

A Further Response to Montague Keen

- Stephen Braude -

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.

Super-psi or Survival? A Response to Prof. Stephen Braude

- Peter Wadhams -

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

BRAUDE'S PAPER "Survival or Super-Psi?" makes a number of important and serious points, but in the end leaves the reader frustrated as he does not take the argument to the logical conclusion of defining what sort of super-psi is necessary to replace survival as an explanation

for experimental data.

As befits a member of a university philosophy department, he takes a great deal of care to define his terms. He shows that "survival" itself has to be defined, in that a surviving consciousness which is absorbed into an undifferentiated "universal soup" of consciousness can scarcely be said to have survived. What matters is the survival of individual attributes, including memory and identifiable personality elements. In considering the possibilities for super-psi, he rightly points out that even apparently straightforward manifestations of psi are not in fact simple at all. A case is PK with various forms of random number generator, where the occurrence or not of positive results seems to be independent of the nature of the randomising process (mechanical or electronic or radioactivity; or various forms of complex circuit). In essence a successful performer is willing a result without understanding how he is bringing that result about. The same might be said about deep trance hypnotic subjects when, for instance, the hypnotist tells him that he is holding a red hot iron bar when he is in fact holding a pencil; a blister appears, but there is no way that a conscious mind can organise the cells of the skin into creating a blister when no source of heat is present. The subject (via the hypnotist) wills, and achieves, a result without knowing how he is bringing it about.

Braude then loses his way somewhat. He goes on to discredit some specific (but not crucial) pieces of evidence for survival. He analyses one of Stevenson's cases of apparent reincarnation which had some weak points, while ignoring the many stronger cases. He ridicules a medium who claimed to be receiving messages from Cagliostro, which were not in character. He considers that the case of Patience Worth may be one of exceptional unconscious creative powers. He asserts that super-psi may have no limits, so we cannot rule it out in any case of apparent survival evidence. This is an unsatisfactory way to end the paper, since I believe that we can tackle the question of survival versus super-psi by working out just what properties super-psi needs to have, and seeing if we can test for them.

It thus seems to me that the whole question of survival of death as a scientific hypothesis rests critically on whether a super-psi hypothesis can be formulated (or bent, twisted and stretched) which can also cover

the observed phenomena. We can forget fraud and similar psychological props of the sceptics - there is just too much interlinked evidence from too many honest sources for this to be feasible. On the other hand, super-psi (a hypothesis which, ironically, a sceptic can't afford to support because he rejects psi as well as survival) could possibly offer an alternative explanation for evidence suggestive of survival of death. In one sense, of course, it's not an "explanation" since psi itself, let alone super-psi, is unexplained; we know little about its mode of working, limitations etc, and this makes it difficult to formulate or to refute a super-psi hypothesis. But so long as super-psi remains in play as a possibility, we have to look carefully at it and, if it can be made to cover the facts, Occam's razor tells us we should adopt it as the preferred hypothesis, given the antecedent unlikelihood of survival (on the basis of biochemical arguments about brain cell destruction at death). But if we can discriminate by some "killer experiment" between survival and super-psi and show that super-psi was completely impossible in that experimental context, then we are left with survival (in all this I'm talking about scientific acceptance or rejection of a hypothesis, rather than personal belief).

So the big question is, what would be a killer experiment? The problem is that, to cover all the facts, super-psi has to be retrocognitive. It has to leap the time barrier as well as the space barrier. For instance, if we accept the evidence from Stevenson and others that some children appear to remember past lives in that they utter statements containing facts known only to a specific person who died before the child was born, then two survivalist explanations are reincarnation or possession. 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. Such an explanation would have to involve something like child B having exceptional psi abilities which cause him to "tune in" to some kind of psychic resonances from the mind of a now-dead person and, by moving backwards in time, read the living mind of that person. You could call it "retrocognitive telepathy" or just "retrocognition". And if precognition exists (which I believe has been experimentally demonstrated, and which is a huge challenge to scientific thinking) then why not retrocognition? Retrocognition would also cover many types of veridical statements by mediums to sitters (of the "I left a new will in a secret

drawer of my desk" type). The trouble is, we don't have much evidence that retrocognition as such actually exists, outside of the need to postulate it to cover these survival cases. While people often report flashes of insight or dreams of future events that come true, if you had such a flash or dream about something that had already happened, you wouldn't think of it as exceptional at all. So it may exist without us recognising it. There are a few spectacular cases, which the late Andrew Mackenzie gathered into a book called "Adventures in Time" (like the ladies at Versailles), but that book mainly impressed me by the smallness of the number of cases that he could find.

