

ESSAY

Super-Psi and the Survivalist Interpretation of Mediumship

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Abstract—According to the survivalist interpretation of mediumship, the existence of discarnate persons provides the best explanation for the data associated with physical and mental mediumship. Others—advocates of what is often called the “super-psi hypothesis”—maintain that the data of mediumship may be at least equally explained in terms of living agent psi (ESP and psychokinesis). Many defenders of the survivalist interpretation of mediumship attempt to deflate the alleged explanatory virtues of the super-psi hypothesis by arguing that the hypothesis is unfalsifiable and lacks independent evidential support. My central contention in this paper is that these frequently encountered survivalist criticisms of the super-psi hypothesis are ultimately self-defeating to the case for survival from mediumship. To show this I first argue in some detail that the survivalist interpretation of mediumship is committed to a kind or degree of psi that is indistinguishable from what is required by the super-psi hypothesis. From this vantage point it can be shown that any attempt to impugn the explanatory virtues of the super-psi hypothesis on account of the kind or degree of psi it requires undercuts the argument for survival itself.

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Introduction

Data collected from physical and mental mediumship constitute an important strand of ostensible evidence for postmortem survival. I will refer to such data as *M* evidence. *M* evidence includes significant veridical information about the life of some deceased person(s) possessed by the medium and communicated to sitters, as well as the medium’s knowledge of various postmortem facts ostensibly originating from the deceased personality, especially knowledge of events or activities in the lives of friends and family of the deceased. *M* evidence also includes data about how this veridical information is communicated to the sitter by the medium. The communications often reflect the linguistic features and personality traits of the deceased. Lastly, *M* evidence includes various physical phenomena frequently alleged to occur in séance settings (for example, materializations, levitations, apports).

Arguments from *M* evidence to postmortem survival have traditionally relied heavily on eliminating alternative competing explanations of *M* evidence. This is a reasonable strategy since an argument for survival from *M* evidence is best interpreted as an inference to the best explanation. As such its strength crucially depends on considering and sufficiently ruling out other relevant explanations of the evidence as having at least equal explanatory value. If the hypothesis of survival of death is the *best* explanation of *M* evidence, then the survival hypothesis must have a comparative explanatory superiority over various competitors with respect to this evidence. Competing explanations of *M* evidence include ordinary culprits such as chance coincidence and fraud, but the most exotic and perhaps most challenging alternative explanation has been the so-called “super-psi” hypothesis.¹

Roughly stated, the super-psi hypothesis attempts to explain *M* evidence in terms of psychic functioning among living persons, that is, in terms of living agent ESP (telepathy, clairvoyance, retrocognition) and psychokinesis (PK). It is widely held that the survivalist interpretation of mediumship must attribute some degree of psychic functioning to living agents, but, whereas the survivalist interpretation of mediumship also posits the psychic influence of discarnate spirits, the super-psi hypothesis attempts to explain *M* evidence solely in terms of psychological and paranormal resources of living agents. The hypothesis is designated *super-psi* since it is commonly held that the exclusive appeal to living agent psi to explain *M* evidences would require a higher degree or more refined form of psi than living persons have demonstrated in other contexts, especially in controlled laboratory experiments. This point may be challenged of course, and arguably the term “super-psi” is laden with unwanted and misleading connotations.² Although I will follow the traditional terminology for much of the paper, I will attempt in the course of the paper to separate the conceptual wheat from the terminological chaff.

Advocates of the super-psi hypothesis contend that *M* evidence may be at least equally explicable in terms of living agent psi as by personal survival. The *prima facie* force of the appeal to living agent psi lies in (i) the independent evidence for living agent ESP and PK and (ii) central features of *M* evidence appearing explicable in terms of either ESP or PK.³ For example, the data extracted from mental mediumship are suggestive of survival because some living agent has highly specific veridical information about a deceased person’s life. This information is the sort that the deceased person would be ideally situated to possess, and it is unlikely that the living person could have acquired the information by any ordinary means. However, veridical information may be acquired by ESP, so we might suppose that in these cases the information was acquired by some exotic mode of cognitive functioning among living persons. This would eliminate the need to postulate survival. Explanations in terms of living agent psi get an additional boost once we recognize that, even on the survival hypothesis, some of the data of mediumship requires a degree of living agent psi. For example, mediums must exercise telepathy to engage in communications with discarnate spirits.

Moreover, in some prominent cases of mediumship there is evidence that indicates that the medium is at times in telepathic rapport with the sitter or with others at a distance.⁴ This naturally raises the possibility that the medium acquires *all* her veridical information about the deceased by means of telepathic interactions with the minds of living persons. And even where telepathy with other living persons can be ruled out, there remains the possibility that veridical information was acquired by means of a broader repertoire of psi functioning, e.g., clairvoyance or retrocognition.

Not surprisingly, many survivalists have attempted to deflate the purported explanatory virtues of the super-psi hypothesis as part of their argument for or defense of the survivalist interpretation of *M* evidence. Since most survivalists affirm the reality of living agent ESP and PK, they typically target (ii) above, the idea that we can adequately explain *M* evidence by restricting ourselves to psi functioning among the living. There are different reasons why the super-psi hypothesis might be inadequate as an explanation of *M* evidence, even if we concede some degree of living agent psi. One common strategy is to argue that living agent psi can explain *M* evidence only if we are prepared to countenance a degree or form of psi for which there is no independent evidence and which seems invulnerable to any sort of counterevidence. If the super-psi hypothesis is evidentially impoverished and unfalsifiable, then it has little going for it as an explanatory competitor to the survival hypothesis.

In the present paper I will show that these frequently encountered criticisms of the super-psi hypothesis are both misguided and self-defeating for empirical arguments for survival from the data of mediumship. In the first three parts of the paper I explore the logical relationship between the survivalist interpretation of mediumship and psi functioning. I argue that if *M* evidences are good evidences for discarnate survival, then there are at least some discarnate persons and some living agents who exhibit a powerful and highly refined form of psi. I will argue that this *survival psi* is indistinguishable from what is required by the super-psi hypothesis in its attempt to explain *M* evidence exclusively in terms of psi functioning among living persons. From this vantage point, it can be shown that the charges of evidential deficiency and unfalsifiability are equally applicable to the survivalist interpretation of mediumship, so these objections cannot effectively be used to give the survival hypothesis an explanatory advantage.

I. Mediumship and Discarnate Interactionism

A. *The Survival Hypothesis*

We should begin by clarifying the survival hypothesis. As a first approximation, the survival hypothesis asserts the continued postmortem existence of a formerly living agent, typically as a discarnate or disembodied spirit.⁵ I will be concerned with this specific and widespread notion of *discarnate* survival. The survival hypothesis attempts to explain some range of observational data in terms

of the intentions, memories, beliefs, and desires of a discarnate person, where these persisting mental states have continuity with the psychological life associated with some formerly living person. Of course, empirical arguments for survival do more than argue for the *existence* of surviving persons. After all, surviving persons might exist and yet have no causal connections to the world of embodied persons. Survival arguments postulate surviving persons to explain observable phenomena. So they presuppose that surviving persons causally interact with living persons and the physical world at some level, communicating with us, acquiring empirical knowledge of happenings in our world, and in some cases bringing about physical effects in our world. I will refer to this as *discarnate interactionism*. A survival hypothesis would seem to entail discarnate interactionism.

