

Is Postmortem Survival the Best Explanation of the Data of Mediumship?

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The data collected from cases of mediumship are potentially significant for answering an important question about the nature of human persons. Do human persons survive bodily death? Survivalists answer this question in the affirmative, and many survivalists maintain that mediumship provides evidence for the postmortem survival of human persons. At the core of most versions of this argument is the contention that postulating the survival of human persons provides the best explanation of the data derived from cases of mediumship. Relying on the more general belief that the explanatory power of a hypothesis confers some probability¹ on it, survivalists conclude with a favorable judgment about the probability of survival based on its alleged possession of certain explanatory virtues, or—as is often the case—based on the alleged failure of competing hypotheses to possess such virtues.²

In this paper I explore one of the two crucial premises of this kind of argument: the claim that survival provides the best explanation of the data of mediumship. The survivalist argument for this claim typically rests on arguments purporting to show that

¹ The probability in view here is the probability or likelihood that some belief or proposition is true relative to some body evidence (in the form of other beliefs or propositions). For example, we can speak of the likelihood that Jack committed the robbery given that his fingerprints were found on the safe, he had a particular motive, and he was seen at the location about the time of the robbery. This kind of probability, usually called “epistemic probability,” should be distinguished from “factual probability” (including “physical” and “statistical” probability) that is a function of objective features of the physical world (e.g., its laws and structure). For example, the factual probability of drawing a black ball from a sealed box containing nine black balls and one white ball is .9 (almost certain), whereas its epistemic probability will vary depending on the evidence one has about the color and number of the balls in the box.

² See Almeder, 1992, pp. 2–4, 25–55, 262–267; Ducasse, 1961, pp. 191–203, 300–307; Griffin, 1997, pp. 263–268; Lund, 2009, pp. 212–218; Paterson, 1995, pp. 152–160, 173–176, 185–190.

survival accounts for or leads us to expect the data of mediumship, and various explanatory competitors fail in this regard. More succinctly stated: the survival hypothesis leads us to expect observational data that are otherwise very surprising or improbable. I will argue that this claim and its supporting arguments face two formidable challenges.

(1) The simple notion of postmortem survival—the continuation of consciousness after biological death in some discarnate state—does not lead us to expect the data of mediumship, unless we adopt a variety of auxiliary assumptions about the afterlife. Since most of these assumptions are epistemically suspect (e.g., being unwarranted, untestable, or *ad hoc*), they are incapable of doing the necessary explanatory work.

(2) Mediumistic data are open to an at least equally plausible interpretation in terms of living-agent psychic functioning (in the form of extra-sensory perception and psychokinesis) that is essentially connected to motivational and dissociative psychodynamics. This psychologically robust approach to living-agent psi renders most of the data of mediumship unsurprising, or at least significantly less surprising than they would be otherwise.

My main conclusion is that (1) and (2) each deflates the purported explanatory power of the survival hypothesis to a degree that justifies a skeptical stance towards the claim that survival is the best explanation of the data of mediumship. More precisely, (1) and (2) together give us overriding reasons to deny that survival is the best explanation of the data of mediumship. As suggested by (2), ruling out alternative sources for the data of mediumship is of considerable importance to establishing that survival is the best explanation of the data. Since living-agent psi is usually regarded as the nearest and most

refractory explanatory competitor to the survival hypothesis, I will reassess how living-agent psi poses a challenge to the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis. Contrary to what has become virtual orthodoxy among survivalists, counter explanations of mediumship in terms of living-agent psi do *not* require an appeal to what has been called “super psi”: psychic functioning of a magnitude and degree of refinement that far exceeds what is apparently manifested outside cases suggestive of survival.

After outlining some of the basic elements of inference to best explanation and their appearance in survival arguments, I provide an account of the baseline data that characterize the better cases of mediumship and show why survival *appears* to provide an explanation of the data. The middle portion of the paper presents reasons for supposing that the predictive power of the survival hypothesis is inscrutable: we can arrive at no justified beliefs about the way the world should look if the survival hypothesis is true, especially if the world has the features described by the data of mediumship. The final part of the paper develops a particular model of living-agent psi that, despite certain explanatory limitations, renders most of the data of mediumship unsurprising. Since the survival hypothesis has very weak predictive power over a range of data that are not otherwise improbable, we are justified to conclude that the survival hypothesis is not the best explanation of the data of mediumship.

Inference to Best Explanation

In 1705 astronomer Edmond Halley proposed that the sun and a previously observed comet formed an approximate Newtonian system. One of the crucial tests for this hypothesis was Halley’s prediction about the future time and location of the appearance of the comet. The prediction was deduced from Newtonian celestial mechanics together with descriptions of three past observations of the position of the comet going back 150

years. Moreover, it was a fairly specific prediction. Given the Newtonian model and the past positions and velocities of the comet, Halley predicted that the same comet, with a specific orbital path, should reappear again in December 1758. Moreover, the prediction was otherwise very improbable. Nothing else at the time led astronomers to expect the phenomenon predicted by Halley's hypothesis. Halley's hypothesis was confirmed when comet returned in December 1758 as predicted.

The case of Halley's comet is a good illustration of "inference to best explanation," a model of inductive reasoning that, while strongly linked to scientific reasoning, is actually employed broadly in everyday life.³ The core idea is that explanatory considerations guide the practice of inference. According to inference to best explanation, hypotheses acquire degrees of likelihood by virtue of having certain explanatory virtues, so we can arrive at conclusions about the epistemic probability of particular statements based on their having certain explanatory merits. The "best explanation" is typically an antecedently credible hypothesis that leads us to expect observational data that are otherwise improbable (relative to our background knowledge), and where the hypothesis exhibits other explanatory virtues (e.g., simplicity, consilience, conservatism, and coherence), some of which bear on the evaluation of the antecedent probability of the hypothesis.

It is pretty clear that most survivalists have adopted this approach in their efforts to establish an empirical or scientific case for postmortem survival. In their presentation of ostensible evidence for survival, survivalists regularly speak in terms of the survival

³ See Giere (1998) for an analysis of Halley's comet as an illustration of how theoretical hypotheses are justified in science by being independently credible hypotheses that lead us to expect what is otherwise improbable.

hypothesis and its ability to *explain* observational data in a way that is superior to some range of explanatory competitors. The inference to survival depends on the explanatory virtues of postulating the continuation of the self or consciousness after biological death. As an illustration of one of these explanatory virtues, prominent parapsychologists have emphasized the importance of formulating a survival hypothesis with clear predictive consequences so that the hypothesis can be tested (Roll, 2006; Schmeidler, 1977). While the notion of predictive power is often implicit in survivalist demands that a hypothesis “account for” or “fit” the data (Lund, 2009), Robert Almeder has explicitly stated that a necessary condition for a good hypothesis is “the data in the case studies in question be precisely what we would expect if the explanatory hypothesis is correct” (Almeder, 2001, p. 350). Almeder has maintained that the survival hypothesis satisfies this criterion (Almeder, 2001, 1992). Survivalists have also traditionally devoted considerable space to showing that alternative hypotheses fail to account for the data.⁴ By showing that competing hypotheses fail in their explanatory power, survivalists establish the improbability of the data if the survival hypothesis is false. A number of survivalists have also appealed to the simplicity of the survival hypothesis as one of its important explanatory virtues (Griffin, 1997, p. 266; Lund, 2009, p. 215).

So survival research has exhibited a deeply entrenched and long-standing reliance on inference to best explanation cashed out in ways that reflect its deployment in the sciences. Survival is treated as a kind of scientific hypothesis that may be confirmed by its ability to lead us to expect data that are otherwise very unlikely, and where the latter is

⁴ See Ducasse, 1961, pp. 191–199; Fontana, 2005, pp. 103–114, 398–403, 468–469; Lund, 2009, pp. 112–128, 135–137, 142–151, 167–177, 202; Paterson, 1995, pp. 142–149, 152–160, 172–176, 183–190.

demonstrated by showing how the relevant observational data cannot be explained as easily by alternative hypotheses.

The Data of Mediumship

I take it that the reader is somewhat familiar with at least some paradigmatic cases of mediumship (covered elsewhere in this volume). Space does not permit a discussion of particular cases here. I intend rather to draw out the most relevant patterns of data from a range of the best cases that would be paradigmatically illustrated by sittings with classical mediums such as Mrs. Leonora Piper, Mrs. Gladys Osborne Leonard, and Mrs. Warren Elliot. The features that I identify have been widely noted in the literature historically, primarily because they appear most conducive to a case for survival.

