

Super psi or Survival A Response to Prof. Stephen Braude

- Montague Keen -

It is recommended that the reader firstly reads Prof. Stephen Braude's original paper, [Survival or Super-psi?](#) before this criticism.

PERHAPS AN interval of twelve years since [Stephen Braude](#) prepared his case for [super-psi](#) and against survival has persuaded him that his arguments were misconceived, but since he has not disavowed his earlier conclusions, one must take them as the most up-to-date, articulate and intellectually rigorous of any modern attempt to meet the challenge to the evidence that human personality survives bodily death.

The first thing to recognise, and welcome, is his sensible starting point and respectable company. As to the former, he readily acknowledges the existence of psi, that combination, among the living, of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and maybe psychokinesis of indefinite potency and extension. He invokes it in various combinations to explain all ostensible indications of a discarnate communicator. And as to the latter, well he shares the same platform as many distinguished super-psi protagonists who cannot shelter behind the veil of ignorance which shrouds most sceptics, from [Richet](#) to Dodds.

The issue Braude poses is one which had clearly emerged by the end of the 19th century to explain ostensible communication from the dead via the living; and Braude is one of the rare brave spirits among modern philosophers who has attempted an honest evaluation of the competing arguments. His efforts, however, are doomed to failure, thanks to a combination of questionable axioms leading to defective logic, and to the apparent ignorance of evidential material which he has either failed to address or of which he is unaware.

Although Braude seeks to dispose of the fundamentalists who question whether the very concept of survival is intelligible, it is not enough to dismiss their arguments as "quite shallow". We might well stand the assumption on its head and ask, as several millennia of mankind would have done until fairly recent times, whether it is the very concept of non-survival that is intelligible. After all, as modern physics has shown us, nothing dies: it is simply transmuted into different forms of energy. And once we have accepted the existence of a faculty which operates independently of the constraints of linear time and three dimensional space, as psi clearly does, then the assumption that it must be bounded by those very constraints from which by definition it is free makes no sense.

Braude seems willing to concede the case for survival of some form of intelligence provided we can find an ideal case. Only by implication does he indicate the attributes such an ideal must possess. And by implication he selects two types of cases which he presents as though they were the most persuasive around. One relates to the [drop-in communicator](#) from beyond the grave, like the legless Runki whose fifty year quest for his missing leg remained unsatisfied until rescued from immurement and given a Christian burial. The other concerns cases of apparent reincarnation, or possession, in which information is conveyed which is beyond the normal knowledge and competence of a living personality. For both these cases, Braude stretches the super-psi explanation to lengths which many will find barely tolerable, but he has on his side the logical contention that, since there are no known limitations constraining the operation of psi in its several forms, there is no justification for arbitrarily imposing or presuming them.

I think it would be fruitless to argue the merits of either case when there are better ones to hand. A good advocate will select the vulnerable part of his opponent's case and ignore the more impressive defences; but we are not concerned with scoring points or getting clients off legal hooks. It is not permissible in an objective search for truth to turn a blind eye to evidence which undermines a cherished hypothesis. I give two such cases, one well familiar to Braude; the other yet to be revealed. Both leave the advocates of super-psi defenceless.

The first is the huge corpus of written material collectively known as the cross-correspondences. I hesitate, but only a little, to introduce this because their volume and complexity invite sceptical critics to select odd extracts which fail to illustrate either the principal or the strongest examples of this remarkable series of mediumistic transmissions from 1901 through to the early 1930s. They illustrate one feature fatal to the super-psi advocates. They were clearly designed to falsify the hypothesis, energetically debated in the late 1890s, that all the veridical messages purporting to derive via mediums from known deceased personalities could be attributed to what later became known as super-psi. The ingenious mechanism for this demonstration was gradually revealed in the form of transmission of ostensibly meaningless pieces of information through the automatic writings of different mediums in different countries, fragments which became intelligible only when fitted together, usually by a third party, as one might assemble disparate pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into a coherent picture.