To be clear, the claim that a survival hypothesis entails discarnate interactionism is distinct from the claim that discarnate *survival* entails discarnate interactionism. It is logically possible that discarnate interactionism is false, even if human persons survive death as discarnate persons. Persons who survive death as discarnate entities might occupy a world constructed solely from their stock of memories and desires.⁶ This idea is intelligible I think even if such persons never have knowledge of what is happening in the physical world, never communicate with the living or other discarnate persons, and never bring about effects in the physical world. Interactionism is nonetheless a requirement for the *hypothesis* of discarnate survival. The survival hypothesis relies on a range of observational data that are taken to be the effects of discarnate persons, but this can only be so if discarnate interactionism is true.⁷

B. *The Data of Mediumship and Interactionism*

A survivalist interpretation of mediumship involves postulating the postmortem survival of the person as the best explanation of the data taken from cases of ostensible mediumship. One of the reasons why mediumship is fascinating is that it provides a rich illustration of how the survivalist hypothesis is committed to discarnate interactionism, and it is arguably the high degree of interactionism involved in mediumship that makes its data provocative and some would say compelling as evidence for survival of death.

One tier of this interaction is cognitive in nature. According to mental mediumship, discarnate persons possess the ability to communicate with living persons by directly sending information to the mind of the medium or otherwise causally influencing the mind of the medium. The content of such communications often involves ante-mortem facts from the life of the deceased and so entails that deceased persons retain memories from their embodied state.⁸

- (m1) In the Rev. and Mrs. Sutton's sittings with Boston medium Leonora Piper in December 1893, Mrs. Piper's control Dr. Phinuit communicated detailed information about the Sutton's recently deceased daughter Katherine (nicknamed Kacie)—information ostensibly originating from

Kakie herself. She provided details concerning her fatal ailment and physical condition shortly before death, her nicknames for her brother, sister, and favorite rag doll, her love for riding horses, daily routines, and the book from which her mother read during Kakie's illness (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 484–494).

- (m2) Beginning in March 1892, a personality claiming to be the recently deceased George Pelham (G.P.) manifested at sittings with Mrs. Piper. The G.P. communicator regularly disclosed the names of many of his personal friends and intimate details of his associations with them throughout his life (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 295–335, 413–441). For example, G.P. recalled going to college with a particular sitter's son, and he provided a correct description of the sitter's summer home where G.P. had once visited (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 300, 329, 457–458). On another occasion, G.P. recalled a very specific conversation with the daughter of a particular sitter (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 297–298, 329).
- (m3) In January 1939 a “drop-in” communicator named Runolfur Runolfsson (Runki) appeared in a sitting with Icelandic medium Hafstein Bjornsson. Although Runki had appeared in sittings with Bjornsson before, on this occasion Runki provided various details of his life: his full name, age and place of residence at the time of his death, some of the details of conversations with friends the night of his death, and the circumstances of his death, which involved falling asleep near the sea and being carried away by the tide (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975).

Other mediumistic communications have postmortem content and so presuppose—on the survivalist interpretation of the data—that deceased persons, while in their discarnate state, acquire information about persons and events in our world.⁹ For example, they exhibit knowledge of persons present at the sittings, what sitters say during the sittings, current events, and events that have taken place on earth since their death. In some cases, they even exhibit apparent knowledge of future events.¹⁰

- (m4) In Mrs. Piper's sittings with friends of G.P., G.P. regularly identified friends who came as sitters, and he stated the activities of family members and friends on particular occasions away from the sittings (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 305–307, 413–418). For example, G.P. correctly reported that on a particular day his father took a picture of G.P. to a photographer to have it copied, and on another occasion that his father took a book of poems to the printer to be copied (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 304, 414). G.P. also claimed to have seen his mother remove a pair of studs from his clothes and give them to his father. He was also aware that his father had sent the studs to G.P.'s friend John Hart (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 297). In a sitting on December 5, 1892, G.P. reported that he had seen his friend Jim Howard visit a man named Fenton and engage in a conversation about G.P. In the same session, G.P. said that Jim Howard was reading at the time of the sitting (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 422–423).

- (m5) Kakie Sutton identified her father and mother at the sittings, noticed her father's absence at one sitting, was aware of the objects presented during the sittings, and knew the type of flowers laid on her casket (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 485–486, 489).
- (m6) When the Richard Hodgson communicator emerged at sittings with Mrs. Piper, he often revealed knowledge of events and the activities of friends that had taken place since Hodgson's death. For example, at sittings where Hodgson's friend Miss Margaret Bancroft was present, the Hodgson communicator indicated that he had visited Bancroft at her home and attempted to communicate with her after his death. He provided details of what Bancroft was doing at particular times on particular dates, the company she was keeping, and what words were exchanged (James, 1909: 51–52). At subsequent sittings, the Hodgson communicator exhibited awareness of various changes that had taken place at Bancroft's summer home since Hodgson's death (e.g., new wallpaper, a new bathhouse, and new pier and platform) (James, 1909: 59).
- (m7) On September 24, 1931, in a sitting with Rev. W. S. Irving, Gladys Osborne Leonard's control Feda relayed information ostensibly originating from Mrs. Dora Irving (the deceased wife of Mr. Irving). The Dora communicator had been asked at a prior sitting to visit the house of Mr. and Mrs. Stansfield—Mr. Irving's cousins—so that a book test could be conducted.¹¹ She provided an accurate current description of the house and some of its contents. She was also aware that a conversation involving reference to “rollers” had recently been held in one of the rooms of the house. And, of course, in accordance with the book test the Dora communicator selected a particular book from a bookshelf and said that a picture or portrait of significance to Mr. Irving and which would remind him of a portrait he has at home would be found on a specific page. She had identified a portrait of Mr. Irving's grandfather. A different portrait of his grandfather was at the residence of his sister where he had been staying (Besterman, 1932).
- (m8) Rev. David Kennedy documented with considerable detail a large number of ostensible communications from his deceased wife Ann during a 6-month period after her death (Kennedy, 1973). The communications came through a dozen different mediums, including Albert Best and Mrs. Lexie Findlater, sometimes at sittings and at other times during impromptu telephone calls. On one occasion Mrs. Findlater telephoned Rev. Kennedy and informed him that Ann had impressed her to call Kennedy at that very moment and to tell him, “Get out now and use the old notes” (Kennedy, 1973: 45). Rev. Kennedy had fallen asleep and would have been late for his evening church service had he not been awakened by the telephone call at that moment. On another occasion, Albert Best telephoned Kennedy and provided him with information, ostensibly from Ann, about the content of specific chapters of a book

Kennedy was writing. In another phone conversation Best told Kennedy that Ann said that she was with her husband 10 minutes prior and knew that he was reading about a particular person, Rev. Drayton Thomas, at the time (Kennedy, 1973: 105). In another phone conversation, the message from Ann concerned the whereabouts of clean clerical collars, which Kennedy was looking for at the time of the phone call. Ann not only knew where the collars were located in the house but she knew that Kennedy was going to be giving a memorial service for a specific person later that evening (Kennedy, 1973: 105–106). On a particular day Best phoned Kennedy and said that Ann had just been watching her husband doing laundry and that he had put too much soap in the wash, resulting in an overflow of suds. She also knew the specific items of clothing that were in the wash (Kennedy, 1973: 105–106). On another occasion Ann claimed to have watched Kennedy cook fish earlier in the day. She knew the kind of fish and added that the pot, which Kennedy had placed in the cupboard, wasn't properly cleaned (Kennedy, 1973: 69–70). In other communications through Best, Ann revealed that her husband had withdrawn £45 from his bank account earlier in the day (Kennedy, 1973: 115) and that the lights on Kennedy's car needed to be replaced (Kennedy, 1973: 125–126).