Three Features of Mediumship

First, arguably the most important data associated with mediumship are data displaying *veridical* features. These features concern the content of the medium's communications, specifically correspondences/correlations between what is communicated by the medium and some range of verified facts about the life of some deceased person and, in many cases, also the lives of people associated with the deceased in some meaningful way.

m1: A medium has quantitatively robust, detailed, and intimate knowledge about the life of some deceased person.

m2: A medium has detailed and intimate knowledge about the life of some person(s) associated with a deceased person (typically family members or friends), where this includes knowledge about events in the lives of living persons closely associated with the deceased but which have taken place after the death of the deceased person.

The other tier of data concerns the *modality* by which veridical information is conveyed in mediumistic settings.

m3: While in a trance state, the medium exhibits the mannerisms, behavior, or verbal skills that the family and friends of some deceased person find persuasively indicative of the deceased.

m4: While in a trance state, the medium writes messages ostensibly originating from some deceased personality.

Finally, in physical mediumship there are physical phenomena of various sorts: knocks and raps in tables and walls, movement or levitation of objects, lights and luminous apparitions, apports, and materializations. Some of these physical phenomena are vehicles for conveying intelligent messages ostensibly originating with spirits, sometimes involving veridical information. For example, where knocks and raps correspond to letters of the alphabet, messages are conveyed by particular sequences of raps. In these cases, the phenomena overlap with the veridicality of mediumistic communication. In other cases, though, the phenomena themselves do not convey any intelligible message but occur as part of a context in which other phenomena do convey such messages, for example, the statements of the medium during a trance state or messages conveyed through automatic writing, the Ouija board, or knocks and raps. I will capture the range of data under the rubric of *auxiliary phenomena* of mediumship.

m5: In the presence of a medium there are observable physical phenomena of an apparently paranormal sort, where the phenomena either convey messages ostensibly originating from a deceased personality or simply accompany other phenomena that convey such messages.

In speaking of m1 through m5 as features of mediumship, I do not mean to imply that these data are all present in every sitting or situation where mediumship is ostensibly operating. There is a common distinction drawn, for example, between cases of *physical* mediumship, where mediumship includes m5 phenomena, and cases of *mental* or *trance* mediumship that exclude m5, though of course some cases of trance mediumship also include m5 phenomena. As will be apparent, m1 and m2—the veridical features of mediumship—are the most frequently encountered phenomena in mediumship and the most strongly evidential in nature. Secondly, the data listed above constitute a core set of relevant data. In subsequent sections of the paper, I will lay out some additional more fine-grained data.

The Argument for Survival from Mediumship

So why should we regard m1—m5 as evidence for postmortem survival? Within the logical matrix of inference to best explanation it is because survival explains m1—m5; more precisely, it provides the best explanation of these data. Let M_V = the conjunction of m1 and m2, M_M = the conjunction of m3, m4, and veridical cases of m5, and M_A = the non-veridical auxiliary physical phenomena under m5. Survivalists who wish to maintain that survival is the best explanation of the above data must argue for the following statement:

(SBE) The survival hypothesis S (α) leads us to expect $\{M_V \& M_M \& M_A\}$ and (β) $\{M_V \& M_M \& M_A\}$ is otherwise improbable.

The argument for (SBE) will depend on the support offered for the conditions α and β of (SBE). This argument begins to take shape once we inquire further into the nature of the veridical aspects of mediumship, their manner of delivery, and the supportive role of

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auxiliary physical phenomena. The explanatory power of the survival hypothesis over these data depends on three crucial premises that link these features of mediumship to the continued existence of the deceased in a fairly strong way. We can capture the first and arguably most important of these links in the following unique-reference veridicality statement.

(UR_v) The medium's knowledge K in m1 and m2 is such that some deceased person D is uniquely situated to be the source of K.

The knowledge under m1 covers knowledge of public and private events in the life of the deceased, the names of family members and friends, and details about the interactions between the deceased person and other persons (e.g., the content of conversations between the deceased and other parties). Our particular aggregation and configuration of thoughts and memories, an essential aspect of our basic psychological package, is one important indicator of our personal identity. Hence, the medium's possession of such information suggests the persistence of the self who at earlier times was associated with and identified with reference to this information. Of course, to be "uniquely situated" with respect to K is to be in a position with respect to K that no one else is in, or at least to be better situated with respect to K than any other person would be. This is obviously not the case for many particular bits of knowledge about the deceased, as many other people will have that kind of knowledge, especially if it is public in nature. So K includes a quantity of information that makes it unlikely that anyone else would know all of it. K also includes private information that would make it unlikely that anyone but the deceased or the deceased and a highly restricted group of people would know it. Finally,

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K includes the configuration of this information in a way that reflects a coherent narrative of significant aspects of the deceased person's life and personality.

Something similar must be said for m2. Whereas m1 identifies a deceased person by way of tracking the aggregation and configuration of knowledge arising from the person's ante-mortem experiences, m2 identifies a person in terms of another aspect of his psychological package: needs and interests that are reflected in interpersonal relationships that were meaningful to the person in life. Knowledge of events in the lives of family and friends of the deceased is indicative of the identity of the deceased through his personal associations during his ante-mortem existence. Where the events have occurred after the death of the deceased it is indicative of an on-going interest on the part of the deceased in personal associations that were meaningful in life. As with m1, the private nature of the veridical information under m2 lends greater weight to UR_V.

A second unique-reference premise illuminates why survival would apparently explain m3 and m4.

(UR_M) The medium's knowledge K in m1 and m2 is *presented* by way of a "persona" with characteristics that some deceased person D is uniquely situated to own.

Like the veridical information in m1 and m2, behavioral characteristics or personality traits are also indicators of personal identity. In trance mediumship, mediums reproduce speech patterns, physical mannerisms, and other skills that were characteristic of the deceased. Sometimes these are quite specific. As with UR_V above, it is the aggregation and configuration of personality characteristics that render m3 conducive to a survival explanation. Since the deceased person would be a discarnate entity, m4 strengthens the

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survival inference since it suggests that some discarnate agent is in executive control of the medium's body.

Auxiliary physical phenomena that convey veridical information would be conducive to survival explanations by virtue of UR_V . However, unlike UR_V and UR_M , there is nothing about non-veridical auxiliary physical phenomena that a particular deceased person would be uniquely situated to bring about. In the interest of making these phenomena conducive to survival explanations, they are best interpreted as phenomena that *some* discarnate person or other is uniquely situated to bring about. This is because they exhibit marks of intelligent agency, but there is no evident causal chain originating from embodied living agents and terminating with these phenomena. Given that these phenomena accompany other phenomena that are associated with a specific deceased person, the auxiliary physical phenomena confirm and reinforce the discarnate origin of the more person-specific phenomena. So we need a third unique-reference premise of the following sort.

(UR_A) There are physical phenomena, which accompany either M_V or M_M , that a discarnate person is uniquely situated to bring about.

Now the three unique-reference assumptions serve to illuminate the specific way in which the survival hypothesis achieves its *prima facie* explanatory power in relation to the data of mediumship. Recall that two factors contribute to the explanatory power of a hypothesis: the high predictive power of the hypothesis (the hypothesis leads us to expect the data) and the low prior probability of the data (the data are otherwise surprising). Now if the medium has knowledge that—due to its highly specific, systematic, and private nature—a particular formerly living person is uniquely situated to possess, then

these features of the data are not very likely to occur unless survival is true. If the medium presents veridical information through a “persona” that a particular formerly living person is uniquely situated to own, then such a “persona” is unlikely to occur but for formerly living person being in executive control of the medium’s body. If the auxiliary physical phenomena that accompany the former two aspects of mediumship are phenomena that a discarnate agent is uniquely situated to bring about, then it is unlikely that we would observe such phenomena in the absence of some discarnate agent. If we accept UR_V , UR_M , and UR_A , then the joint appearance of all three kinds of mediumistic data would seem to be *very* unlikely if survival is false. In other words, the unique-reference assumptions entail that the prior probability of the conjunction of m_1 — m_5 is very low. They entail the satisfaction of the β condition in the (SBE) formulation above. This contributes in a significant way to the contention that the survival hypothesis is the best explanation of the data.

