

Survival or Super-psi A Response to Montague Keen

- Stephen Braude -

It is recommended that the reader consults [Montague Keen's](#) and [Peter Wadhams'](#) criticisms of Braude's paper [Survival or Super-psi?](#)

I'M GRATEFUL to both Montague Keen and Peter Wadhams for taking the time to respond to my paper, and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to reply in turn. It's precisely this sort of dialogue that I had hoped my paper would encourage. I also sympathize with my commentators' frustration over my failure to address certain matters more fully (or at all). I have to agree that my paper presents an incomplete picture of the issues. But of course, it was only a paper, not a full treatise. In fact, I thought I had made it clear that it was merely an opening salvo in what had to be a much more extensive examination of the issues.

Because my comments here must be brief, nothing I say now is likely to satisfy either commentator. But I can at least indicate in broad outline how I think adequate replies should go. I'm also pleased to report that a greatly expanded presentation of my views on survival will be available shortly as a book (Braude 2003). I'm told "Immortal Remains" will be off the presses some time in April. (Of course, my views are always my views du jour. My position on survival, unlike my book at this stage, is a work in progress. However, interested readers will certainly get a clearer picture of my thinking, and I hope of the issues generally, by reading the book rather than concentrating on my now relatively ancient article.)

So, let me respond briefly to the major criticisms lodged against my paper, and I'll begin with Monty's reply. I was quite surprised, first, that Monty portrays me as an opponent of the survival hypothesis. Granted, I've lobbied for the super-psi alternative, but I thought it was clear from the start that I was interested merely in making sure that the super-psi hypothesis wasn't rejected for the wrong reasons; typically, by considering it in an implausibly weak form. Apparently, I didn't stake out that position as clearly as I had thought, because many have since taken me as a proponent of the super-psi hypothesis and an opponent of the survival hypothesis. I take full responsibility for that mistaken impression, but I've done much to combat it since, including numerous talks at the SPR and elsewhere in the UK, in which I've stated clearly that I've wanted simply to raise the debate to the level of conceptual sophistication which it deserved all along. But since Monty attended several of those talks, I'm surprised he says I've never disavowed my position "against survival." In fact, at my Tate lecture at the SPR a couple of years ago, and at the Beloff conference in Edinburgh shortly thereafter (both of which Monty attended), I said plainly that there was some evidence that I felt the super-psi hypothesis couldn't handle, and in the former talk I even presented a detailed argument showing how the super-psi hypothesis seemed ironically to be self-defeating.

Monty makes several other comments with which I must disagree. For example, in a puzzling argument in his fourth paragraph, he claims, "as modern physics has shown us, nothing dies." But physics has shown no such thing, and I would have thought that only the most naive reductionist would have ever thought so (and obviously, physicalistic reductionism is a position to which Monty does not subscribe). In fact, physics doesn't even purport to describe everything; just those things that can be characterized at a certain level of description, or which can be abstracted from the domain of intentional properties. In fact, I'd go further and maintain that physics can't possibly show that nothing dies, because no science in principle can encompass everything there is within its distinctive set of descriptive categories.

Next, Monty asserts that psi "clearly operates independently of the constraints of linear time and three dimensional space." At the very least, this cannot be all that clear, because many have debated it; myself included. Indeed, the usual reasons for thinking that ESP violates, say, the inverse square law is massively confused (for an examination of those issues, see (Braude 1997)). Similarly, there are powerful arguments for the position that precognition can only be made sense of in terms of clockwise causality (Braude 1997, Eisenbud 1982).

But turning more directly to the case for survival, Monty notes correctly that I don't indicate clearly what attributes an ideal case would possess. It's true, I didn't do this in my paper, but I do discuss the matter in considerable detail in "Immortal Remains". However, I don't believe that the cases discussed in my paper were presented as though "they were the most persuasive around." I thought it was clear that I regarded them as cases many have found impressive, but which I considered to have certain heuristically useful weaknesses.