It is worth emphasizing that most survivalists include postmortem knowledge in the data of mediumship and typically as having significant evidential value. There is a very strong presumption in favor of doing so. First, postmortem knowledge is often conveyed together with veridical claims about the ostensible communicator's ante-mortem existence. The data in such instances mutually reinforce postulating an actual discarnate agent with the memories and interests of the deceased. Secondly, postmortem knowledge is at least implicit in traditional mediumistic communications, for ostensible communicators not only convey veridical information about their ante-mortem existence but they are *responsive* to the statements, questions, and gestures of the sitters, as well as aware of objects presented at the sitting. This presupposes that discarnate persons have some knowledge of what is occurring in the physical world. Hence, even if we exclude postmortem knowledge of perceptually remote facts, the responsive and interactive nature of mediumistic communications during actual sittings makes postmortem knowledge an essential feature of the data of mediumship.

But many paradigmatic cases of mediumistic communication involve more than a series of cognitive transactions. In cases of trance mediumship, we must suppose that discarnate persons are not merely knowers but also agents who bring about physical effects, for instance temporarily controlling the vocal cords of the medium or animating her body. So there must be a causal chain originating from the discarnate person and terminating in some physical event. In Mrs. Piper's mediumship, communicators (for example, Pelham and Hodgson) often communicated by way of automatic writing, trancelike states during which Mrs. Piper was capable of writing messages from alleged spirits. Phinuit controlled Mrs.

Piper's voice and gestures, as did other communicators on occasion (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 331). Physical effects are even more pronounced in cases of physical mediumship where discarnate spirits allegedly bring about raps and knocks on tables and walls, as well as more large-scale physical effects like levitating tables, materializations of objects, apports, and disembodied voices. The physical phenomena associated with the mediumship of D. D. Home and Eusapia Palladino are impressive examples of such physical effects.¹²

If taken as evidence of survival of death, the above data from mediumship imply the following theses:

- (α) Discarnate persons send veridical information to the mind of living agents.
- (β) Discarnate persons have highly specific knowledge of living agents and the physical world acquired after their death.
- (γ) Discarnate persons operate causally on the physical world.

I will refer to the conjunction of these three theses as *discarnate interactionism*. We can now state in a preliminary way a conditional claim that expresses the link between discarnate interactionism and the data of mediumship interpreted as evidence for survival.

- (1) If M phenomena are evidences for postmortem survival, then discarnate interactionism is true.

C. Mediumship and Other Survival Evidences

Classical empirical evidences of postmortem survival make up a broad evidential territory. In addition to physical and mental mediumship, this territory includes apparitional experiences, near death experiences, and claims to past life memories. It should be relatively clear that while the survivalist interpretation of all the data of mediumship entails the conjunction of (α), (β), and (γ), not all alleged evidences of survival have this entailment. In fact, one might plausibly argue that some putative survival evidences do not entail even the disjunction of (α), (β), and (γ). For example, apparent “past life memories” common in spontaneous reincarnation-type cases do not entail either (α), (β), or (γ). While there are different models of reincarnation that may accommodate the transmission of memories, at least some of these are consistent with either there being no intermediate state of discarnate existence or there being an intermediate state of discarnate survival but during which discarnate persons do not communicate with the living, acquire knowledge of living agents or physical events, or bring about physical effects, other than perhaps the physically datable event of the re-embodiment of their consciousness. So we are not driven to conclude that just any putative survival evidence entails discarnate interactionism.

Nonetheless, three things seem relatively clear. First, the data of mediumship are important to the empirical case for survival, and the initial pull of M evidence

in the direction of survival may be attributed at least in part to features of mediumship suggestive of a high degree of interaction between discarnate persons and the living. Secondly, discarnate interactionism is present to some degree in other ostensible evidences of survival (for example, apparitional experiences, near death experiences). Mediumship arguably exhibits a very high degree of interactionism, but interactionism is not unique to mediumship. Third, the implications of interactionism in mediumship will apply to the case for survival in general if *M* evidence is part of the case for survival. Although there is some dispute among survivalists about the strength of *M* evidence, there is considerably less dispute that a strong case for survival will rely on several strands of survival evidence, including *M* evidence (Almeder, 1992: 255–256; Braude, 2003: 301–306; Griffin, 1997: 263–268). Discarnate interactionism seems unavoidable in the empirical case for postmortem survival.

II. Discarnate Interactionism and Psi Functioning

Discarnate interactionism, though, raises an important question about how exactly discarnate persons are able to interact with living agents. How would they send messages to mediums, acquire knowledge about events taking place in our world, and bring about effects in our world?

Several prominent philosophers and parapsychologists have argued that discarnate persons, if they exist, would have to rely on exotic modes of cognition and causation in their communications with the living. These include Frederic Myers, Anthony Flew, H. H. Price, C. D. Broad, Terence Penelhum, and more recently Alan Gauld and Stephen Braude (Braude, 2003: 20–22; Broad, 1962: 409; Flew, 1953: 69; Gauld, 1982: 139, 145, 159, 231–232, 236, 241, 248–250; Myers, 1903: chap. 9; Penelhum, 1970: 30–36, 39–43; Price, 1953, 1957). The widely held intuition here seems correct. After all, discarnate persons lack the sensory perceptual systems used by living agents to acquire knowledge about their environment. They do not have bodies and so cannot affect the world by moving their bodies in some particular way. Their means of acquiring information, sending it, and causally influencing the physical world would have to be through powers or capacities that operate independently of our sensory perceptual system and body. And this is at least approximately how psychic functioning is understood. However, we should consider this in greater detail.

A. *Discarnate Knowledge: Telepathy and Clairvoyance*

As explained above, the survivalist interpretation of mediumship indicates that discarnate spirits not only have knowledge of persons, places, and events from their earthly lives, but they also exhibit a range of knowledge of postmortem facts, usually involving people or places that were significant to them during their earthly life. The possession of knowledge of postmortem facts means that we cannot sufficiently explain the content of the deceased person's knowledge by appealing to knowledge that was naturally acquired during the deceased person's

life. Some of this postmortem knowledge reflects facts related to the séance sessions, as exemplified in the ability of communicators to identify sitters and objects presented at the sitting. A considerable amount, though, extends beyond the sitting to details about particular places, the location of certain objects, and what certain people were doing at particular times. So, even if we supposed that a deceased person relied solely on the sensory perceptual faculties of the medium to know the identity of the sitters and what they say during the sitting, no such appeal would be available to explain knowledge of perceptually remote facts. We would have to appeal to psi functioning.

There remains the interesting question, of course, as to what kind of psi is utilized to acquire postmortem knowledge, whether clairvoyance, telepathy, or both.¹³ In the Ann Kennedy communications, telepathy would arguably be insufficient to explain some of the communications since neither Rev. Kennedy nor any other living person was aware of the facts at the time. For example, the Ann communicator correctly identified a dangerous defect in the electrical system in Rev. Kennedy's car, though it was unknown to Rev. Kennedy at the time (Kennedy, 1973: 125–127). She also disclosed the location of a very specific pair of earrings Rev. Kennedy had never seen before (Kennedy, 1973: 147–148). The “book tests” with Mrs. Leonard also suggest the exercise of discarnate clairvoyance. Other evidence, though, suggests telepathy with living agents. For example, the G.P. communicator claimed to have watched his father compose a letter to G.P.'s brother Frank on a particular day. Although G.P.'s father did not write such a letter, he had intended to do so on the day in question (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 315, cf. 307). On another occasion, sitters asked G.P. to provide a description of the activities of his friend Mrs. Howard at the time of the sitting. G.P. correctly described Mrs. Howard's activities from the previous day (Hodgson, 1897–1898: 305–307). Hodgson argued that errors of this sort suggest that rather than clairvoyantly acquiring information about the world, communicators retrieve information about the world indirectly from the minds of living agents, a process that sometimes results in distortions of facts.