However, while the point here highlights the explanatory merits of the survival hypothesis, it also reveals its potential weakness as an explanation of the data of mediumship. Any hypothesis that rests all or even most of its weight on the otherwise improbable nature of the data it aims to explain is vulnerable to defeat by virtue of facts (or other hypotheses) that render the data less surprising. In other words, counter explanations that provide overriding reasons to suppose that the unique-reference assumptions are false will deflate the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis, unless this is significantly outweighed by the predictive power of the survival hypothesis relative to its explanatory competitors. In other words, the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis depends in part on the satisfaction of the α condition of (SBE).

The Predictive Power of the Survival Hypothesis

As indicated earlier in the paper, many prominent survivalists have emphasized that the survival hypothesis is, like other scientific hypotheses, a testable hypothesis by virtue of having predictive power: we may deduce empirical consequences from the hypothesis. Given the nature of the data of mediumship, we are obviously interested in personal survival, but survivalists have stated the hypothesis of personal survival in different ways. C.J. Ducasse spoke of “the continuation of conscious individual life” after bodily death, noting that this postmortem consciousness would amount to the persistence of different aspects of our mental life such as our memories and personality traits (Ducasse, 1961, p. 11). More recently, David Lund speaks in terms of a “person” or “self” existing apart from the body after death. He defines a person as an immaterial subject of mental states possessing various causal powers (Lund, 2009, p. 62). On this view, postmortem survival will be understood as the postmortem continuation of an immaterial subject of mental states possessing various causal powers in the absence of a conventional physical body.

I will use the designation *simple survival hypothesis* to refer to the hypothesis that the self or individual consciousness continues after biological death in the absence of a conventional body. To argue that this hypothesis is the best explanation of the data of mediumship requires reaching a justified conclusion about its predictive consequences. Specifically, we must be able to deduce the relevant data from it. However, there are compelling reasons for supposing that we cannot deduce M_V , M_M , or M_A from the simple survival hypothesis. Consequently, the predictive power of the simple survival hypothesis relative to the data of mediumship is *inscrutable*.

Inscrutable Predictive Power

The basic problem is that postulating a surviving immaterial person or postmortem continuation of consciousness does not logically entail that such persons possess the causal powers or mental states in their postmortem state necessary for there being *any* kind of observational data brought about by such persons for the purpose of providing evidence of their survival. There is no contradiction in supposing that (i) immaterial persons survive death but—in the absence of a functioning brain—do not exhibit any mental states or exert causal influence on our world,⁵ (ii) some persons survive death as conscious beings, desire and intend to communicate, but lack the power to communicate, (iii) some persons survive death as conscious beings, possess the power to communicate, but lack the desire and/or intention to communicate, or (iv) some persons survive death as conscious beings but lack the power, desire, and intention to communicate.⁶ There is not even a probabilistic inconsistency involved in any of these scenarios. Put in the most general manner, the survival of consciousness or a immaterial subject of mental states endowed with causal powers and who continues to exist after physical death would not lead us to expect there being any *appearance* of survival in our world. *A fortiori* there is no reason to expect the specific kinds of phenomena that characterize the data of mediumship as a special case of an appearance of survival.

⁵ This point is sometimes missed because survivalists sometimes assume that a surviving soul must exhibit conscious states, but this is not true, at least not a conceptual truth. The functioning of a soul, which results in conscious episodes, might depend on a functioning brain (even if its existence does not) in much the same way that a light bulb depends on electrical current to give off light (even if its existence does not). See Swinburne, 1986, pp. 176, 310.

⁶ Building on a similar idea suggested by C.J. Ducasse, Oxford philosopher H.H. Price (1953) developed a conceivable afterlife scenario in which persons survive death as discarnate agents in worlds that are constructed out of their stock of ante-mortem memories and desires. While Price's image-world afterlife model allows interaction between discarnate persons in the afterlife through telepathically generated apparitions, and shared worlds through common memories and pooled desires, his model does not conceptually require this, much less does it require interactions between the deceased and living agents in the physical universe.

However, perhaps this is too quick. Perhaps the survivalist position can be given predictive life. Since Pierre Duhem (1861-1916) it has been widely acknowledged in the philosophy of science that single hypotheses rarely have observational consequences. The testable consequences of hypotheses are the result of logical deductions from bundles of statements, typically a central hypothesis conjoined to various auxiliary assumptions. So perhaps it is of no major consequence that the simple survival hypothesis has no predictive value. All the survivalist needs to do is supplement the simple hypothesis with a suitable range of auxiliary assumptions that will, together with the simple hypothesis, have predictive consequences.⁷

One essential auxiliary assumption is what I will call *discarnate interactionism*. Since the survival hypothesis posits persons as the cause of observational data, it is a personal explanation: it attempts to explain observational data as the effect of causal powers exercised by intelligent agents guided by mental states in the form of certain beliefs, desires, and intentions. Someone who argues in favor of the hypothesis that Jack stole \$150 from Lisa's desk drawer attempts to explain the disappearance of Lisa's money from a particular location, within a certain range of time, in terms of the actions of a particular person. This requires auxiliary hypotheses about the extent of Jack's causal powers to steal the money, his having the appropriate mental states to guide the exercise of his causal powers, and his having the desire and intention to steal the money. Now in the case of the survival hypothesis *discarnate* persons must be intelligent agents who have the requisite causal powers and mental states (in the form of beliefs, desires, and

⁷ Technically, the simple hypothesis, as I have been thinking of it, is the simple supposition of personal survival *plus* the unique-reference assumptions outlined earlier, for without these assumptions the data would not be conducive to survival explanations.

intentions) to bring about the phenomena indicated by the data. Since much of the veridical information and its manner of presentation presupposes that discarnate agents are aware of events in our world, what sitters are saying in a séance, or what mediums are saying, we must attribute to deceased persons knowledge of other minds and/or events in the empirical world.

So we need something like the following auxiliary hypotheses:

(S1) At least some discarnate persons possess the power, desire, and intention to communicate with the living.

(S2) At least some discarnate persons possess empirical knowledge of events taking place in our world after their death, as well as knowledge of other minds.

(S1) and (S2) conjointly constitute a discarnate interactionist hypothesis. Successful communications require not only that discarnate persons initiate causal chains terminating in observational phenomena in our world, but that they are aware of what is happening in our world, otherwise they cannot properly have communications with a responsive element. However, since the surviving persons in view are *ex hypothesi* discarnate, the discarnate interactionist hypothesis entails what I have elsewhere designated a *discarnate psi hypothesis* (Sudduth, 2009). This has been widely acknowledged by survivalists and skeptics alike.⁸

(S3) At least some discarnate persons exhibit efficacious psychic functioning in the form of ESP and PK to communicate with the living.

⁸ Braude, 2003, pp. 20–22; Broad, 1962, p. 409; Flew, 1953, p. 69; Gauld, 1982, pp. 139, 145, 159, 231–32, 236, 241, 248–50; Lund, 2009, pp. 142, 151–152; Penelhum, 1970, pp. 30–36, 39–43; Price, 1953, pp. 246–247.

The conjunction of (S1), (S2), (S3), and the simple survival hypothesis constitute what we might call a *strengthened* survival hypothesis. The new hypothesis meets the necessary preconditions for the appearance of survival generated by discarnate persons, and it leads us to expect that there *should be* evidences of survival in the world. In other words, it would not be surprising to find an appearance of survival in the empirical world. In that sense it renders intelligible data that suggests the survival of consciousness beyond biological death.

Problems with the Strengthened Survival Hypothesis

Sadly, though, this result will not do the necessary explanatory work. If we consider paradigmatic cases of “best explanation” in the sciences, these involve highly specific predictions, and ideally also novel predictions. We already saw this illustrated earlier with Halley’s comet. Halley’s prediction was not the vague prediction that some comet or other would appear between 1705 and 1758, or that the same comet would appear again at some point between 1705 and 1758. Halley predicted a comet with a specific orbital path to appear within a 30-day period 53 years in the future. But the strengthened simple survival hypothesis does not permit predictions even approximating this relative to the data of mediumship. We cannot predict which, if any, deceased persons will communicate, when they will communicate, or how or what they will communicate.