I actually agree with Monty that some cases seem to be stronger, but I disagree that the cross correspondences fall into that category. This is not the place to defend that point in detail (and once again, I do look at it more carefully in "Immortal Remains"). In fact, in his reply to me Peter Wadhams notes certain weaknesses in those

cases, and I agree with his comments. For now, I'll just now add the following. First, I think the cross-correspondences are defective as evidence precisely because the cases are so convoluted. Because this is a problem that also afflicts the Scole material (another body of evidence that Monty overrates, in my opinion), I have to conclude that he and I have radically different conceptions of the nature of evidence. Much of the voluminous cross-correspondence material is devoted to detailed and seemingly inconclusive debates over the proper translation, interpretation, and significance of its obscure allusions and quotations. And I'd argue that material is evidentially weak if it consistently provokes these sorts of apparently unresolvable debates, even among readers sympathetic to parapsychological data. That is why Robert Thouless commented, "The cross-correspondence technique was too elaborate. It seems to be the products of minds who realized the necessity for evidence but not the equal necessity for the value of evidence being easily assessed." (Thouless 1959, p. 141). We can do better, and have often done better in digging up provocative cases.

Monty also claims, "no medium, however gifted in acquiring information from living minds, can produce a meaningful message of which no-one alive is aware when the messages are written down." But this seems unclear or confused on several counts. First, if the message is merely meaningful and contains no verifiable information, then at best it is only very weakly evidential (and, probably, not evidential at all). Second, if it contains verifiable information, then the information was available all along to real-time ESP. Third, Monty seems to forget that the survival hypothesis requires the type of psi posited in super-psi explanations. Communication between the deceased and the medium is presumably exactly the type of psi posited by super-psi advocates. The only difference is that one of the participants on the survivalist scenario is deceased. But it's still just direct mind-to-mind interaction nevertheless, and so advocates of the survival hypothesis are in a uniquely bad position to argue against telepathic interaction when it involves only living agent and percipient. Moreover, Monty has given no reason for thinking that telepathic interaction among the living suffers from limitations not found when one of the participants is deceased. (However, I try - with conspicuous lack of confidence - to show something like that in "Immortal Remains".)

These problems also afflict Monty's case of the medium who helped the police. Monty describes the medium as "prompted by her discarnate informant," but since she gave information which the police could verify, then Monty has shown precisely why the appeal to ESP among the living (either telepathy or clairvoyance) is a live option. In fact, the degree of psi suggested strikes me as no more astonishing than the better examples of CIA-sponsored remote viewing declassified over the past few years.

I have fewer bones to pick with Peter Wadhams. One small point is his claim that I ridicule the medium Mrs. Chenoweth when describing the fascinating Cagliostro case. I can't imagine how I created that impression. Mrs. Chenoweth seems quite clearly to have been a remarkable medium. The only question I raised about her concerned the origin of the material incorporated into the Cagliostro persona, and I mentioned Eisenbud's conjectures about the possible (and plausible) sexual repressions of all the sitters.

My main disagreement with Wadhams overlaps one of my last-mentioned problems with Monty's reply. Wadhams argues that in a killer experiment, "to cover all the facts, super-psi has to be retrocognitive." Presumably, that's because (as he says), "a non-survivalist explanation has to account for the fact that information which existed only in the mind of person A subsequently appeared in the mind of person B, where person B was born after person A died." But that seems false. If this were the case, then we'd be unable to confirm now that the information was accurate. So again, if the purported spirit message contains verifiable information, then somewhere now there exists that information in a form accessible to real-time ESP. And if the message contains no such verifiable information, then it's not evidential.

As for Wadhams's proposed cipher test, if the postmortem communicator "gets through" to one of the mediums, that also is telepathy. So this explanation presupposes the psychic phenomenon in question. But once we've made that concession, how would we distinguish evidence of survival from evidence for telepathy among the living with (say) telepathic deferment (a well-known phenomenon from both crisis and experimental cases)?