Many psychical researchers have preferred to steer clear of the X-Cs because of the abundance of Greek and

Latin passages, the obscurity of the puzzles, the morass of difficult and irrelevant details through which the essential message has to be discerned, and the sheer patience and dedication required for their study. But it needs only one or two striking and relatively straightforward cases to make the point: that 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. One would have to extend the super-psi attribute by arguing that a medium could precognise the time, perhaps several years thence, when the several scattered clues pieced together by a third party (normally one or more scholars in the hierarchy of the Society for Psychical Research) combined to make an intelligent message, and usually one beyond the normal wit and knowledge of the medium. I question whether even Braude would be willing to impose that strain on the credulity of his readers.

Braude may be forgiven for his ignorance of the second illustration, since it has yet to be published in a peer-reviewed Journal, and I do not wish to imperil the chances of its appearance by premature release of all the details. But I give the essence of the case in the knowledge that all the actual names, original documents and participants with a single exception will be made public. The single exception is that of a young woman whose brutally murdered body was found by a police detective who broke into her apartment in West London in February 1983. The detective spent five hours examining and recording every aspect of the body and the apartment. A few days later, accompanied by a colleague, he visited the home of a young Irish woman who was among the scores of members of the public to have responded to one of a large number of offers from the public for information.

The Irish woman described to the two policeman how she had been assailed over the weekend following the murder by a voice identifying itself as the murdered woman, albeit by her maiden name which had not been made public. In the course of the interview she gave some 150 pieces of evidence, almost all of it accurate, save for a few instances where the information was unprovable, but consistent. The medium's informant gave details of the precise circumstances of the murder, the clothing and jewellery of the dead woman, her activities on and before the day of the murder, the names of her closest relatives and friends, the appearance, age, habits, Christian name and unique nickname of the murderer. To dispel the obvious doubts of the police officers, and prompted by her discarnate informant, she proceeded to give the assistant officer three highly accurate pieces of information about himself which not merely astonished him but changed his entire belief system for life.

Some of the information could have been drawn from the mind of the policeman whose notes confirmed the accuracy of her descriptions. Some of it - the location of her friend's house, her pending divorce, fits of depression, the conduct of the murderer in her flat and in his getaway car after the killing, the length of time she had known the murderer, the tattoos on his arm, the description of his girlfriend, the false insurance claim he had recently made etc - was unknown to the officers, although subsequently verified. Some of it - the full name of a woman friend - was not confirmed as accurate until eighteen years later.

The murderer, a petty criminal known to the police, was not a suspect and had an alibi. Evidence from a murdered woman via a medium is not admissible in UK Courts. The case was cold stored until 2,000 when advances in DNA technology enabled the police to produce evidence which determined the fate of the killer, now serving a lengthy prison sentence. The crucial evidence was provided by the murderer's discarded pullover, rescued from a dustbin by the investigating police officer solely because of the impressive accuracy of the medium's information. The notes of his interview, along with the medium's semi-entranced drawing on which she wrote the murderer's nickname, and the cryptic address of a location which was found years later to have been the most likely hiding place of the stolen jewellery, were carefully preserved by the officer who, together with his colleague, and the medium, have testified to the accuracy of this evidence.

Thus far the case has been reported only obscurely, in an article by the police officer principally involved, in a privately circulated police magazine. What makes it so damaging to the super-psi case is the extravagance of the assumptions that have to be made to avoid postulating an intelligent deceased and clearly identifiable communicator. Here is a case where fraud and straightforward mind-reading from the living can be immediately eliminated as inconsistent with known and unchallengeable facts. Cold reading, body language, and the customary litany of feeble explanations employed by sceptics to account for veridical evidence clearly have no place here: there was no-one's mind to read for much of the evidence, even if one assumes that some of it was dragged from the reluctant depths of the murderer's own psyche. The medium was unknown to the victim, so far as is known; but even assuming that to be untrue, and positing ample cryptomnesic prowess by the medium, it could not accurately reveal facts unknown to anyone alive when the information was transmitted.