B. Discarnate Communication: Telepathy and PK

But discarnate psi functioning is needed not only to account for how the deceased acquires knowledge of postmortem facts, but also in accounting for how a discarnate person can *communicate* this information to the living. In discarnate cognition the causal chain operates *from* the world or human minds *to* the discarnate mind, but communications between the deceased and the living would seem to require causal chains that move in the other direction, from the mind of the discarnate person to the mind or world of the living. Even where discarnate knowledge concerns ante-mortem facts naturally acquired in life and stored in memory, communicating this knowledge to or through a medium would require psi functioning. A discarnate person by definition lacks the ordinary means of communicating by her own voice, writing, bodily gestures, or facial expressions.

Such a person must either utilize telepathy to directly send information to the mind of the medium or utilize PK to either (a) gain control of the medium's physical body and use it as a surrogate for speaking, writing, bodily gestures, or facial expressions¹⁴ or (b) bring about some other physical effect that can serve as a means of communication. (a) and (b) of course highlight the importance of discarnate agency, which requires a causal chain that moves from a discarnate mind to the physical world. While living agents bring about physical effects by using their bodies, the discarnate agent's mental states would have to directly produce changes in the physical world. We find (b) in physical mediumship where the effects attributed to discarnate spirits include levitating tables, the materialization of objects, the movement of objects from one location to another, playing of instruments, and so forth. The automatic writing involved in trance mediumship is an example of (a). So discarnate psi is required for both the acquisition of post-mortem knowledge (by ESP) and the communication of anything a discarnate person knows (by ESP or PK).

While I have been arguing that the discarnate interactionism involved in the survivalist interpretation of mediumship entails discarnate psi (ESP and PK), I think we must also hold that this interactionism entails living agent psi. First, mediumistic communications generally suggest a telepathic link between the medium and the discarnate person. We might suppose that the medium acquires her knowledge of discarnate minds by telepathically scanning their minds or that the discarnate person is telepathically sending information to a medium's mind. In either case, living agent telepathy is operative. Secondly, the medium often initiates contact with the spirit world by way of spirit controls. The spirit controls are either discarnate persons or secondary personalities of the medium. If the former, the medium would have to rely on telepathy to initiate contact with them. If the latter, the medium must telepathically interact with communicators, for "the control" is supposed to be a discarnate spirit who telepathically interacts with other discarnate personalities. Third, as pointed out earlier, there are numerous instances where it is apparent that the medium has telepathically mined information from the minds of the sitters or other living persons. If we suppose that the medium has telepathic abilities that allow her to interact with discarnate persons, we just might expect that the medium would periodically pick up on information in the minds of sitters or other living persons. But again, this reinforces the contention that some mediums exhibit a significant degree of psi functioning.

So we can now state a conditional claim that links discarnate interactionism and psychic functioning in discarnate and living persons.

- (2) If discarnate interactionism is true, then discarnate persons and some living persons exhibit psi functioning.¹⁵

The conjunction of (1) and (2) entails

- (3) If *M* phenomena are evidences for postmortem survival, then discarnate persons and some living persons exhibit psi functioning.

III. Survival Psi and the Super-Psi Hypothesis

So the survivalist interpretation of mediumship requires psi functioning in both (deceased) discarnate persons and living agents. Suppose we designate the psi required by the survivalist interpretation of mediumship *survival psi*. A fairly important question arises at this point. Is survival psi something in the neighborhood of the psi required by the so-called “super-psi hypothesis,” that is, the psi needed to explain putative *M* evidence if we limited ourselves to psi functioning among the living?

A. *Physical and Mental Mediumship*

In the case of phenomena manifested in physical mediumship, I think it is difficult to argue that survival psi is less potent or less refined than super-psi. The psi in each case would be PK, and the effect being measured is the same. It is only the postulated *source* that is different, whether it is a living or deceased person. If we suppose that a discarnate spirit is levitating a 25-lb table, we must minimally attribute to him PK powers sufficient for bringing about this effect. But we would have to postulate no more than this to account for a living agent levitating the same table. If D. D. Home utilized PK to play songs on the caged accordion, it would be a no less refined exhibition of PK for a discarnate spirit to do so. In fact, the discarnate person’s exercise of PK in this context is arguably a more refined form of psi functioning. When discarnate spirits produce physical effects as a means of communicating with the living, these effects are often *responses* to the actions or words of living agents. In that case, the discarnate person would have to rely on knowledge of what living persons are doing or saying at the time and then produce the appropriate effect, be it knocks or raps on tables or playing some particular song on an instrument (see Penelhum, 1970: 53). This would have to be done consistently to produce an intelligible series of responses. But, as already argued, if a discarnate person knows what is happening at any moment in the physical world, he must utilize ESP to acquire this knowledge. So a discarnate person’s PK effects (if responses to the words or actions of living persons) would have to be coordinated and calibrated with an efficacious ESP, whether telepathy or clairvoyance.

Mental mediumship presents a more complex set of issues. In (m4)–(m8) above, the communicators have detailed knowledge of a wide range of facts about objects in different physical locations and events or activities taking place at different locations and times. For example, Ann Kennedy (whose ostensible communications were cited in [m8]) had knowledge of events taking place in different places on earth. The content of the communications involves highly specific information about the location of objects and activities of people, some of which were not even known to Rev. Kennedy at the time of the communications. Ann describes herself as being “there” at particular locations or “with David” at specific times. Her *presence* must have been quite regular because she exhibits

knowledge of facts not as isolated events but nested within a larger chronologically accurate narrative. She not only knows *that* certain events happened but she knows the temporal *order* of many events. The deceased person has what we might call “narrative knowledge” of various postmortem facts. This is also suggested by prolonged conversations between discarnate persons and sitters in which the former are capable of keeping track of the conversation and sometimes recalling the content of earlier sittings.

The first thing to see here is that if a living agent acquires knowledge of some target fact *f* by way of ESP, it will plausibly take the same degree of ESP for a discarnate person to acquire knowledge of *f*. If Mrs. Piper accesses information about Miss Bancroft’s summer home (m6) or the activities of George Pelham’s father or friends on a particular day (m4), *prima facie* it seems that a discarnate person must have ESP powers of the same degree to acquire knowledge of the same facts, that is, assuming—as seems reasonable—that discarnate persons operate in the same causal nexus as living persons. Secondly, as illustrated in the mediumship of Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, and the mediums consulted by Rev. Kennedy, the clairvoyance (or telepathy) needed for acquiring knowledge of specific postmortem facts is extraordinary, and this seems true whether it is the product of psi functioning in discarnate persons or psi operating solely in living persons. In either case, psi must be utilized to acquire knowledge of the same set of facts, including their systematic and chronological relations. Psi would have to be extremely powerful and sufficiently refined to consistently produce such results.

B. The Problem of Crippling Complexity and Goldilocks Psi

The above points can be reinforced and developed in the light of what Stephen Braude has designated the problem of “crippling complexity” (Braude, 2003: 86–95). 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 constraints on psi functioning imposed by the larger network of causal interactions in which psi is embedded. More specifically, like normal abilities, psi functioning would be subject to various kinds of interference from other causal chains in the world. As Braude has argued, 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: 87, cf. 89–90). 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, and given the frequency of the kind of mediumistic data illustrated above, 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.

Braude initially introduces the problem of crippling complexity to highlight a particular difficulty with the super-psi hypothesis, namely that the degree of psychic functioning among the living needed to explain ostensible survival evidences, especially the data of mediumship, is likely to be so strong that it runs the risk of defeating itself. Of course, Braude thinks the survival hypothesis faces a similar difficulty (Braude, 2003: 92). But this indicates a fundamental parity in the psi that must be postulated by these competing explanations of *M* evidence. If we suppose that there *is* consistent efficacious psi functioning, which procures the kinds of knowledge outlined above, this psi must be both extremely powerful and extremely refined. It must be powerful enough to overcome a vast array of potentially contravening conditions (including other psychic efforts); yet it must be refined enough not to disrupt psychic activities in the causal neighborhood. In other words, psi must not be too weak, and it must not be too strong. What is needed is *goldilocks psi*,¹⁶ an efficacious, highly calibrated psi that can handle the problem of crippling complexity. Here is the crucial point: goldilocks psi is needed whether we are dealing with living agent psi or discarnate psi. As Braude says, "If deceased communicators exist and interact with the living, then presumably both they and the living contribute to the total underlying causal nexus. In that case, one would expect the deceased to confront the same sort of interferences that frustrate psychic activities among the living" (Braude, 2003: 94). This underscores why discarnate psi would have to be at least as powerful and refined as living agent psi.