To develop this important point a bit, consider the gap between the strengthened survival hypothesis and the data of mediumship. The strengthened survival hypothesis is compatible with the world having an appearance of survival but without the data of mediumship. First, the world could still have an appearance of survival in the absence of M_A . The auxiliary physical phenomena of mediumship are largely a gratuitous addition

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since the appearance of survival is sufficiently generated by the veridical features of mediumship and M_A is not needed for this. Now we might even suppose that data in the form of veridical information are necessary for an appearance of survival in the world. More precisely, perhaps it is not possible for there to be an appearance of survival unless there is evidence of the continuation of the psychological package associated with some formerly living person. But this is a far cry from claiming that such veridical information must take the form that it does in the data of mediumship. It certainly need not take the form assumed by M_M . We simply cannot deduce from the continuation of persons after death (with powers, desires, and intentions that suffice for interactions with this world) that they will interact with living persons by taking executive control of the bodies of certain people or otherwise generating a “persona” through them that reflects their own personality traits. Indeed the prevalence of contemporary arguments for survival that exclude the data of trance phenomena is sufficient testimony to this.

Even M_V is not a predictive consequence of our strengthened survival hypothesis. There are many ways outside the context of mediumship for veridical information to emerge in the world that would give an appearance of survival. Discarnate persons might produce veridical apparitions resembling themselves or reincarnate in new human bodies (while carrying with them their prior psychological package), something many survivalists believe has actually happened and for which we have good evidence. Perhaps discarnate persons could make use of television, radios, and computers to send messages, something an increasing number of survivalists think is supported by apparent spirit communications through electronic devices, so-called “electronic voice phenomenon.” Or discarnate persons might be creative enough to arrange rocks, tree branches, clouds, or

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other naturally occurring phenomena to spell out messages to family and friends. No doubt some believe this also has happened. The central point is that the appearance of survival, even with veridical requirements, has parameters so broad that the survival hypothesis can easily *ex post facto* accommodate just about any phenomenon that reveals veridical information about a deceased person.

The Limits of Predictive Power

It is of course possible for the survivalist to locate a set of highly detailed auxiliary statements that *would* lead us to expect veridical data through mediums and in a way that reflects the particular features of the data. The challenge would be to locate auxiliary statements that simultaneously do the necessary explanatory work and are independently testable or otherwise carry some sort of epistemic credential. The danger here is that the survivalist will simply engage in a conceptual scavenger hunt that results in auxiliary assumptions that are unwarranted, untestable, and *ad hoc*. The problem of predictive power is a serious one, but the point is worth some further development.

First, if the survivalist is to overcome the predictive inscrutability of the survival hypothesis, he must already be in possession of a certain kind of knowledge (or justified belief) about the entities and processes invoked by the hypothesis, but the whole motivation behind arguing that survival is the best explanation of the data is to offer evidence for the existence of such entities and processes. So the survivalist faces the following dilemma: adopt a small number of assumptions that are epistemically secure because they have very little questionable content, but consequently lead us to expect nothing about the way the world should look, or adopt a large number of assumptions that will yield specific predictive consequences, but where the assumptions are epistemically insecure because of their speculative and untestable nature.

Secondly, consider even the modest auxiliary assumptions outlined above. It is unclear how we could know that either (S1), (S2), or (S3) is true. There is certainly no empirical test for such assumptions. And notice of course that these auxiliary assumptions converge on a more general and highly unwarranted assumption. They each assume that we know what consciousness will be like on the other side of death, specifically that it would be significantly similar to our present consciousness. But we do not know how the experience of death might alter consciousness or the mental states or causal powers of immaterial persons, even if our consciousness should continue to exist after biological death. Indeed, there are reasonable considerations from philosophy of mind that suggest that consciousness would be significantly altered in the absence of our physical body or an analogous surrogate substratum (Tart, 1990). Ducasse alerted us to the many forms that personal survival could take and that would affect the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis (Ducasse, 1961, pp. 121–131). There is also the long-standing and commonly encountered distinction between the survival of the self in a psychologically robust sense—the individual I—and the survival of aspects or fragments of the individual self, a kind of attenuated or non-personal mode of survival (Gauld, 1982, pp. 9; Broad, 1962, pp. 419–430). It should be evident that none of these views of survival is going to lead us to expect the world to appear one way or the other, until we supplement the central hypothesis with a fairly large repertoire of auxiliary assumptions.

Appealing to survival to explain the data of mediumship is a lot like postulating the covert operation of invisible time travelers from earth's distant future to explain the seemingly improbable datum of a mysterious disappearance of massive amounts of sugar from a sugar factory in Santa Rosa, Texas. We are highly warranted to believe that (i)

humans have powerful cravings for sugar, and (ii) there is an abundance of sugar in the world today. It seems at least plausible to suppose that (iii) sugar will become increasingly scarce in our distant evolutionary future, and (iv) environmental conditions in our distant evolutionary future will make the mining of natural resources for fructose impractical. Finally, assume that (v) new advancements in technology will make it possible for future humans to travel to earlier time periods in human history when sugar was produced in abundance and transport limited amounts of sugar back to the future. The conjunction of (i)-(v) would perhaps lead us to expect the mysterious disappearance of sugar at some location at some point in earth's past, but this transparently fails as an explanation, and for much the same general reasons that the survival hypothesis fails.

First, like the survival hypothesis, our time traveler theory does not permit the deduction of any *specific* empirical datum, much less a novel one. However, like the survival hypothesis, the theory predicts something very general of which the datum in need of explanation is an instance, so it is very easy for the theory to cover the datum by retrofitting. But it does not allow us to predict any fine-grained (no pun intended) details about the sugar's disappearance, such as the even approximate time or location of its disappearance. Nor does this theory allow any novel predictions about the even approximate time, location, or amount of any future disappearance of sugar from sugar factories. Both of these contrast, of course, with paradigmatic cases of scientific explanation, like that of Halley's comet.

Secondly, like the survival hypothesis, the general prediction permitted by the time traveler theory rests on some highly speculative, unwarranted, and untestable assumptions. One of these clearly relates to the physical (and some would say logical)

possibility of time travel. We must assume that future humans will be capable of exercising a *super* causal power that enables them to travel into the past and return to their present with sugar booty from the past. We might also suppose that the strengthened survival hypothesis is committed to something akin to “super psi” in order to account for magnitude and refinement of the cognitive and causal powers of the deceased to account for the data, a point to which I will return near the end of the paper. More importantly, the time traveler theory makes a crucial unstated assumption, namely that the human species will retain its current degree of craving for sugar into our distant evolutionary future. However, the kinds of desires and intentions humans form in the distant future will be based on their actual needs and interests at that distant stage in their biological evolution. This is neither observable nor subject to extrapolation from anything we presently observe. Our biological and psychological needs are shaped, in the long term, by many unpredictable environmental and technological changes. This cannot be predicted with any accuracy over millions of years into the future. Our evolutionary descendents are just as likely to have developed a powerful aversion to sugar, for example, if it leads to health problems that threaten the survival of the species. In a similar way, the survival hypothesis assumes that consciousness, if it should survive the transition of death, will retain desires and intentions that characterized consciousness prior to death, namely the desire and intent to connect in certain ways with the loved ones in this life. However, assuming this is very much like assuming that humans will continue to have the same biologically grounded needs in their distant evolutionary future. We do not know enough to make anything more than conjectures at this stage.⁹

⁹ If the time travel analogy seems too outrageous (for example, by requiring the alleged logical

So I conclude that the survival hypothesis either cannot satisfy the α condition of the (SBE) formulation above or it cannot satisfy the α condition without relying on auxiliary hypotheses that are unwarranted or empirically untestable and therefore unable to lead us to expect the data of mediumship from an epistemically secure position.

The Challenge Posed by Living-Agent Psi

So I think it is clear that the failure of the survival hypothesis to lead us to expect the data of mediumship deflates the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis. However, a survivalist might still make the argument that survival has life because *but for the survival hypothesis* the data would be inexplicable. So we return to an important issue raised earlier in the paper, the β condition of (SBE). The apparently low prior probability of the data of mediumship seemed to be a point in favor of the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis. It is here that explanatory competitors became extremely relevant. As indicated earlier, if we accept UR_V , UR_M , and UR_A , then the joint appearance of all three kinds of mediumistic data would seem to be *very* unlikely if survival is false. However, I also indicated that this was a point of potential vulnerability for the survival hypothesis since any overriding reason for believing something incompatible with either UR_V or UR_M would defeat the improbable nature of the data of mediumship and thereby deflate the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis. The β condition of (SBE) would not be satisfied.

impossibility of time travel), posit rather extra-terrestrial beings that come to earth to steal our sugar because natural resources for the production of sugar on their planet have been depleted. As with the analogy in the text, we do not know whether extra-terrestrial beings have the ability to reach us, and most fundamentally we do not know that their evolutionary history would result in a physiological need for fructose or whether if they had such a need it was outgrown in their subsequent evolution, for example, as silicon-based forms of life. An ET hypothesis to explain the mysterious sugar disappearance would have exactly the same explanatory problems as the survival hypothesis has in relation to the data of mediumship.