If, of course, one heaps on the overloaded psi faculty ample helpings of precognition, some retrocognition, and an ability to extract selective pieces of information from a number of totally unknown persons (including at least one fact relating to a dead girl friend of the murdered woman, the accuracy of which remained unknown until August 2001), then we can still support the super-psi theory. But whatever the evidence for individual components of psi, there is absolutely none for the presumption that it has a co-ordinating, purposeful and discriminating intelligence

that can selectively visit the minds of several unknown persons and fit together from them a correct account of persons living and dead, and events past and future.

We should not be deterred by difficulties about establishing discarnate identities, or by the notorious inconsistency and unreliability of purported discarnate communications, and the host of reservations which any critic, and many spiritists, must feel about the nature of the afterlife and the integrity of the post-mortem persona. These are legitimate areas of dissent and investigation. But they must presuppose some form of surviving and communicating intelligence. The case I have just cited provides a very powerful weapon for the protagonists of simple survival.

Montague Keen. December 22nd 2002.

A Further Response to Prof. Stephen Braude

- Montague Keen -

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

FIRST, my apologies if I misrepresented Stephen as an opponent of the survival hypothesis, but it still looks that way to my unsophisticated mind. No matter: the issue (as I am sure will be generally agreed) is not whether either theory can be proved, but which is the more plausible. And the case against super-psi is in effect the case in favour of its only apparent alternative explanation: survival of some sort. So where I differ from Stephen is in the degree of credibility I attach to evidence pointing apparently to survival, and the degree of improbability with which I credit the several assumptions necessarily attributable to the supposed super-psi capacity. I think Stephen minimizes both.

Let me give one example which both Stephen and Peter Wadhams dismiss too readily: the cross correspondences. It is true that they are difficult, and that many of them generate debates over "the proper translation, interpretation and significance of its obscure allusions and quotations", but that shouldn't be allowed to detract from the fact that many of them can be seen in retrospect to be perfectly clear. If Stephen or Peter study The Palm Sunday case by the Countess of Balfour[1], they would find it difficult to escape the conclusion that details of Arthur Balfour's private tribute to his dead lover in 1875 were transmitted some decades later via five different automatists through automatic writings, trance utterances and cross-correspondences from five identifiable deceased communicators. The alternative explanation invokes what Alan Gauld described in his Hunt Memorial Lecture on the super-psi hypothesis in the same year as "staggering powers of the subliminal self or the subconscious mind".

[1] *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 52, pt 189, 1960.

[2] *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 53, pt 192.

If some simpler illustration of a communication using the cross-correspondence concept is required, let me cite the Lethe case which still after 95 years awaits a non-survivalist explanation. Here we had George Dorr in Boston challenging the identity of deceased [Frederic Myers](#), via [Mrs. Piper](#), by inviting him to say what the word *Lethe* conveyed to his mind. The communicator then provided a number of accurate but oblique references drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* giving an account of the mythical Hadean stream of *Lethe* bounding the shores of the Elysian fields, and from whose waters the newly dead must drink and purify themselves. These were arcane, scholarly allusions, typical of Myers. When [Oliver Lodge](#) in London learned of this he decided to put the same question to Myers via Mrs. Willett. The communicator immediately pointed out that he had already responded to this question via Mrs. Piper, but to avoid the hypothesis of thought-transmission, he would give similar evidence. This time, however, they were drawn from a description of the same scene in Book Six of Virgil's *Aeneid*. There was no communication between the two women; neither was classically educated, and even the recipients of this information had to go to a good deal of trouble researching the references, which were abundant in number, relevant in content and ingenious in construction.

Now before trying to reconcile that with super-psi, note that other mediums (e.g. the "Mac" family in Scotland), were getting references to, puns on and illustrations of Dorr's name at the same time.

Since Stephen notes his agreement with Peter Wadhams's doubts, which center on the role of the classicist [Mrs. Verrall](#) as the unconscious source of the messages, I have to point out that this familiar criticism has long since been refuted. Not only did the cross correspondences continue for a great many years after Mrs. Verrall's death, but many of them originated with or involved other mediums. And while I agree with [Robert Thouless](#)'s strictures on the complexity of the cross-correspondences, which Stephen quotes approvingly, note that Thouless did not suggest

that the cross-correspondences were not sound evidence of survival: merely that they were too elaborate. He does not appear to have understood the reasons why they were deliberately made elaborate, but a hat remains a hat even if we disapprove of the bunches of flowers and feathers with which it is adorned.