Take the medium Albert Best's knowledge of the specific portion and content of a book that Rev. Kennedy was reading 10 minutes before Best called Rev. Kennedy (Kennedy, 1973: 105). On the survival hypothesis, we must suppose that Kennedy's deceased wife acquired the information using ESP and communicated the information to Best using ESP. On the super-psi hypothesis, we must suppose that Best acquired the information by ESP. But many of the obstacles or interferences that Best's psi functioning would have had to overcome are obstacles or interferences that Ann Kennedy's psi functioning would have also had to overcome. This reason for this is that (a) it is the same fact that is ostensibly known by Mrs. Kennedy and Albert Best and (b) some of the important factors that prevent an efficacious exercise of psi are relative to the fact(s) known by ESP, for example, the nature of the event, its duration, location, and specific time(s) of occurrence. This can be contrasted with defeating factors related to the person exercising ESP, for example, simple weakness of ability. I might fail to hear what someone says in a crowded room because my hearing itself is not very good, but it might be that at

the time the person speaks or at some point during speaking, there is increased chatter in the room which prevents me from hearing all or some of what is said. This illustrates how some kinds of interference are relative to the time and duration of an event. The psychic parallel should be clear. While psi may fail to be efficacious on occasion because of factors relative to the person's psi functioning, it might also fail because at or during the time of the event there is something like "increased chatter"—an array of causal influences operative at the time—that prevents an efficacious exercise of psi or otherwise interferes with psi functioning. So what we see here is that not only are there *general* obstacles to efficacious discarnate psi, but it is quite plausible to suppose that discarnate psi would face the same *specific* obstacles in particular cases that living agent psi would face. So however powerful or refined living agent psi must be to overcome these kinds of interferences, discarnate psi must be as powerful and refined.

C. *Magnitude of Psi and Multiple Source Issues*

The survivalist is likely to point out, though, that restricting ourselves to living agent psi involves a more *extensive* use of psi and that this is a significant discontinuity between survival psi and super-psi I have neglected to consider. We can develop the point here by considering four kinds of knowledge involved in mental mediumship:

- (i) knowledge of a significant range of highly specific ante-mortem facts about the deceased person's life.
- (ii) knowledge of the temporal order and larger context of a multiplicity of ante-mortem facts.
- (iii) knowledge of highly specific postmortem facts about the lives of friends and family of the deceased.
- (iv) knowledge of the temporal order and larger context of a multiplicity of postmortem facts.

The mere survival of a person in any psychologically robust sense logically entails (i) and (ii), so a discarnate person would only need to utilize psi to acquire (iii) and (iv). However, if the veridical data produced in mediumship is explained solely by the operation of psi among living persons, then the medium would have to use psi also to acquire (i) and (ii), as well as (iii) and (iv). So we might conclude that, although discarnate psi is no less powerful than living agent psi with respect to (iii) and (iv), the super-psi hypothesis requires a more extensive use of psi by a living agent to account for the entire range of veridical data involved in mediumship. Psi functioning would have to accomplish more than its survival psi counterpart. We might suppose that this increased task complexity requires a more powerful or refined form of psi since it is harder to carry out a larger number of tasks than a smaller number. Of course, this assumes that psi would be something akin to a set of refined tasks, and that it is more difficult to carry out several tasks than a few. But psi might operate more like a magic wand, requiring little more

than an efficacious wish, in which case psi effects could be causally streamlined (see Braude, 2003: 11–12, 89–90). So there may be no task complexity required to acquire the kinds of knowledge in question. But we can restructure the argument here in terms of crippling complexity. If living agent psi must be utilized to acquire a broader scope of information, then—owing to the complexity of the causal nexus in which psi operates—it looks like there will be a greater number of obstacles for psi to circumvent. This will be a problem even if psi works like a magic wand, for the problem of crippling complexity is concerned with conditions that undercut psi functioning, whether psi functioning is simple or complex. If psi must be employed to acquire a robust body of information, which is in turn used to construct a convincing trance persona of the deceased, there are far more ways this can be frustrated. So it looks like the psi involved in the super-psi hypothesis is after all more extraordinary than survival psi given the problem of crippling complexity.

The problem is that the survival hypothesis is not merely committed to claiming that discarnate agents possess the kinds of knowledge in (i)–(iv) but—like the super-psi hypothesis—that the medium herself either possesses this knowledge or is an instrument for transmitting it to living persons. Discarnate interactionism entails that discarnate persons send (i)–(iv) through the medium or directly to her mind, but as already argued above a discarnate person would have to rely on psi for this kind of communication. Also, the medium herself would need significant telepathic abilities, either to receive information sent from discarnate persons or to send information to the mind of the discarnate person. So the survival hypothesis cannot avoid attributing a significant degree of telepathy to the medium. On the super-psi hypothesis, psi is required to account for the medium's possessing (i)–(iv), but psi is not required to explain the communication of this knowledge to others. For the survivalist, psi is required to explain how the discarnate person acquired (iii) and (iv), *as well as how the discarnate person communicates (i)–(iv) to others*. Discarnate persons may get away with a less extensive use of psi to account for what they know, but they will need a considerably more extensive psi repertoire to communicate this knowledge to the medium. The problem of crippling complexity suggests that the greater the magnitude of psi functioning the greater the need for something like goldilocks psi to avoid the Scylla of psychic impotence and the Charybdis of omnipotent self-defeat.

Of course, defenders of the survival hypothesis are likely to point out that other features of mediumship reveal that the super-psi hypothesis faces its own set of complexities, complexities that demand a form of psi that is more refined and potent than survival psi. A widely advertised problem for the super-psi hypothesis is accommodating mediumistic data that is drawn from multiple sources. For example, Alan Gauld notes that in some cases the medium's stock of knowledge would have to rely on the telepathic retrieval of information from more than one living mind or clairvoyance directed toward multiple sources of information, as opposed to a single causal chain between the discarnate person and the medium (Gauld, 1982: 55–56, 59–61, 70, 130–131, 139–140). We can accept Gauld's

point, though arguably an expanded repertoire of psi functioning, which includes retrocognition, might be able to avoid the problem of multiple sources. Following Braude, I would suggest that the challenge Gauld's "multiple sources" scenario poses is not increased task complexity but a more precarious navigation through the causal nexus. If the medium must rely on multiple sources of information, there are more opportunities for interference arising from the underlying causal nexus. Mediumistic success would require a very potent and refined form of psi functioning to overcome the increased likelihood of failure that is engendered by having to mine information from multiple sources. By contrast, if the medium's veridical information about the deceased originates from the deceased personality, all that is required is a single stable psychic link between the mind of the discarnate person and the deceased. It seems that the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis is more *super* than what is needed for the survival hypothesis.