It is in this context that the challenge to the survival hypothesis posed by counter-explanations in terms psychic functioning (in the form of extra-sensory perception and psychokinesis) among living agents can be placed in their clearest resolution. The appeal to living-agent psi does not challenge the truth of M_V , M_M , or M_A , but rather it aims to rebut the unique-reference assumptions (UR_V , UR_M , and UR_A) that render the data of mediumship conducive to survival explanations. Not surprisingly, survivalists have commonly devoted a significant tier of their argumentation to deflating the explanatory merits of the living-agent psi (hereafter, LAP) hypothesis.

Living Agent Psi: Its Scope and Limits

Survivalists have generally attempted to deflate the LAP hypothesis by arguing that this hypothesis can only account for the data of mediumship if it is modified to assert the existence of psi of a magnitude and degree of refinement for which we have no independent evidence, or at least no laboratory evidence.¹⁰ What is needed is so-called *super psi*: psi of a degree of potency and refinement, perhaps without any limits, for which we have no examples outside the context of survival cases. Almeder and Lund, for example, demand independent evidence for super psi before such a hypothesis can be legitimately employed as a counter-explanation to the survival hypothesis (Almeder, 1992, pp 52–53, 118–121; Lund, 2009, pp. 149–150, 172, 177). Of course, survivalists must rely on a variety of unwarranted and untestable auxiliary assumptions (for predictive power), and the discarnate psi required by (S3) above will likely exceed what has been established outside cases suggestive of survival (Braude, 2003, pp. 92–95;

¹⁰ See Almeder, 1992, pp. 52–53, 117–121, 226; Ducasse, 1961, pp. 195–199; Fontana, 2005, pp. 103–112; Gauld, 1982, pp. 129–143, 247–248; Lund, 2009, pp. 123–125, 144, 172, 176–177, 197–199, 212–215; Paterson, 1995, pp. 159–160, 173–174, 182.

Sudduth, 2009, pp. 179–184). So survivalists are really in no position to make this kind of objection to the LAP hypothesis. Yet this objection remains standard in the literature. But the objection is mistaken for another reason. The explanatory power of the survival hypothesis may be deflated by reasons that raise doubt about the unique-reference assumptions (UR_V , UR_M , and UR_A), but defeaters for the unique-reference assumptions need not entail super LAP.

To see this, consider first paradigmatic cases of what we might call ordinary LAP. The conception of so-called ordinary LAP depends largely on data associated with qualitative and quantitative experimental research typically conducted in laboratory settings, as represented for example in ganzfeld, remote viewing, and random number generator experiments which have tested for telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and PK. Some of the results from this experimental history are worth noting since they inform us about the characteristics of ordinary LAP.

The data collected from forced-choice tests¹¹ (e.g., card-guessing and random number generator experiments) indicate a statistically significant above chance selection of fixed and limited targets by experimental subjects, as well as positive correlations between the intentions of experimental subjects to alter various kinds of output from random number generators (RNGs) in particular ways and actual changes in their output (Braude 2002, pp. 64–101). If such data are evidence for LAP, they at least provide evidence that some people are capable of acquiring knowledge of simple images on cards (through telepathy and/or clairvoyance) and exerting direct causal influence on physical systems. While

¹¹ In “forced-choice” experiments, subjects must make a selection from among a small number of known candidate targets (say, one of five cards), whereas in “free response” experiments (below in text) subjects are asked to describe targets without being given any potential candidates (say, by simply describing the imagery they experienced during a dream state or while in the ganzfeld).

these effects may seem weak, the data from some RNG experiments are compatible with interpretations that involve a very potent and refined psi, ranging from living agents having direct causal influence over the past (retroactive PK) to their successfully using multiple psi processes that combine PK and highly refined precognition (Braude 2002, pp. 68–78). Since precognition itself raises the specter of the future affecting the past (to account for some person at present time knowing what will happen in the future), it may be necessary to postulate a very powerful clockwise ESP and PK, one that involves psychic access to highly detailed information and influences on large-scale events (Braude, 1997, pp. 233–253). Moreover, the experimental data also provide very good evidence that PK success is independent of task complexity. PK appears capable of influencing target systems of varying types and complexities (where this includes the complexity of the experimental design), and it is efficacious even when subjects are blind to the target and details of the RNG mechanism, as well as when subjects do not even know that they are involved in a PK experiment (Kennedy, 1978; Stanford, 1977, pp. 338–342, 370–374). So we should not be seduced into thinking that because the observed effect is small under a particular description that the causal powers responsible for the effect are weak.

Free response experiments seem to provide more direct evidence for LAP of broader scope, potency, and refinement. In the dream laboratory at Maimonides Medical Center a decade-long run of experiments tested subjects for telepathy and clairvoyance during their dream states (Ullman and Krippner, 2002; Sherwood and Roe, 2003). In these experiments, many subjects scored significant “hits,” providing descriptions of their dream content that corresponded thematically and often in specific details to randomly

selected pictorial targets, typically in the form of paintings or art-prints. Telepathy-specific experiments involved agents, sometimes at a great distance from the subject, who focused on the target and attempted to “send” the image to the subject during the REM state. The results suggest that in altered states of consciousness detailed imagery in a narrative format mediates telepathic or clairvoyant interactions. In ganzfeld experiments subjects have achieved significant hits with static and dynamic targets (ranging from pictures to movies) during a waking but sensory restricted state (Honorton, 1985; Bem and Honorton, 1994). In the STARGATE remote viewing program, subjects in normal states of consciousness have produced accurate and sometimes detailed verbal descriptions and drawings of large outdoor targets at a great distance (including large and small buildings, underground facilities, and natural settings), with and without any ostensible sender (May, 1996; Targ, 1996; Puthoff, 1996). Where our ordinary conception of LAP draws on data from free-response experiments, ordinary LAP entails the telepathic, clairvoyant, and perhaps even precognitive acquisition of veridical information corresponding to complex and dynamic targets, and it is often mediated by detailed mental imagery.

While many parapsychologists wish to limit claims about ordinary LAP to what has been ostensibly established in the above kinds of experimental contexts, Stephen Braude (1997) has provided what I regard as a compelling case for including spontaneous case data. These are significant in that they both reinforce the general conclusions drawn from experimental research and directly extend our conception of the potency and refinement of LAP. Many such cases provide ostensible demonstrations of a wide range of large-scale PK effects, including knocks and raps, apports, levitations, and materializations.

We find these not only in the older physical mediumship of D.D. Home and Eusapia Palladino (Braude, 1997), but similar phenomena in modern RSPK cases (Roll, 2004) and modern controlled sitter-group situations, such as those conducted by Kenneth Batcheldor (Batcheldor, 1966, 1984) and Iris Owen's "Philip Group" (Owen and Sparrow, 1977).¹² A number of survivalists accept the spontaneous-case data as informing our concept of ordinary LAP (Almeder, 1992, pp. 44–53, 227; Lund, 2009, pp. 131, 207, 212).

A Prima Facie Challenge to the Survival Hypothesis

The LAP hypothesis has a *prima facie* appeal in relation to defeating UR_v because it tells an alternate story about how K *could* have been acquired solely as the result of paranormal cognitive processes in embodied, living agents. This story seems to erode the otherwise maximally tight connection between the deceased and the stock of veridical information that characterizes the better survival cases. In essence, the LAP hypothesis rebuts the contention that some deceased person is *uniquely* situated to be the source of

¹² It is sometimes argued that we cannot justify appeals to the physical phenomena associated with D.D. Home and Eusapia Palladino as evidence for LAP since Home and Palladino claimed to be communicating with discarnate spirits who might have been responsible for the phenomena. However, there are important similarities between phenomena associated with older physical mediumship and more recently documented physical phenomena in modern RSPK and sitter-group situations that are better interpreted as cases of LAP. We have good reason to believe that human agents are, individually or jointly, causing physical phenomena, even where there is ostensible contact with discarnate entities. For example, in the Bindelhof Group in the 1930s, Batcheldor's sitter-group experiments in the 1960s, and the Philip Group in the 1970s the ostensible discarnate spirits do not exhibit sufficient autonomy from the sitters themselves, as we would expect from some distinct center of self-consciousness (Pilkington 2006, pp. 202–226). These "personalities" often end up relaying messages to sitters that correspond to the ideas or wishes of the sitter-group participants. In the Philip Group sittings, the participants intentionally created the "Philip" personality by collaborating in the production of a fictional biography prior to this alleged spirit being conjured by the group. For a good summary of connections between physical mediumship, sitter-group experiments, and RSPK, see Roll, 1982, pp. 212–226.

