employed to keep the debate on a very general and seemingly inviolable level, thereby avoiding entering a discussion about crucial practice-related minutiae. But we need something with more substance. Given Augustine’s suppositions are true: Where exactly did the parental coaching, misinterpretation, misreporting, or cheating enter the reports about Ryan and Gnanatilleka’s cases? What is the flaw that renders them untenable?

Augustine (2022a, p. 380) used the same sweeping generalization, namely claiming that conventional sources of information for ostensibly anomalous knowledge have been present in before-cases, also to refute the results of a study I introduced in my essay. Its authors compared the mean percentage of correct statements and the overall number of statements recorded in 21 before-cases to those recorded in 82 “after-cases”, i.e. cases in which the statements were recorded only *after* the families of the subjects and previous personalities had met and interacted with each other (Schouten & Stevenson, 1998). The study showed that these before-cases and after-cases yielded almost equal percentages of correct statements, and that the overall number of statements was even significantly higher in before-cases. For reasons outlined in the original study and my essay, both results contradict what one should expect from the perspective of Augustine’s model. Interestingly, Augustine’s repudiation of these results by simply invoking the presence of conventional sources of information in before-cases implies that the before-cases Schouten and Stevenson considered contained *at least* as

much misremembering, misreporting, and/or deceit as the after-cases they considered. This implication stands in contrast to common sense and the notion held by the majority of scientists who are in general agreement that for obvious reasons, misreporting and misremembering are more difficult and unlikely to occur in before-cases—hence their widely recognized importance and scientific desirability (e.g., Matlock, 2021, 2022b). To date, nobody has even tried to demonstrate that many let alone all before-cases are flawed.⁶

Augustine's attempt to counter two of my numerous arguments against his explanatory model for CORT by simply repeating the same somewhere-somewhat conjecture I already demonstrated to be deficient in my essay, is virtually everything that he had to offer in defense. His refusal to enter a data-driven debate comes close to the claim according to which data suggestive of psi are "irrelevant" and need to be disregarded when forming the correct opinion about our world (Reber & Alcock, 2019). This stance has already been noted to be symptomatic of the egregious state of some prominent forms of current skepticism (Nahm, 2020; Roe, 2019). Concerning my arguments against his explanation for CORT, at least, the verbosity and cynicism of Augustine's commentary merely represent the drone of silence.⁷

In the following, I introduce a few selected aspects of the arguments that Augustine did not address. Space limitation precludes a more detailed exposition of the fascinating and multifaceted phenomenology of CORT and of many more arguments that challenge his model, so I need to refer interested readers to my essay.

To begin with, it is obvious that adults who initiate the purposeful or unwitting creation of a contrived CORT for the mentioned motives should make sure that the identity of the previous personality whose past life a child speaks about can be readily identified. The easiest way to ensure this identification consists of providing personal names of the previous personalities and/or of their family members to enable people to "solve" the case. However, this is often not the case. Consequently, some CORT can only be solved after years, if at all. Many remain permanently unsolved despite substantial efforts to identify the deceased individual in question. In this context, Sri Lanka is of particular interest. When comparing countries where children provide similar average amounts of information about their supposed past lives, children provide personal names more rarely in Sri Lanka. Also, Sri Lankan Gnanatilleka did not provide names of her claimed previous family. Consequently, an unusually high proportion of 76% of Sri Lankan CORT remained unsolved in Stevenson's files (Stevenson, 1977). Such a high share of unsolved cases is clearly not in line with what must be expected from Augustine's model.

Why should all these people take the trouble to construct artificial CORT to improve their social or financial status, and then omit, of all things, the most relevant trivialities, but still keep their construct alive for years and wait in vain for the expected profits—and this specifically in Sri Lanka?⁸ The survival model offers a smooth explanation for this curious lack of providing names in Sri Lankan CORT: When Stevenson conducted his investigations, people who lived there avoided using personal names as much as possible for traditional reasons. In contrast to other countries, they almost had a national phobia about calling anyone by their given names, even among spouses. Therefore, it would be understandable if words which were rarely spoken or heard in a past life, and concepts which had in effect strongly been avoided, might not rank high among items remembered or spoken of by Sri Lankan CORT subjects.