I'm pleased to report that in my new book, I do what Wadhams suggests; namely "re-examine the types of evidence for survival and decide which are the strongest in competition with super-psi." (Of course, whether I do this adequately is another matter. I guess we'll see.) For reasons I explain therein, the case for survival remains much more complex than most of its adherents realize. The problems concern, not simply shoddy reasoning about super-psi alternatives to survival, but also the nature and limits of human abilities, latent creativity, dissociation, second-language acquisition, and other matters to which writers on survival have paid scant attention, and about which they seem to know very little.

I don't doubt that my new book (like my paper) will fail spectacularly as the last word on the topic of survival. But I do hope it will raise the level of debate another notch or two.

This article was written in response to [Montague Keen's second criticism](#) of Stephen Braude's paper [Survival or Super-psi?](#)

FIRST, let me reaffirm that we agree on an important point about the cross-correspondences; namely, that some cases are very impressive. I never denied that. In fact, I agree that the Palm Sunday and Lethe cases pose a significant prima facie challenge to the super-psi hypothesis; probably as great a challenge as any single case can. I also believe that the Hope, Star, and Browning case (a much simpler example) is impressive as well. But in a way, all this is beside the point. As I try to show in *Immortal Remains*, what makes mediumship most compelling as evidence is a feature probably no particular case can display. What matters most, I suspect, are aspects of the evidence that manifest only over the course of a medium's career. Moreover, it still seems clear (at least according to my own standards of evidentiality) that most of the good cross-correspondence cases; and certainly the corpus of material as a whole; are too byzantine and obscure to carry much weight. The case for survival, in my view, needs to stand more firmly, on more straightforward pieces of evidence.

I also continue to believe that Monty underestimates how powerful the evidence is for refined super-psi. It comes from all corners of the psi domain; for example, from the inadequacy of retro-causal interpretations of both precognition and Schmidt-type experiments with pre-recorded targets, and from the evidence for physical mediumship. I suspect it also comes from the evidence for impressive synchronicities. This is a point I first explored long ago (see, e.g., Braude, 2002), and probably need to address again. But in a nutshell, since it's at least religiously anachronistic, and probably incoherent, to suppose that Nature herself organizes synchronicities for us, the most plausible alternative is to conclude that we psychically arrange them for ourselves. And in many cases that requires a large-scale organizing of events that goes well beyond anything required to account for the cross-correspondences.

One final point. I can't accept Monty's claim that I downgrade the evidentiality of Stevenson's best reincarnation cases. In fact, I consider some of the reincarnation evidence to be as compelling as the mediumistic cases. What I have challenged is Stevenson's assessment of some cases, and (perhaps more important) his general strategies for defending them as evidence of survival. My fundamental complaint about Stevenson's work, and that of his colleagues and emulators, is that it's inexcusably psychologically superficial. Some cases do, indeed, look very good. And in fact many of the cases may be better than Stevenson reveals. But considering how few of the right questions he and others seem to ask; questions that would give us more of a handle on whether super-psi explanations are antecedently plausible; we have no way to know. And I think Monty perhaps overestimates the evidence for the persistence of personality traits, etc., although I agree that some of it needs to be taken very seriously.

At any rate, in *Immortal Remains* I make clear that I regard some mediumistic and reincarnation evidence as the best we have, and I invite those following this exchange to see what leads me to that judgment. I submit that the matter is much more complex than Monty allows, even though we may reach similar conclusions. I'll say, once again, that my concern has not been to defend the super-psi hypothesis and reject the survival hypothesis. Rather, I've wanted to make sure that certain alternatives to the survival hypothesis were not rejected too easily. Moreover, one reason the parapsychological evidence is so fascinating is that it suggests degrees of connectedness and influence that most people in most industrialized cultures find abhorrent. In fact, it suggests the basic correctness of a more 'primitive' and magical view of the world, according to which we have virtually unlimited access to and control over the inner and outer lives of others. Until we come to grips with that aspect of the evidence, the case for survival will remain in the conceptually rudimentary state in which we find it today.