

Is Scientific Investigation of Postmortem Survival an Anachronism? The Demise of the Survival Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT: The survival hypothesis, or the notion of postmortem survival, has been a key domain of parapsychological research since the inception of the Society for Psychical Research in the late nineteenth century. Parapsychologists nevertheless have made no definitive progress toward the verification of the survival hypothesis, and the continued centrality of this issue to parapsychology is a major impediment to the acceptance of the field as a scientific enterprise. A redefinition of parapsychology and the relegation of the survival hypothesis to minor status are advocated.

Parapsychology, the investigation of ostensibly paranormal phenomena through conventionally scientific methods, has three classical domains of inquiry: extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK, or mind-over-matter effects), and the survival hypothesis (Irwin, 1999). This paper addresses the viability of research into the last of these three domains.

The survival hypothesis proposes the occurrence of postmortem survival, that is, the notion that “a disembodied consciousness or some such discarnate element of human personality might survive bodily death at least for a time” (Irwin, 1999, p. 175). This hypothesis is of course a tenet of most systems of religion, but as a scientific discipline parapsychology does not embrace hypotheses either as self-evident dogma or as assumptions defensible solely on philosophical grounds; rather, parapsychologists seek to subject the survival hypothesis to rigorous scientific scrutiny and to gauge the extent of strictly empirical support for the hypothesis.

This approach to the survival hypothesis has been endorsed in parapsychology since the establishment of “psychical research” as an empirically oriented activity in the late nineteenth century. Much of the early work of the (English) Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was concerned principally with the issue of discarnate survival (Beloff, 1993; Inglis, 1977). That is, members of the SPR investigated phenomena of the

séance room and documented the occurrence of spontaneous psychical experiences with an explicit aim of providing data upon which the survival hypothesis might be assessed. Today there is a substantial empirical literature on a number of parapsychological experiences that appear to bear on the hypothesis. An analysis of the viability of scientific investigation of the survival hypothesis therefore might usefully begin with a brief (and necessarily selective) examination of this body of evidence.

THE STUDY OF SPECIFIC PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES

Among the principal parapsychological experiences that have been advocated in support of the survival hypothesis are séance phenomena, near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, poltergeist and apparitional experiences, and reincarnation experiences. Each of these is considered in turn.

Séance Phenomena. Spiritualistic mediums reportedly have elicited many phenomena in the séance room that suggest the intervention of entities from the spirit world. The reported evidence here includes *mental* phenomena, that is, communications from spirits of information to which the medium evidently had no normal access, and *physical* phenomena such as materialisation of a spirit, levitation of objects (e.g., the séance table) by spirit forces, production of sounds (raps) by unseen spirit hands, and the delivery of exotic objects (apports) by courtesy of a spirit entity. These diverse phenomena nevertheless have proved to be scientifically inconclusive for the survival hypothesis. Thus, the mental phenomena could feasibly be the product of the medium's extrasensory awareness of relevant information from mundane sources such as the sitter, people outside the séance room, and written records. These non-survivalist accounts of mental séance phenomena may appeal to some extraordinary extrasensory processes and thus they are commonly dubbed the "super-ESP hypothesis" (Braude, 1992; Gauld, 1961), but as the operation of such processes is seemingly impossible to exclude, mental séance phenomena cannot be conclusive for the survival hypothesis. I must admit I am not in irrevocable despair of séance research on this ground, as I see no reason *in principle* why the limits of ESP (or super-ESP) will not be ascertained at some future time. Another methodological constraint is, however, rather more problematic. Specifically, the detection of fraudulent activity by mediums is so common and researchers' prevention of such activity so difficult and open to criticism that there appears to be no possibility of the controlled investigation of séance phenomena ever generating universally persuasive, scientifically rigorous evidence of postmortem survival. The

same conclusions may be seen to obtain in the case of some contrived experimental “tests” of survival such as the cipher test (Thouless, 1946) and the combination lock test (Stevenson, 1968) that rely on postmortem communication of information (for a review see Irwin, 1999).