K. By rebutting UR_V in this way, the LAP hypothesis is a defeater or doubt-maker for the inference to survival, inasmuch as that inference depends on the truth of UR_V .

The medium is a living agent who possesses K, but we can only know this fact because the information in K is possessed by other living agents or is accessible to living agents by uncovering sources with the information contained in K (e.g., diaries of the deceased). One or more sitters are often in possession of the information in K, so the medium might acquire K through telepathic interactions with their minds. Since ordinary LAP is not inhibited by distance between the agent and target, the medium might acquire K through telepathic interaction with even distant persons with the requisite information.¹³ Where telepathy with other living persons is implausible as a source, veridical information may have been acquired by the medium through a broader repertoire of psi functioning, for example, clairvoyantly accessing the relevant facts, even at a distance, as illustrated in remote viewing experiments. The difficulty for the survival hypothesis is that unless the content of K is presently accessible to people through some source other than D, no one could know that the medium actually possessed K, for this requires verifying the medium's statements about the deceased. But if the content of K is presently accessible to people through some source other than D, it is possible in principle that the medium could acquire K by accessing that source through ESP. In other words, D is not uniquely situated with respect to K if living agents have psychic functioning and K is psi-accessible, and once we postulate LAP there is no compelling

¹³ This accounts for so-called proxy sittings where the friends or family members of the deceased are not physically present at sittings but have stand-ins for them. Since the proxy sitters are typically ignorant of the relevant details of the life of the deceased, proxy sittings prevent the unintentional leakage of information about the deceased (through dialogue or body cues), but LAP does not require sources to be in physical proximity.

reason to suppose that K is not psi-accessible. Similarly, the data from sitter-groups and spontaneous RSPK rebuts UR_A , for these data show that large-scale physical phenomena characteristic of old-style mediumship are found in contexts where survival explanations seem less plausible, if not gratuitous.

Two issues remain, though. First, we have not seen how LAP rebuts

(UR_M) The medium's knowledge K in $m1$ and $m2$ is *presented* by way of a "persona" with characteristics that some deceased person D is uniquely situated to own.

Secondly, in rebutting UR_V , we have only rebutted the statement that some deceased person would be uniquely situated to be the source of K , but this does not lead us to *expect*:

$m1$: A medium has quantitatively robust, detailed, and intimate knowledge about the life of some deceased person.

Living agents having quantitatively robust, detailed, and intimate knowledge of the lives of other persons may be unsurprising, but it still might be surprising that they should acquire this knowledge about deceased persons and in a way that represents the data as originating from such deceased persons. We have not yet seen how the LAP hypothesis would lead us to expect any of the actual data M_V , M_M , or M_A . Rebutting the unique-reference assumptions partially removes the surprising character of the data, and so partially deflates the satisfaction of the β condition of (SBE), but a stronger case would be needed that would render the data themselves unsurprising.¹⁴

¹⁴ More technically stated, rebutting the unique-reference assumptions removes our reasons for supposing that the data are surprising (if survival is false). If the LAP hypothesis independently leads us to expect the data, then we acquire reasons for supposing that the data are not surprising (if survival is false). In the former case, we do not have good reasons for supposing that the data are surprising (if survival is false). In the latter case, we have good reasons for supposing that the

A Psychologically Robust Living-Agent Psi Hypothesis

In order to address these issues, the treatment of the LAP hypothesis above needs a significant modification in terms of what Stephen Braude has called a *motivated* psi hypothesis (Braude, 2003, pp. 13–14, 23–29). On this view, psychic functioning is integrally related to a person's larger psychological life, for example, a person's needs, goals, and interests, whether these be conscious or not. So the LAP hypothesis must be considered in conjunction with various auxiliary assumptions that illuminate plausible psychodynamics in which psychically acquired veridical information about other (deceased) minds is embedded and which may direct psi functioning towards particular manifestations. While LAP provides an alternative story about how someone other than the deceased *could* be the source of veridical data, a motivated LAP hypothesis explains why LAP *would* tap into veridical information relating to deceased persons and in a way that presents such information as ostensibly arising from the deceased. In that case, the LAP hypothesis will actually lead us to expect that living agents will possess veridical information about other minds, including the deceased. This would *significantly* increase the prior probability of the veridical features of the data and so significantly reduce the explanatory force of the survival hypothesis.

Since a motivated psi hypothesis appeals to some living agent's psychological need, the fairly widespread human interest in personal survival becomes explanatorily relevant for why the data should take the form of "survival evidence." Sitters typically have a powerful and conscious interest in communicating with their deceased loved ones, and there is little doubt that mediumistic phenomena often meet their fundamental need for

data are not surprising (if survival is false). Both deflate the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis.

assurance that a loved one is still alive, for them to still connect with the person in some way, or to have assurance that their own life will not terminate with death. The appearance of survival thus satisfies a very important human need. And of course many mediums have an overriding interest in offering comfort to sitters, and the appearance of the survival of a loved one provides just such a comfort. Such motivations would lead us to expect the content of much ostensible spirit communication, such as ostensible communicators providing evidence that their identity and relaying messages that comfort family and friends (Gauld, 1982, p. 77). Of course, needs may be covert and unconscious, and not even directly related to any interest in survival, but where the appearance of survival indirectly assists with satisfying the need in question.

While motivation is crucial to the directedness of psi processes, and hence to the LAP hypothesis leading us to expect the appearance of survival, *dissociative phenomena* are of considerable importance as well. First, we have good evidence that dissociative states are psi conducive (Zingrone and Alvarado, 1997), so needs that are served by the appearance of survival might be best met as the result of dissociative states. This would lead us to expect an appearance of survival correlated with dissociative phenomena. Secondly, we have good reasons for believing that the fictitious controls and communicators of trance mediums are dissociated aspects of the medium, but these fictitious personae are capable of delivering impressive amounts of veridical information over long periods of time, for example, Mrs. Piper's "Phinuit" control and Mrs. Leonard's "Feda" control (Gauld, 1982, pp. 32–44, 114–118, 219; Braude, 2003, pp. 33–

35, 56).¹⁵ If the conscious or unconscious needs of the medium (or sitters) are best satisfied by an appearance of survival, then—given the psi-conducive nature of dissociated states—the manifestation of veridical information about deceased persons during dissociated states would not be surprising.

However, another relevant aspect of dissociative phenomena is that they provide illustrations outside the context of survival of the sudden manifestation of novel skills without prior learning or practice. Survivalists often argue that LAP cannot account for the skill sets displayed in the better cases of mediumship, for example, the speaking of a new language, artistic or musical abilities, and refined literary skills. One reason is an alleged limit on LAP: it can only generate knowledge-*that* (propositional knowledge) not knowledge-*how* (practical knowledge). A second reason is the skills manifested in trance mediumship are skills that require practice for their development, so it is allegedly surprising that trance mediums suddenly manifest personality traits and skills other than their own. But dissociative phenomena are commonly linked to the sudden manifestation of novel cognitive and behavioral patterns, including unusual and impressive linguistic, artistic, and musical skills (Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1997). In cases of dissociative identity disorder alter-personalities manifest, in addition to radically different personality traits, skills not previously manifested in the person and which typically require learning and practice before their initial manifestation. Nor must we suppose that trance mediums acquire such skills through LAP. There is no good reason to believe that linguistic skills

¹⁵ It is possible that dissociative states of the medium are conducive to spirit communications, so that the medium's fictitious personalities are a mouthpiece for actual discarnate communicators. It is equally possible, though, that these are paradigmatic cases of potent and refined LAP that manifests in extreme dissociative states similar to the alters in cases of dissociative identity disorder (DID). For a comparative study of the characteristics of trance mediumship and DID, see Braude, 1995, pp. 218–240.

exhibited by mediums have been *transferred* or *acquired*, only that novel skills are suddenly *manifested* without any obvious antecedents. But this is not surprising in the light of the data from abnormal psychology.