Other data challenge Augustine's model more directly. For example, a study in which numerous features of CORT have been correlated has shown the following (Tucker, 2000):

- There was no correlation between the strength of a case and the social status and caste of the subjects. This counters the supposition that CORT would preferably be created in poor families to increase their financial or social status.
- There was no correlation between the strength of a case and the reaction of the subject's parents to their children's claims. This is inconsistent with the supposition that the parents stimulate and encourage the creation of CORT.

The emotions displayed by the young subjects in CORT also constitute an important feature. Many who were able to engage personally with these children became convinced that they just cannot be the result of fantasies or parental coaching (for examples, see my essay). This concerns emotions that may shake the little ones when they talk about their presumed death in the past life, which was often violent and unpleasant. It also concerns negative emotions when they desperately long to see members of their supposed previous family but cannot do so for months and maybe years, but also overt joy, relief, and sadness when they finally meet and recognize them. Take the case of Gnanatilleka again, of which I included two photographs in my essay. They showed how she reacted at age four when she first met members of what she claimed to be her previous family. From a safe distance at a desk, all this may seem pretty unimpressive. Does Augustine say that Gnanatilleka was coached to behave in this way (by whom, when, and where?), or that the entire investigation and the photographs were staged (by whom, and how)? Because Augustine did not address such vital and prac-

tice-related questions, and did not even attempt to counter my arguments against his explanation for CORT on factual grounds, I can simply repeat my essay's conclusion regarding his model (Nahm, 2021, p. 48):

Regarding the better-documented cases, an explanatory model that ultimately needs to resort to postulating numerous years-long, fraudulent, water-tight conspiracies by entire extended families plus various neighbors, villagers, strangers, and perhaps even researchers—and all this without being able to show solid positive evidence supporting this notion, and in the light of several failed predictions of its background hypothesis whilst simultaneously ignoring all counter-evidence—is modest at best.

PART 3: CONCLUDING COMMENTS

First, I briefly comment on subjective personal experiences. In typical scientific contexts, they cannot be considered to constitute objective evidence for obvious reasons. Hence, I would like to stress that I do *not* advance the following considerations as a scientific argument but only as a personal comment. I add it because occasionally it is useful to remember that we are dealing with personal experiences when we address the questions about whether aspects of the mind can function independently of a brain or if there is life after death. This obviously differs from addressing the question about whether there is life on Mars. I alluded to the significance of personal experiences for oneself already in my essay. I stated that in contrast to the mainstream notion, CORT subjects and witnesses deeply involved in CORT might regard the physicalist hypothesis according to which consciousness is produced by the brain to be an as-yet-unwarranted hypothesis (Nahm, 2021, p. 66). In my life, I have had a number of experiences that I can solely explain in terms of psi, and I also had one time-anchored experience of dual awareness that I can only explain in terms of the supposition that one part of my mind operated independently of my brain—even though I am perfectly aware of all the evidence for the “dependence thesis,” the dangers of misinterpreting such experiences, etc. In each case, these experiences were very plain and simple—not of the kinds that are complex and difficult to interpret, such as alien abductions or fleeting apparitions in twilight. I also know that countless people, ranging from intimate family members and friends to strangers, have reported very similar experiences (for an overview on the prevalence of exceptional experiences in different countries, see Schmied-Knittel, 2015). Therefore, reading theoretical treatises by people who insist that the

experiences I had are “impossible” (Reber & Alcock, 2019) or that my interpretations of them must be wrong is often perplexing and sometimes even amusing; and pretty much the same applies to theoretical elaborations in which authors explicate how proper “probabilities” for the mind/brain-dependence must be gauged (Augustine, 2022a, 2022b; Augustine & Fishman, 2015; see also Nahm, 2021, p. 59). I know that I speak for very many people including scientists when I say: For those who have solid first-hand experiences demonstrating the contrary, such authors are simply not on a level playing field. They do not know what they are talking about.