The survivalist, though, faces a parallel difficulty. To account for the discarnate person's knowledge in (iii) and (iv) the survivalist will have to say that discarnate persons draw information telepathically and/or clairvoyantly from multiple sources. For example, Ann Kennedy's postmortem knowledge (m8) could not have all been telepathically acquired from the mind of her husband, as he was ignorant of some of the postmortem facts at the time they were communicated to him by the medium. Ann must have either drawn this information telepathically from other minds or clairvoyantly from multiple physical locations. This is also illustrated in several of the G.P. sittings with Mrs. Piper (m4) in which G.P. provided reports of what other people were doing at specific locations while the sitting was underway. Moreover, if we suppose that communicators telepathically acquire their knowledge of the sitters' questions and answers, communicators must be capable of telepathically drawing information from multiple minds at about the same time. In all these cases, communicators must integrate information from multiple sources. Why should the medium's act of mining information from multiple sources require a more potent or refined form of psi? "Narrative knowledge" requires both a consistent psychic link with the world and a potent process of acquiring and integrating information from multiple sources.

What Gauld in effect argues is that for the survivalist the causal chain involved in the *communication* of knowledge from the deceased to the living is less complex than what the super-psi hypothesis requires for the causal chain involved in the medium's *acquisition* of knowledge about the deceased. Or, to put this in terms of the problem of crippling complexity, the communication of knowledge from the deceased to the living (medium) involves a less precarious navigation of the causal nexus than the medium's acquisition of knowledge about the deceased. The problem, of course, is that the deceased person's acquisition of knowledge of postmortem facts will require a more precarious navigation of the causal nexus than the medium's communication of knowledge about the deceased to the living. And the discarnate person faces no fewer kinds of obstacles or obstructions in psychically acquiring knowledge of postmortem facts than the medium faces in psychically acquiring knowledge of ante-mortem facts about the deceased. On

the survivalist interpretation of mediumship, the discarnate person must use ESP to acquire postmortem knowledge about different locations, different people, and different events (sometimes concurrently), each of which is represented as parts of a coherent and temporally ordered narrative. On the super-psi hypothesis, the medium must do the same with reference to ante-mortem facts about the deceased person's life. In each case psi will have to be powerful enough to be efficacious, despite so many potentially undercutting causal factors at work in the world, but it will have to be refined enough to avoid becoming the prime undercutter of psychic activity itself. Each case requires goldilocks psi.

We see here that we can easily select features of survival psi, compare these features with features of the super-psi hypothesis, and as a result the living agent psi required by the super-psi hypothesis looks more extraordinary than survival psi. But if we switch our focus to other features of survival psi, such as the acquisition of knowledge of postmortem facts, survival psi begins to look as impressive as the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis, if not more impressive. Here is the crux of the issue. There is really no way to non-arbitrarily privilege any of the comparative features of survival psi and super-psi. It is not as if the psi involved in the medium's acquisition of ante-mortem knowledge about the deceased is more important than the psi involved in the deceased person's acquisition of various bits of postmortem knowledge. Both make up equally significant portions of the data of mediumship. Consequently, we cannot say that the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis must be more potent or more refined than survival psi. To be sure, I have suggested at points why survival psi might be more extraordinary than super-psi, but clearly we must exercise as much caution here as I have urged in connection with comparative judgments about the power and sophistication of super-psi. The main difficulty is weighing the relevant features of comparison. What we can say is that survival psi is a highly refined and efficacious sort of psi-functioning (what I have designated "goldilocks psi"), which is indistinguishable from the degree or kind of psi required by the super-psi hypothesis.¹⁷

IV. Deflating Deflationary Strategies

Having argued for a fundamental parity in the strength and sophistication of survival psi and the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis, we are now in a good position to consider and evaluate survivalist strategies for deflating the apparent explanatory virtues of the super-psi hypothesis. I will consider two of the more ubiquitous strategies encountered in the literature.

A. *Survivalist Deflationary Strategies*

According to one deflationary strategy, the problem with the super-psi hypothesis is that, independent of its alleged explanatory power with respect to *M* evidence, there is no evidence in support of such a hypothesis. C. J. Ducasse (1961: 191–199) raised this objection in the early 1960s in his response to E. R. Dodds's preference for explaining the veridical component of mediumistic

communications in terms of a complex form of telepathy among living persons. It is a standard objection in more recent works on survival (Almeder, 1992: 46, 52–53, 118–120, 226–227; Fontana, 2005: 104–107, 245, 339; Gauld, 1982: 15, 127–128, 248; Lester, 2005: 213–214; Paterson, 1995: 52–53, 159–160, 173–174, 182). For example, Alan Gauld (1982: 248, cf. pp. 130–131, 237, 239–240) has contended that the super-psi hypothesis postulates psi of “an extent and complexity for which there is no other warrant.” According to Robert Almeder, appealing to living agent super-psi to explain survival evidences is like proposing that a particular person robbed a bank even though we have no antecedent or independent evidence that the person in question exists (Almeder, 1992: 52). While some authors focus on the alleged lack of experimental evidence for super-psi, others speak generally of the lack of either experimental or non-experimental evidence.

The authors who raise this objection to the super-psi hypothesis minimally intend to argue that on account of this evidential deficiency the super-psi hypothesis is inferior to the survival hypothesis as a putative explanation of *M* evidence. Almeder (1992: 52) says, “before one can appeal legitimately to super-psi as an alternative way of explaining anything, one should have some empirical evidence that in fact super-psi exists.” It is unclear what “legitimately” means here, though one is left with the impression from the rest of Almeder’s discussion that a hypothesis cannot do *any* explanatory work unless it is antecedently supported by independent evidence. This seems unnecessarily stringent.¹⁸ It would be more sensible to suppose that when we have two competing explanations for observational evidence, if the hypotheses are equal in all other respects, the superior hypothesis is one that already has something going for it epistemically in the way of independent evidential support.

The other common deflationary strategy contends that nothing could in principle count as evidence *against* the super-psi hypothesis, so it is unfalsifiable (Almeder, 1992: 52–53; Fontana, 2005: 110–111; Lester, 2005: 213–214). It is fairly clear that critics intend specifically to claim that the degree and kind of psi required by the super-psi hypothesis is such that nothing could count against its existence. The argument is developed in different ways. Almeder (1992: 53), for example, claims that a hypothesis that cannot be falsified is empirically meaningless and so cannot do any explanatory work. On the other hand, it is frequently held that a theory is *scientific* only if it is falsifiable, falsifiability being a common though problematic demarcation principle. In that case, this particular deflationary objection would be that the super-psi hypothesis is not a genuine scientific hypothesis, not necessarily that it is empirically meaningless. Of course, we might also cast the objection in more general terms. Falsifiability is *a* criterion to be employed in comparing rival hypotheses with each other. All other things being equal, a hypothesis that is falsifiable is to be preferred to one that is not. This allows, at least in principle, a deflationary argument against the super-psi hypothesis as an explanation *simpliciter*; not merely an argument against the scientific status of the super-psi hypothesis.

The crucial point to see here is the general structure of deflationary strategies. They posit some condition, *c*, that is necessary for a hypothesis *h* to do certain explanatory work, deny that the super-psi hypothesis satisfies *c* because of the degree or kind of psi it requires, and then argue that the survival hypothesis satisfies *c*. Consequently, the survival hypothesis has an explanatory edge. Some deflationary strategists seem to think the satisfaction of *c* is necessary for *h* to have *any* explanatory power. That seems unnecessarily strong, so I will formulate the deflationary argument in a more modest form. For this purpose, we can use the generic notion of “significant explanatory efficacy.” I will assume that in any strong inductive argument from evidence *e* to hypothesis *h*, where *e* renders *h* more probable than not, *h* will have significant explanatory efficacy, though arguably the notion applies also in cases where *e* merely confirms *h* by adding to the probability of *h*. If my subsequent argumentation about deflationary arguments is cogent, it will apply equally to stronger versions of the deflationary argument that contend that the super-psi hypothesis has no explanatory power at all.

The deflationary argument may be formally stated as follows:

- (4) A hypothesis *h* has significant explanatory efficacy only if (a) *h* is independently supported and (b) *h* is falsifiable.
- (5) The super-psi hypothesis postulates a degree or kind of psi that is neither independently supported nor falsifiable.