One possibility for a killer experiment that could overcome super-psi would be a variant of the cipher test, where an experimenter leaves a cipher message, the key of which he intends to communicate after death. In this variant a panel of excellent mediums is assembled, who make every possible effort to determine the key by "ordinary" telepathy from the experimenter while he is alive. When he dies, we only consider messages received by members of that same panel of mediums. If the key is received, then this argues for survival rather than super-psi, since if a medium couldn't pick up the information by ordinary common-or-garden telepathy, it is hardly likely that he could do so by the more exotic and presumably difficult retrocognitive telepathy.

Another thing that we can do is to re-examine the types of evidence for survival and decide which are the strongest in competition with super-psi. An example which seems to come out weaker than before are the cross-correspondences. These have been taken as amongst the strongest evidence for survival. In his book "Human Personality and its Survival of Physical Death" Myers showed himself fully aware of the dangers of taking the statements of single mediums as evidence for survival. He did not mention the idea of a surviving person sending a message through two mediums such that only joining the messages together made sense, but in reading his book you get the feeling that that is just what Myers would do. It's characteristic of his way of thinking and working. Also he was a classical scholar and the messages are all riddles from classical literature. So for two reasons it looks like the hand (or surviving mind) of Myers was at work. Yet one of the mediums involved in the cross-correspondences, Mrs Verrall, was herself classically educated and was one of the inner circle of SPR members

who knew Myers well and might have been familiar with his way of thinking. It is possible, therefore, that an unconscious fragment of Mrs Verrall's personality conceived of the cross-correspondence idea, sent half-messages telepathically to her fellow medium (Mrs Holland in India) and sent the other halves up to her own conscious mind. There was no conscious fraud, just an unconscious scheme to prove survival.

It seems to me that Stevenson's reincarnation cases remain the strongest evidence for survival, requiring the most stringent form of super-psi, that of "retrocognitive telepathy". And if we can show that this form of super-psi does not occur in other contexts, then we have a powerful case for survival.

Peter Wadhams, 3 February 2003.

Currently I'm reading [*Immortal Longings*](#), by Trevor Hamilton, a biography of pioneering psychical researcher and psychological theorist F.W.H. Myers. Early in the book, the author discloses a fact about Myers that may be relevant to the famous "cross correspondences."

The [cross correspondences](#) were a long series of messages received by mediums after Myers' death. These messages were broken up into fragments that appeared in the communications of different mediums, widely scattered around the world. When someone thought of piecing these fragments together, coherent messages emerged.

Of course, people have debated the significance of this for years. Some regard the cross correspondences as among the best evidence for life after death; others think the connections between the fragments are coincidental or the product of "data mining."

What I learned from *Immortal Longings* is that this method of disguising a message by breaking it into fragments was actually used by Myers when he was alive. As Hamilton reports, some of Myers' diary entries took exactly this form.

Take Myers' cautious approach to recording his love for Annie Marshall, a married woman. Hamilton writes,

Entered in his diary on the next page, broken up into several pieces as was sometimes his way with material that required discretion, was '*Adgnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae*: I recognise traces of the former passion', the anguished cry of Dido in book IV of the *Aeneid*.

Note that the majority of cross correspondences attributed to the discarnate Myers also involved classical allusions. Myers, a classical scholar, often expressed his ideas in terms of quotations from classical sources.

Later, Myers visited Scarborough with Annie and her husband. Hamilton tells us:

At the foot of the page recording the Scarborough excursion, and of the next three pages, were placed single-line quotes from a poem by William Morris. When these were combined they clearly indicated the way love had been creeping up on him: 'Love is enough;/ while ye deemed he was sleeping/ There were signs of his coming/ and sounds of his feet'."

Referring specifically to this series of entries, Hamilton adds:

For those interested in the puzzle of apparent post-mortem communications from Myers, it may be worth noting that the same device appeared in one of 'his' [postmortem] scripts.

The close similarity between the cross correspondence and Myers' habit, when alive, of concealing his messages by breaking them up is, at the very least, suggestive that Myers' consciousness lay behind some of the messages received after his death.

http://michaelprescott.typepad.com/michael_prescotts_blog/2009/10/hidden-messages.html