A motivated psi hypothesis that incorporates our knowledge of dissociative phenomena, then, generates a more serious challenge to the survival hypothesis than the *prima facie* challenge noted earlier for a simple LAP hypothesis. First, it attempts to explain the data of trance mediumship in terms of dissociation, which in turn facilitates psychic functioning, as well as the manifestation of latent and impressive skills (Braude, 2003, pp. 101–132). This not only leads us to expect M_M , but it leads us to expect the joint occurrence of M_V and M_M . So it provides overriding reasons for supposing that all *three* of the unique-reference assumptions are false, UR_M , as well UR_V and UR_A . This has as a logical consequence the loss of all three essential grounds for supposing that the data are surprising if survival is false. Secondly, unlike the simple LAP hypothesis, it leads us to expect M_V , M_M , and M_A . Where an agent's (conscious or unconscious) needs are best met by the appearance of survival, the psychic functioning facilitated by dissociation will lead us to expect a confluence of dissociative characteristics and the appearance of survival. This leads us to expect not only the individual appearance of M_V and M_M , but also their joint occurrence. These data of mediumship are not surprising given a psychologically robust LAP hypothesis, one that is sensitive to motivational and dissociative psychodynamics. Therefore, we have overriding reasons to believe that the β condition of (SBE) is not satisfied.

Independent Evidence of LAP in Mediumship Data

As a final consideration, our psychologically robust LAP hypothesis receives additional support from other data drawn from the better cases of mediumship, data that are strongly suggestive of telepathic interaction between the medium and the minds of sitters.

First, there are cases where the medium's highly specific claims about the deceased are actually false, but where these incorrect claims correspond to incorrect beliefs held by the sitters (Myers, 1889–90, pp. 568–571, 581–583, Podmore, 1910/1975, pp. 165–166). Since the claims in question concern highly specific matters about which the deceased is unlikely to have been mistaken, and it is not surprising that agents other than the deceased would have been mistaken, we have evidence that the correspondence between the medium's false claims and the sitter's false beliefs is the product of telepathic interaction between their minds. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that the medium's telepathic acquisition of information from the minds of the sitters would take place only on occasions where the sitters entertained false beliefs about the deceased. So it seems reasonable to infer that at least some of the medium's veridical claims about the deceased should also be the product of telepathy with the sitters. This fits well with the earlier observation that fictitious communicators and controls are capable of delivering large quantities of veridical information.

Secondly, there are cases where the content of mediumistic communications seems to correspond in a striking way to matters recently and randomly experienced or mentally entertained by the sitters. For example, in some sittings the medium spontaneously introduces the name and other identifying details of a deceased person but the person happens to be related to a living person whom the sitter has only recently randomly

encountered or who may have through chance coincidence been on the mind of the sitter (Salter, 1922, pp. 69–72). When the claims of mediums relate to fortuitous aspects of the sitter’s very recent experiences, it seems that the medium is simply tapping into sitter’s recent memory to guide the narrative of the sitting, rather than this being evidence that a deceased person has highly impeccable timing for showing up at sitting with precisely this sort of information. More persuasive along these lines are cases where obviously fictitious communicators or controls appear at séances, but their identities happen to correspond in some way to what sitters were thinking about prior to the séance (Sidgwick, 1915, pp. 85, 297ff, 437–448). Because of their highly specific or idiosyncratic nature, it seems implausible to suppose that these latter kinds of correlations would be merely fortuitous. In that case, though, we have *prima facie* evidence that the medium not only has telepathic interaction with sitters, but she sometimes presents or constructs (ostensibly deceased) personalities from telepathically derived information from the minds of the sitters. It seems unlikely that telepathy with sitters would only operate when the personalities entertained by sitters were clearly fictitious. It is plausible that on different occasions the names and characteristics of the deceased family members and friends would also enter into the medium’s mind through telepathic interaction.

These more fine-grained features of the data of mediumship fit very well with the LAP hypothesis and provide *prima facie* evidence that psi functioning is capable of more impressive manifestations in survival contexts than what is typically observed outside that context. In the light of this, we should be skeptical about placing limits on psi or drawing what amounts to arbitrary boundaries to psi based on its manifestations outside the context of survival.

The Multiple-Source Problem

In the early part of the paper I argued that the survival hypothesis does not satisfy the α condition of (SBE), at least not without having to incorporate auxiliary hypotheses that are either unwarranted or at least empirically untestable. Upon careful scrutiny, the alleged predictive power of the survival hypothesis dissolves as an illusory explanatory virtue. In the latter part of the paper I have argued that a psychologically robust LAP hypothesis prevents the satisfaction of the β condition of (SBE). So we have seen two reasons for rejecting the survivalist contention that the survival hypothesis provides the best explanation of the data of mediumship.

However, it must be acknowledged that the survivalist has an initially plausible counter to the case against the satisfaction of the β condition, and this must be addressed. While the psychologically robust LAP hypothesis outlined earlier may render m_1 — m_5 unsurprising, the addition of new data may change this. After all, it is a truism in explanatory arguments that additions to a body of data may result in the revised set being more surprising than the original set. It is a well-known problem that LAP hypothesis has a difficult time accommodating the data of mediumship when the data are described in a more fine-grained manner; that is to say, in a way that includes particular, relevant details. This is the problem of recalcitrant data commonly encountered in scientific theorizing. The best scientific theories run up against data that are either not to be expected or that appear incompatible with what a hypothesis leads us to expect. Here I want to look at what is usually regarded as the most intractable datum for the LAP hypothesis: the need to postulate veridical information allegedly arising from multiple, independent sources.

Survivalists frequently point out that the LAP hypothesis requires super psi because ordinary clairvoyance and telepathy do not include instances where veridical information is drawn and integrated from multiple sources, and yet in some mediumship cases the medium's knowledge, if the result of LAP, would have to have done precisely this; for, at the time of the sittings, no single source contained all the veridical information communicated through the medium.¹⁶ So while we might suppose that a robust LAP hypothesis can account for M_V , it is strained if M_V includes a more fine-grained formulation of the veridical data produced in the better cases of mediumship:

m6: A medium has quantitatively robust, detailed, and intimate knowledge K about the life of some deceased person, where K is a composite of information the individual elements of which are located in independent sources (persons or documents).

I think we must concede that m6 involves a complex configuration of knowledge in the medium, and this "complexity" is highly relevant to UR_V since the information quantity plus its configuration supports the deceased person being uniquely situated to be the source of K . So it is not clear that the LAP hypothesis, even of the robust sort outlined above, rebuts UR_V if UR_V includes m6. We should also grant that, to the extent that the survival hypothesis explains m6, it provides a more simple or tidy explanation of m6. It posits a single source (the deceased) for the wide range of veridical information the medium possesses. And so the scales would seem now tipped in favor of the survival hypothesis, at least insofar as gain in explanatory power is a consequence of the data of mediumship being otherwise improbable.

¹⁶ See Braude, 2003, pp. 36–38, 82–84, 93–94; Ducasse, 1961, pp. 198–199; Gauld, 1982, pp. 59–60, 68–73; Lund, 2009, pp. 194–199.

Psi and Task Complexity

While I think the multiple-source problem prevents an advocate of the LAP hypothesis from effectively arguing that m_6 (and hence M_V) is clearly not surprising, this turns out to be a fairly shallow victory for the survivalist. The survivalist needs to show that survival is the best explanation of m_6 , but this requires showing that m_6 would be surprising or improbable if survival is false. And this commits the survivalist to the fairly strong claim that LAP *cannot* account for m_6 . But this seems quite difficult, if not impossible, to do.

First, to suppose that LAP cannot account for m_6 would seem to require the assumption that LAP operates in a way analogous to ordinary information processing, proceeding in a step-by-step manner, gathering and then organizing information. Survivalists often speak of psi having to move from a “selection” stage to the “organization of information” or to gather and then “integrate the information,” as if LAP operated like a librarian trying to reconstruct a physical card catalogue after the cards had been scattered throughout a city by a hurricane and mixed together with tens of thousands of other pieces of paper (Lund, 2009, pp. 174, 199). But this view of psi and its relation to task complexity is at the very least underdetermined by the data presently at our disposal. Secondly, the experimental evidence for LAP is at least suggestive that psi is actually immune to the obstacles that attend task complexity (Foster, 1940; Kennedy, 1980). Experimental subjects have successfully carried out ESP tasks involving the integration of veridical information from multiple targets. For example, subjects have successfully carried out blind matching ESP tasks in which they have matched two unknown cards, as opposed to simply identifying a single unknown card (Kennedy,

1995). So it is not true in general that we lack cases in which subjects have acquired and integrated information from multiple sources by way of ESP.