So

- (6) The super-psi hypothesis does not have significant explanatory efficacy.

B. Two Initial Problems

There are two closely related initial problems with the deflationary argument. Both issues affect the soundness of the argument.

First, even if there is no independent evidence for the existence of super-psi, it hardly follows that there is no independent evidence for the super-psi *hypothesis*, but it is the latter claim that is needed for the deflationary argument to be formally valid. Critics of the super-psi hypothesis move too quickly from the claim that there is no independent support for the existence of a certain degree or magnitude of psi (never precisely specified) to the conclusion that there is no independent support for the super-psi hypothesis. The so-called “super-psi hypothesis” is fundamentally the exclusive appeal to efficacious living agent psi to explain ostensible evidences for survival or—in this paper—specifically the data of mediumship. It is not the claim that living agents are omnipotent or omniscient, nor is it the supposition of efficacious living agent psi with a tacked on auxiliary assumption that psi is unlimited. The designation “super-psi” hypothesis is objectionable for precisely this reason. It imposes on the hypothesis a claim (this psi is super) that it does not make, which in turn presupposes a distinction (super-psi vs. ordinary psi) that the hypothesis does not make. Granted, if living agent psi provides a

good explanation for *M* evidence, then living agent psi must be potent and refined enough to produce *M* evidence. But it is far from obvious that the experimental and non-experimental data does not provide some evidence for this (see Braude, 2003: 14–15). Moreover, independent evidence for living agent psi does provide a confirmation of the special powers or capacities postulated by the super-psi hypothesis, even if there is no direct evidence that such powers or capacities have previously produced the specific results in *M* evidence. Suppose a rare Egyptian artifact is stolen from a particular museum that has the most sophisticated security system in the world. We may have no independent evidence that Joe Blogs has ever used his security hacking and heist abilities to pull off such a feat. However, Joe Blogs's track record of having pulled off several similar feats in the past adds to the probability of the supposition that he is the culprit in the present case. How *much* it adds to the probability of the hypothesis depends on the degree of similarity between the robberies. But the bald assertion that there is no independent support at all absent direct evidence for the identical effect is without warrant. So, in addition to the validity problem, we may be unwarranted in accepting (5).

Secondly, and parallel to the point raised above, even if the claim that super-psi exists cannot be falsified, it would not follow that the super-psi *hypothesis* cannot be falsified. Again, there is reason to doubt the validity of the deflationary argument as it stands. One of the problems here is that otherwise falsifiable theories may have unfalsifiable components or entailments (for example, absolute time in Newtonian mechanics). It may be quite difficult to siphon off the metaphysical components of empirical theories.¹⁹ What falsifiability requires is that theories have *some* testable consequences, and the more the better. The super-psi hypothesis claims that human persons have efficacious psi powers. If these claims are falsifiable, then there is a fairly important aspect of the super-psi hypothesis that *is* falsifiable. Of course, even the falsifiable aspects of scientific theories depend on what auxiliary hypotheses are adopted. Since auxiliary assumptions are often unfalsifiable, other criteria must be used to evaluate them. So it may matter less whether claims about *super-psi* are falsifiable and more whether there are plausible auxiliary assumptions that permit efficacious and refined living agent psi to have testable consequences. This would permit a core element of the super-psi hypothesis to be falsifiable. Also, as Stephen Braude (2003: 17–19) has argued, even if a super-psi hypothesis (with various auxiliary assumptions) is compatible with all observation-statements, it does not follow that nothing at all could count against the hypothesis. The super-psi hypothesis may be unfalsifiable in the former sense, but falsifiable in the latter sense.

C. A More Serious Problem

So there are at least two initial reasons to be concerned with the plausibility of the deflationary argument. But there is something more profoundly wrong with

the deflationary argument. The argument, designed to give the survivalist interpretation of mediumship an explanatory edge against its main exotic competitor, actually undermines the case for survival from mediumship. The deflationary argument generates a kind of logical or explanatory “blowback” against the survival hypothesis itself. Once we view the deflationary argument in the light of what I have argued about survival psi in the earlier parts of the paper, it should be clear that it *cannot* both be the case that (a) the survival hypothesis has significant explanatory power and (b) the super-psi hypothesis does not have significant explanatory power on account of the degree or kind of psi it requires. Consequently, the deflationary strategist faces a dilemma: either there is no good empirical case for survival from mediumship or the deflationary argument is unsound.

To set this up, recall that above I argued that the survivalist interpretation of mediumship entails discarnate interactionism and that discarnate interactionism entails survival psi, that is, psi functioning among discarnate persons and at least some living agents. I have avoided making the claim that survival psi is super-psi. In fact, I have tried to avoid speaking of *super-psi* altogether. The phrase “super-psi hypothesis,” as I have used it in this paper, simply designates the hypothesis that attempts to explain *M* evidence exclusively in terms of living agent psi. I have argued that *this* hypothesis requires goldilocks psi, a very refined and efficacious form of psi functioning among the deceased and the living that is capable of overcoming the problem of crippling complexity. I have also argued that survival psi entails goldilocks psi, and for this reason there is a fundamental parity between the psi required by the survival hypothesis and the psi required by the so-called super-psi hypothesis.

One of the difficulties facing the deflationary argument should be immediately apparent. If the survivalist demands independent support for the degree or kind of living agent psi required by the super-psi hypothesis before any such hypothesis may be invoked to explain *M* evidence, epistemic parity requires imposing a similar explanatory constraint on the survival hypothesis itself. And therein is the difficulty. The survival hypothesis is committed to survival psi, so the survivalist must either concede that survival psi is without parallel in the literature on spontaneous and experimental ESP (Gauld, 1982: 145) or he must claim that—unlike the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis—there is independent, empirical support for survival psi. The first admission prevents the survival hypothesis from having superior explanatory power over *M* evidences. The second admission prevents the survivalist from sustaining his deflationary objection against the super-psi hypothesis. Any attempt to argue that there is independent evidence in support of survival psi will be evidence for goldilocks psi. This undercuts the contention that there is no warrant for belief in the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis, for a fundamental way of characterizing this psi is as goldilocks psi. Even if the psi required by the super-psi hypothesis is greater than survival psi, surely evidence for the latter would be inductive evidence for the former existing, even if there is no direct evidence for it. The survivalist simply cannot plausibly conclude

that there is *no* evidence for super-psi and yet maintain that his own hypothesis involves a degree or kind of psi that is independently confirmed.

But the survival hypothesis actually compounds the difficulty. The survival hypothesis appeals to discarnate persons (significantly continuous with formerly living persons) to explain *M* evidence. However, if as Robert Almeder says, it is necessary to have “some evidence of the causes cited in offering an explanation” (before employing such explanations), then we cannot appeal to discarnate persons to explain observational data unless we have independent, empirical reasons to suppose that such entities exist. Almeder (1992: 52) says that there must be independent, empirical evidence that Jones exists before we can postulate that Jones is the robber of Rabun Gap Bank. By parity of reasoning, though, there must be independent empirical evidence that a certain entity exists before we appeal to that entity to explain observational data. So it is not just that the survival hypothesis postulates capacities and powers the existence of which stands in need of independent, empirical support, but we would need independent, empirical support for the existence of the kinds of entities who ostensibly have these capacities and powers. But independent of the purported explanatory virtues of the survival hypothesis, it would seem that the empirical evidence for discarnate persons is fairly thin.