Stephen takes me to task for my assertion that "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". This was carelessly worded. I was thinking of cases where information transmitted by a medium proves accurate and highly specific, but at the time of transmission is unknown to anyone alive. One such case, reviewed by Professor [David Fontana](#) recently (*Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 63, no 855, 1999), concerned Helen Dallas, a notable researcher and author whose deceased uncle and former guardian urged her through a medium to check something incorrect in her will, which he had been responsible for drawing up. When Dallas checked it with a retired judge, he identified the blunder which her solicitor had failed to spot. Here telepathy from the living is clearly ruled out, since neither Dallas nor her solicitor was aware of the mistake at the time of the sitting. The judge learned about it only when sent the will. Nor (to eliminate clairvoyance too) was there anything in writing at the relevant time to suggest that the will was imperfect.

Even more striking is the very recent case of the medium assailed by messages from a freshly murdered woman, which I summarized all too inadequately, leaving Stephen to draw the wrong conclusion. Although many accurate statements she gave to the police could have been drawn from the mind of the investigating detective who had spent five hours a few days earlier examining every aspect of the corpse and the victim's apartment, a good many facts were unknown to him or to his fellow constable at the time of the interview.

Of course, where verification of the facts takes place later on, the super-psiers must attribute this to precognitive clairvoyance or precognitive telepathy. But this is my point: one piece of information (the name of a person who turned out to have been the murdered woman's closest friend, but who was already dead) was not verified until 18 years later, after the murderer's trial and conviction in 2001. Most of the checking process was spread over a period of several weeks, but a drawing by the medium containing information bearing on the temporary hiding place of the stolen jewellery, lay dormant until after the trial before it was found to be accurate. Hence the presumed super-psi faculty must be able to select and transmit pieces of veridical information relevant to the murder inquiry by drawing information and images from the minds of a number of persons unknown to the medium either at the time, or when the information comes to light in the future, picking and choosing among an infinite number of unknown persons those bits of information which the medium somehow selects to present as discarnate intelligence. Add to this the demands posed by even one veridical cross-correspondence, and you have to endow this faculty with the capacity to produce scraps of meaningless information in the knowledge that at some time in the distant future (several years for some of the early cross-correspondences) it will be married up with other meaningless scraps by future third parties to form a quotation, a description of part of a picture in the Uffizi or a silver casket or a reference to a Syracusan cave. I know of no evidence which independently demonstrates any such powers of selection and calculation.

Stephen similarly downgrades the evidentiality of Ian Stevenson's better cases of apparent reincarnation, on which Peter Wadhams relies for support. It is not merely the case that small children can obtain information known to the dead person whose personality they appear to have inherited. If that information were known exclusively to the dead person, there would be no means to verify it, and hence it is not evidence. So far I agree with Stephen. However, the evidence goes much beyond mere information transmission. It is of things, people, places, toys and even garments recognized by the child when visiting his "former parents", to say nothing of birthmarks related to the location of injuries sustained at the death of the deceased. There are in addition personality traits, likes and dislikes, prejudices and recollections which often persuade the families of the former life that the child has indeed inherited the spirit and the memory, as well as the personality, of their dead relative.

Finally Stephen argues that, since advocates of survival accept telepathy from dead communicator to live medium as a transmission mechanism, they can't logically jib at similar telepathic interaction between the living. But these extreme extensions of psi are not evidence: they are speculations designed to fit a theory; and some of them are a mite too fanciful for me. I do not say the super-psi hypothesis is impossible, but that it stretches improbability beyond my credulity when a simpler, more obvious and more consistent alternative presents itself, one which has a great deal of supporting buttresses in the literature of psychical research.

I look forward to reading Stephen's *Immortal Remains*. May he long survive before he becomes part of them.

Montague Keen. February 15th 2002.