Coming to a close now, I look forward to reading Augustine's reply, wondering if it will match my expectations regarding its content and tone. Contemplating his multiple misrepresentations of my essay, it occurred to me that it is occasionally likewise useful to remember that from the perspective of the physicalists' “world of natural science in all its mechanistic glory,” we are causally closed entities consisting of only “flesh, blood, atoms, and molecules” (Reber & Alcock, 2019, p. 10), or using Augustine's more refined words: Mental processes are actually brain processes. It follows logically that there is no free will and that 1) we never had any chance to act differently than how we acted in the past and that 2) our futures are likewise fixed already except for quantum events we cannot influence (Hossenfelder, 2022; Vollmer, 2017). These deductions are consequential. Thus, I often marvel at physicalist skeptics who *constantly treat parapsychologists and survival researchers as if they had a free will*, blaming them of having performed pseudoscience, cherry-picking, and other “inexcusable” misconduct, complaining they should have known better, behaved differently, and thought more rationally—as if the molecules constituting their deterministically operating brain matter ever had the slightest choice of having processed the physicochemical stimuli they received in any other way—and especially: more “rationally”! According to physicalist logic, causally closed brains cannot behave differently than they do. Hence, the mental by-products of survival researchers' deterministic brain processes just *cannot* be blamed for anything. Mind your accusations, please!⁹ But after all, the mental accessories of physicalists' brains can also not be blamed for what they had to write and for what they will have to write—this may alleviate brooding about the reasons underpinning such unheeding paradoxical reasoning and systematic misrepresentations of other people's work. Say what you will: Physicalism is an astonishing world view. In all its mechanistic glory.

NOTES

¹ In two of the other 28 award-winning essays, a book Augustine co-edited (Martin & Augustine, 2015a) was mentioned in passing (Rocha et al., 2021; Roe et al., 2021).

² The literature on CORT is not consistent as to how before-cases should exactly be defined. Much in agreement with Michael Sudduth (2021, p. 1011f), I suggest that in the future one should distinguish between two subtypes of before-cases: “Pre-investigation” and “pre-identification” cases. The first category refers to cases in which statements were recorded before the investigation to find a previous personality even began. The second category refers to cases in which statements were recorded during the investigation but still before the identification of the previous personality was accomplished. The first category represents the ideal before-case. But in practice, some cases will involve recording statements during the investigation. When both types of statements occurred in a given case, one should list pre-investigation and pre-identification statements separately. One could even distinguish a third type of statements, namely statements recorded after the identification of the previous personality, but before members of the two concerned families met for the first time (c.f. Schouten & Stevenson, 1998). But the latter statements would not pertain to the proper “before-case” aspect of CORT. The criterion for before-cases should best be defined as the existence of statements recorded before the identification of the previous personality was accomplished and confirmed.

³ The formulations I chose for this differentiation imply that I have absolutely no problem with the term and concept of super-psi. I perfectly agree that in the context of survival discussions, one should posit theoretically that living agents can possess enormous psi abilities. But I consider the complexity, qualitative and motivational aspects, theoretical ramifications, and what I called meta-evidence, to be more decisive for survival theorizing than the sheer amount of psi required to explain survival phenomena. Furthermore, I am in perfect agreement with those who maintain that the purportedly deceased must possess (super-) psi faculties that are at least equal to those of the living. In fact, given that the deceased who affect our world would have to operate from a non-physical beyond, everything they do or communicate would have to be framed in terms of psi. I consider this to be a triviality and therefore seconded Hans Driesch’s proposition in my essay according to which the means of communication that would appear “paranormal” to the living would be “normal” for the deceased (Nahm, 2021, p. 64).

⁴ Augustine’s conduct is particularly remarkable because he boldly announced in his commentary that he will call

out “bad behavior” and “poor reasoning.” As an example of such bad behavior, he declared cherry-picking to be “inexcusable” and a hallmark of “pseudoscience.” Since his own habit of constructing arguments by systematically misrepresenting text and attributing denigrating fictions to those he criticized is clearly much worse than mere cherry-picking, I wonder: Applying his very own standards, which vocabulary would he have to use for characterizing his own manner of engaging in this debate, then?