Now whereas the super-psi and survival hypotheses each postulate the existence of goldilocks psi (which, let us suppose, is without independent evidence), the super-psi hypothesis would seem to at least have the virtue of not postulating *additional* entities for which there is little if any independent evidence. If the absence of independent evidence for super-psi is a problem, surely the problem is compounded by the lack of independent evidence for the kinds of entities that ostensibly exhibit survival psi. The thrust of the deflationary demand for independent evidence suggests a kind of explanatory conservatism: only appeal to antecedently known entities and processes, until there is sufficient evidence for expanding our ontological inventory. The survival hypothesis seems to doubly violate this epistemological disposition.

Something similar will hold for the charge that the super-psi hypothesis is unfalsifiable. Even if this is true it is difficult to see how the objection can be sustained in a way that does not apply to the survivalist interpretation of mediumship. If the super-psi hypothesis is unfalsifiable on account of postulating goldilocks psi, so is the survivalist interpretation of the data of mediumship. Indeed, given that the survival hypothesis appeals to discarnate persons, it is in double trouble, for it is not obvious what sort of observation-statement can falsify the supposition that there are discarnate persons. To be clear, I am not arguing that the survivalist hypothesis cannot be falsified. Indeed, in the weak sense of falsifiability suggested earlier, the survivalist interpretation of mediumship looks falsifiable (as does the super-psi hypothesis). The challenge the survivalist deflationary strategist faces is to find a formulation of falsifiability that includes the survivalist interpretation of mediumship but excludes the super-psi hypothesis.²⁰

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the relation between the super-psi hypothesis and the survivalist interpretation of the data associated with mental and physical mediumship. In Part I of the paper I argued that if the data of mediumship are evidence of postmortem survival, then a very strong interactionist thesis about discarnate persons and their relation to the world must be true. In Part II I argued that this interactionist thesis requires psi functioning in discarnate persons and living persons. The heart of the argument was developed in Part III, where I showed that the survivalist interpretation of mediumship is committed to the same kind or degree of psi functioning as postulated by the super-psi hypothesis. If this is true, then certain attempts at deflating the explanatory virtues of the super-psi hypothesis are self-defeating. In Part IV I showed that deflationary strategies undercut the case for survival from mediumship if they attempt to impugn or discredit the super-psi hypothesis on the grounds that super-psi is unfalsifiable or without independent support. To the extent that other ostensible evidences for postmortem survival are also committed to discarnate interactionism, a similar conclusion will follow. The sensible course of action I believe is for the survivalist to reject these particular deflationary strategies and attempt to defend the survival hypothesis on other grounds.

Notes

- ¹ The terminology “super-psi” may be traced to Hornell Hart’s designation “Super-ESP” in Hart (1959), but the idea of explaining mediumistic communications in terms of extraordinary living agent psi originated in the late 19th century among members of the British and American societies of psychical research.
- ² Stephen Braude nicely addresses this point. See Braude (2003: 12).
- ³ Advocates of the survival hypothesis typically concede that living agents exhibit some degree of telepathy or clairvoyance. They have had to concede this on the basis of their own appeal to mediumistic communications, which seem to require telepathic abilities on the part of the medium. See Price (1966).
- ⁴ We find this, for example, in the mediumship of Leonora Piper. One kind of case here is where the medium’s information about the deceased is incorrect, but the incorrect beliefs correspond to incorrect beliefs held by the sitters (see Myers, 1889–1890: 568–571, 581–583; Podmore, 1910/1975: 165–166). In other cases, obviously fictitious communicators or controls appear at séances, but their identities happen to correspond to what sitters were thinking prior to the séance (see Sidgwick, 1915: 85, 297ff, 437–448). It seems implausible that these kinds of specific correlations would be merely fortuitous.
- ⁵ While a discarnate person may be a wholly immaterial substance or mind persisting without any physical substrate or physical properties, it may also be understood as possessing some physical properties (e.g., spatial location), or even an ethereal or astral body. On the range of possible physical properties of the soul, see Zimmerman and Van Inwagen (2007: 23–28). Hence, a “discarnate person” on my understanding lacks a conventional body.
- ⁶ For a development of this conception of the environment of disembodied survival, see Price (1953, 1957).

- ⁷ This shows that a well-formulated survival hypothesis needs as its content not merely a claim about a person surviving death as a discarnate spirit, but something more specific that will lead us to expect discarnate interactionism. If we postulate the persistence of persons with roughly the same sort of desires and intentions as they had in life, then we should expect the deceased to attempt to communicate and interact with our world.
- ⁸ For a good overview of such evidences, see Broad (1962: 253–383); Gauld (1982: chaps. 2–8); and Braude (2003: chaps. 2, 3).
- ⁹ H. F. Saltmarsh analyzed 142 sittings with medium Mrs. Warren Elliott and found that postmortem statements were just as frequent as ante-mortem statements. They were also slightly more accurate than ante-mortem statements, 74% to 66.3%. See Saltmarsh (1930–1931: 91–92); and Broad (1962: 317–320).
- ¹⁰ The mediumship of Mrs. Leonard provides examples of this. See Thomas (1939); Salter (1926); and Smith (1964: chap. 7).
- ¹¹ The “book test” involved a communicator disclosing the contents of a particular page in a particular book at a specific location (residence and location on a particular bookshelf), where these details were unknown to the medium and sitters.
- ¹² See Braude (1997: 53–129) for an excellent summary of the phenomena encountered in the physical mediumship of Home and Palladino.
- ¹³ For an analysis of clairvoyantly acquired postmortem knowledge, see Stephen Braude (2009: 195–210).
- ¹⁴ Frederic Myers designated this “telergy” and distinguished it from a discarnate person’s telepathic influence on the medium. See Broad (1962: 298–299).
- ¹⁵ It might be argued that discarnate persons are only discarnate in a weak sense. They lack a conventional body, but they are not wholly immaterial persons. Discarnate spirits have bodies of a different sort, astral or ethereal bodies (Fontana, 2005: 422–425, 445–450). The communicators and controls of mediums sometimes state that they possess something analogous to a human body, and they use their own sense organs to acquire knowledge of our world and other deceased persons (see Broad, 1962: 280–285). It is plausible to suppose that it seems to these communicators and controls that they are embodied even if they are not, in much the same way that it seems to us that we are embodied in our dream states. However, even if we suppose that discarnate spirits have astral bodies, their interaction with the physical world would still have to be considered paranormal. Psi functioning is typically regarded as a mode of cognition or causation that does not depend on the physical body or its sensory system. This would be no less true for cognitive and causal powers grounded in an astral body.
- ¹⁶ In the children’s story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” a young girl named Goldilocks secretly enters the home of three bears and tastes their three bowls of porridge. The first is too hot, the second is too cold, but the third is “just right.” The term “goldilocks” is often used to signify unique or special conditions. I use the term here to designate psi that is just right, given the problem of crippling complexity.
- ¹⁷ Gauld concedes that survival theorists “must postulate what is in effect, super-ESP” (Gauld, 1982: 250, cf. pp. 139–140). Braude (2003: 20–21, 92–94) has developed this point.
- ¹⁸ Almeder’s position prevents us from ever acquiring knowledge of the existence of something first by way of inference to best explanation. This is simply unacceptable in both science and ordinary experience. See Braude (2003: 14–15).
- ¹⁹ For a discussion of how scientific or empirical theories have embedded ontologies that resist observation-refutation, see Wisdom (1972).

²⁹ Fontana (2005: 110–111) attempts this, but the effort is unsuccessful. Fontana claims that the super-psi hypothesis is not falsifiable, whereas the survival hypothesis is falsifiable. According to Fontana, a hypothesis *h* is said to be falsified on one of two conditions, *h* does not effectively fit with known facts or there is some other hypothesis *h** that fits the known facts better. Fontana then claims that the survival hypothesis fits the known facts better than the super-psi hypothesis. However, if what Fontana says is true, the super-psi hypothesis is falsified, from which it self-evidently follows that the super-psi hypothesis is falsifiable.

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