It is in this context that we can best understand the relevance of Stephen Braude's well-known appeal to our relative ignorance about the limits of LAP (Braude, 1997, pp. 255–276). Braude has argued that we are not in an epistemic position to rule out potent, highly refined, and large-scale LAP of the sort needed to account for multiple-source data in cases of mediumship. Critics have argued that Braude has illegitimately appealed to a merely *possible* form of psi to counter survival explanations, but the only legitimate explanatory competitors must appeal to known cognitive processes and causal powers.¹⁷ However, Braude's critics have missed the dialectical force of his point. Braude's claim is best interpreted as blocking or reducing the force of the survival inference, not positively establishing a counter explanation in terms of LAP. The explanatory force of the survival hypothesis depends on m_6 being improbable if survival is not true. To show this requires that the survivalist adopt an assumption about LAP having certain limits, being constrained by task complexity, etc. Braude's point is that we are not warranted in any such assumptions. So while the multiple-source problem may prevent an advocate of the LAP hypothesis from justifiably asserting that m_6 is not surprising (if survival is false), the survivalist is prevented from justifiably claiming that m_6 is surprising (if survival is false). At the most, the multiple-source problem simply pushes us in the direction of agnosticism about whether survival is the best explanation of the data.

The Problem of Crippling Complexity

¹⁷ See Almeder, 1992, pp. 52–53, 117–121; Fontana, 2005, pp. 106–108; Lund, 2009, pp. 149–150, 177.

However, Braude does raise what could be a serious problem for the LAP hypothesis even if we assumed that psi operates like a “magic wand” and achieves its results in a way impervious to task complexity, perhaps requiring nothing more than an efficacious wish in which psi effects are causally streamlined. This is the problem of “crippling complexity” (Braude, 2003, pp. 86–95). In general, the efficacious exercise of our abilities or capacities is conditioned, limited, and even prevented by a variety of causal influences. Like other kinds of abilities or capacities, there are plausible constraints on psi functioning imposed by the larger network of causal interactions in which psi is embedded. Like normal abilities, psi functioning would be subject to various kinds of interference from other causal chains in the world, even if psi functioning is simple and unaffected by task complexity. As Braude puts it, psi “would be embedded within an enormously complex web of interactions, psi and nonpsi, overt and covert, local and global, and it would be vulnerable to equally potent interferences or checks and balances (including psychic defenses) within that network” (Braude, 2003, p. 87). The more complex the causal nexus is, the greater the number of obstacles that must be circumvented for the efficacious exercise of psi on particular occasions. To accomplish this, psi would have to be quite powerful. Given the frequency of veridical mediumistic data, psi would have to be extremely powerful on more than isolated occasions. But the efficacious exercise of psi, whatever its degree of potency, would be included in the network of causal interactions that potentially undercut psi functioning elsewhere. If psi functioning is widespread, there will be a vast array of psychic factors that will regularly inhibit or impede psi functioning, or otherwise thwart the production of psi effects. So in addition to insulating itself from ordinary forms of interference, psi would have to be

powerful enough to insulate itself from undercutting psychic influences. However, once we grant that psi has *that* degree of potency, we significantly increase the likelihood that it will interfere with various individual psychic efforts. Extremely potent psi runs the risk of being self-defeating. The problem of crippling complexity suggests that LAP may *not* be unlimited and indeed may *not* even have the required degree of potency and refinement needed to account for something like m6, even if task complexity is not a problem.

But this is another illusory victory for the survivalist. If drawing information from multiple, independent, sources requires a degree and refinement of psi that is potentially self-defeating, the survival hypothesis is saddled with exactly the same problem. As Braude and I have argued in some detail (Braude, 2003, pp. 92–95; Sudduth, 2009, pp. 179–184) the discarnate psi needed as an auxiliary assumption for the survival hypothesis ((S3) earlier in the paper) involves psi of a magnitude and refinement that is apparently equal to that needed for living-agent psi to account for a datum such as m6. More precisely, in actual cases of mediumship, if we grant the survival hypothesis, we must suppose that the deceased has knowledge of what is presently occurring in the sitting and what is happening at other times in the lives of living family and friends. It becomes clear very quickly that discarnate persons must telepathically and/or clairvoyantly access a broad range of facts from multiple sources to account for the detailed data in the better cases of mediumship. So even if the information flow from discarnate persons to mediums is less subject to interference from the causal nexus, the information flow from the world/other minds to discarnate persons is just as fragile as any flow of information from the world/other minds to the medium.

So we can agree that the survivalist can account for the more fine-grained veridical datum m_6 in a more economic manner by positing a single source of the complex information possessed by the medium, namely the deceased person. However, the survival hypothesis will require a more fine-grained auxiliary assumption that requires positing the psychic mining of information from multiple sources:

(S4): At least some discarnate persons possess quantitatively robust, detailed, and intimate knowledge K about the life of living persons and events in the world, where K is a composite of information the individual elements of which are located in independent sources (e.g., other minds or states of affairs in different locations in the empirical world).

To sum up—the multiple-source problem is no more a reason to deny the explanatory merits of the LAP hypothesis than it is to deny the explanatory merits of the survival hypothesis. The survivalist must argue that m_6 is otherwise improbable, which seems impossible to do without having to unjustifiably claim that psi is limited in particular ways that make task complexity an obstacle to efficacious psi functioning. Moreover, if we take the problem of crippling complexity as a reason to affirm limits on psi (to avoid self-defeating psi processes), then we have equal reason to set limits on discarnate psi, which would curtail the ability of that hypothesis to explain data that generates a parallel multiple-source problem. Therefore, the multiple-source problem, even if it prevents us from justifiably asserting that the β condition of (SBE) is not satisfied, nonetheless prevents the survivalist from justifiably claiming that the β condition *is* satisfied. This is sufficient for defeating the survivalist claim that the survival hypothesis is the best explanation of the data of mediumship.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have argued that traditional arguments purporting to show that postmortem survival is the best explanation of the data of mediumship are deeply flawed. First, contrary to the claims made by survivalists, the predictive power of the survival hypothesis is actually inscrutable. Moreover, the problematic nature of addressing this explanatory defect by introducing various unwarranted and empirically untestable auxiliary assumptions has been largely unacknowledged in the literature. Secondly, while survivalists have wished to argue that they are presenting data that are otherwise highly improbable, I have argued that a motivated LAP hypothesis sensitive to the psychodynamics of dissociative phenomena renders most of the data unsurprising, and this—despite the multiple-source problem—is enough to sufficiently deflate the survivalist claim that the survival hypothesis is the best explanation of the data.

In the course of my argument I have also drawn attention to two ways in which survivalists have, perhaps unwittingly, masked these explanatory defects. Survivalists tend to pile on case data that are allegedly suggestive of survival, followed by protracted arguments allegedly showing that the alternative hypotheses cannot explain crucial features of the data. This creates the illusion that the survival hypothesis actually explains something, when what has been shown, at best, is only that non-survival alternatives do not explain the data. In this way, the explanatory merits of the survival hypothesis have rested almost entirely on the claim that the data in question are otherwise inexplicable, rather than proposing something substantial that has definite empirical consequences. Another masking maneuver has been the survivalist's excessive pre-occupation with super psi and the implicit suggestion that the explanatory merits of the appeal to LAP require postulating a degree of psi that is merely epistemically possible.

As a result survivalists have missed the deflationary implications of ordinary LAP guided by motivational and dissociative psychodynamics.

My skeptical appraisal of the explanatory merits of the survival hypothesis is of course entirely compatible with the rationality of belief in survival. However, I think we must conclude that the rational status of belief in survival must be grounded in a recalibrated explanatory matrix (broadening the data base or tweaking explanatory virtues) or rationality must be detached from conventional “best explanation” models. I do not propose to decide between these options here. What is clear is that “best explanation” arguments for survival from mediumship face formidable challenges in optimizing the kind of theoretical virtues that are characteristic of scientific hypotheses. Rather than informing us about the empirical world, survival arguments run the risk of only informing us of the many ways of retrofitting empirical data to our varied metaphysical inclinations and biases.

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