⁵ I cannot resist introducing one example that shows how Augustine subtly but grossly misled his readers about CORT already in the past. Much in line with other fierce critics of Ian Stevenson’s work who nevertheless seemed to be painfully ignorant of even most basic facts about what Stevenson had actually written and published, Augustine claimed as late as 2015 and 2016 that a critical assessment of CORT research authored by Champe Ransom in 1972 would have been written for the “late” Stevenson (Martin & Augustine, 2015b, p. 571; Augustine, 2016, p. 205). When Ransom wrote his report in November 1972, he was a research assistant of Stevenson who had just turned 54 years old. Stevenson died in 2007 and published virtually all his important treatises on CORT after 1972: The revised and enlarged second edition of his first book on CORT, seven further books about CORT, and dozens of articles in scientific journals. It is frankly absurd to state that Ransom’s addressee was the “late” Stevenson. The latter replied to Ransom after he received his report, and during the 34 years that followed until his last publication on CORT, he had plenty of time to consider aspects of Ransom’s critique he might have regarded justified. However, claiming that Ransom’s report was written for the “late” Stevenson obviously suggests that 1) during most parts of his research career as an investigator of CORT, Stevenson was unaware of important critical aspects of his work that were only “uncovered” (Martin & Augustine, 2015b, p. 571) by a late assistant of his, and that 2) Ransom’s critique therefore concerned most of Stevenson’s published work. But rather than damning Stevenson’s lifework, as Augustine’s readers are led to believe by his use of the seemingly inconspicuous word “late,” the critique of Ransom, who has not even once accompanied Stevenson in his field studies, concerned only the first phase of Stevenson’s investigations of CORT and his write-up of the reports. Be that as it may: When you read these lines, dear reader, I walk this planet for 52 years—and I can only hope that Augustine will not address his reply to the present article to the “late” Michael Nahm.

⁶ Sudduth’s critique of Leininger’s case is untenable with regard to some of its most important features (Matlock,

2022a, 2022b). This shows that Augustine's (2022a, p. 379) arbitrary rejection of my "flawed assumption" according to which retrospective tampering is more difficult in before-cases compared to after-cases is not only illogical from a theoretical perspective but also contradicted by facts: It was precisely the time-stamped documentation of facets of Leininger's case—however imperfect—that already sufficed to demonstrate that core elements of Sudduth's "retrospective tampering" with it had been fallacious.

⁷To be sure, Augustine presented very many arguments in his commentary. But irrespectively of whether I agree with them or not, they barely concern my charges against his explanation for CORT. And he knows it. He stated (Augustine 2022a, p. 367) that he specifically selected my essay for consideration in his commentary because in addition to evaluating the survival evidence, I would have addressed "the most substantial challenges to personal survival published in recent years." Selecting my essay for this reason is very laudable. One hopes for an interesting discussion regarding these most substantial challenges. But oddly, Augustine explained in the next breath that "space" precluded him from discussing precisely these most important features of my essay, which, after all, contributed substantially to making him select it for inclusion in his commentary. But it is no wonder space ran out, given that Augustine preferred to spend no less than 33 double-column pages of large format on different matters, and that he critiqued numerous other aspects of my essay on umpteen of these 33 pages already. In his lengthy reply to Braude et al. (2022), Augustine (2022b, p. 413) lamented in response to a respective charge that it would be "perverse to complain in one breath that I didn't say enough, and then in the next that I said too much." But rather than considering such a stance "perverse," I assume that virtually everybody has already had experiences with people who use many words but do not say much with them. It is a common phenomenon. There is even a communication disorder that concerns excessive wordiness and repetitiveness, *logorrhea*.

⁸As argued in my essay, this empirical finding poses a substantial challenge for the LAP model as well.

⁹It is bizarre: In essence, people who habitually deny the existence of psychokinesis and consider the belief in it to be a hallmark of pseudoscientific reasoning reproach parapsychologists and survival researchers for not having applied psychokinesis to their brain chemistry in order to make it cause more "rational" thoughts.

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