Near-Death Experiences. In a near-death experience (NDE) people faced with a life-threatening situation may have the impression of leaving their physical body and proceeding to an otherworldly environment in which they may encounter religious figures and the spirits of deceased friends and relatives. Superficially, therefore, the NDE seems to constitute descriptive evidence of a postmortem state of human existence. On the other hand, many commentators have formulated theoretical explanations of the NDE in purely psychological or neuropsychological terms (for a review see Irwin, 1999). What is particularly noteworthy about the NDE literature is that proponents of the survival hypothesis (e.g., Sabom, 1982) essentially have sought to establish their case by demonstrating the insufficiency of the psychological and neuropsychological accounts. Clearly this does not constitute direct testimony to the survival hypothesis. Thus, the NDE remains an experience to be explained; in itself the content of the experience does not represent a scientifically acceptable source of evidence for the survival hypothesis, in part because this content may ultimately be hallucinatory. In addition, even a successful demonstration that a nonphysical self may persist at the moment of biological death would not constitute proof of postmortem existence as an enduring state.

Out-of-Body Experiences. An out-of-body experience (OBE) is one in which a person has the impression that consciousness temporarily is outside the physical body. At first blush this experience appears to indicate that there is an element of human existence that is distinct from our status as a biophysical entity. Some parapsychologists (e.g., Osis, 1975) have even attempted experimentally to show that the accuracy of perceptual impressions during an OBE can not be explained by (in-the-body) ESP, but again this research has been plagued by an inability to specify with confidence the limitations of ESP. Similarly, experimental attempts to detect the presence of an exteriorised self at some place outside the body (for reviews see Alvarado, 1982; Irwin, 1985) have not been able to exclude possible psychokinetic influences over the detection apparatus. More fundamentally, even if there were some way to document objectively the exteriorisation of the self during an OBE, this would not demonstrate that this element of existence actually survives physical death; it must be remembered that the person is physically alive during an OBE, and the viability of the hypothetical exteriorised self could well depend on the

physical integrity of the individual. On this ground the OBE is unable to provide definitive support for the occurrence of postmortem survival.

Poltergeist and Apparitional Experiences. Spontaneous cases in which spirits' activity reportedly is witnessed (poltergeists) or spirit forms reportedly are seen and heard (apparitions) are widely interpreted by the general public as evidence of spirit entities. There is no doubt that people do have poltergeist and apparitional experiences, and in this regard there are phenomena here that require research and explanation. On the other hand, no human experience in itself can properly be construed as objective evidence for spirit entities. Again, it has proved difficult for scientific investigators to obtain objective recordings of such entities under rigorously controlled conditions, and the methodological elimination of all opportunity for fraud among the principals of the case is problematic. In addition, various commentators have suggested the possible role in these experiences of psychological and parapsychological (ESP and PK) mechanisms that do not require any assumption of postmortem survival, and some evidential support for these approaches has been adduced (for reviews see Houran & Lange, 2001; Irwin, 1999). For these diverse reasons the study of poltergeist and apparitional experiences has not been productive for the survival hypothesis.

Reincarnation Experiences. The notion of reincarnation is that a nonphysical element of human existence not only survives biological death but subsequently is reborn in another body. In the parapsychological context the principal source of evidence for this putative phenomenon comes from documented cases of people (usually children) who seemingly recall detailed memories of a previous existence (e.g., Stevenson, 1966). Reincarnation experiences are particularly intriguing for the survival hypothesis because they prompt a more careful consideration of just what it is that is deemed under the hypothesis to survive death (Edwards, 1996). It must be said that the documented experiences certainly are consistent with the survival hypothesis, and parapsychologists such as Stevenson (1966) have made impressive efforts to establish the inapplicability of alternative accounts of the cases, but still there is no satisfactory demonstration that postmortem survival necessarily must have occurred. Thus, even Stevenson himself prefers to designate these reports as "cases of the reincarnation type" rather than more definitively as "cases of reincarnation".

In summary, there are various parapsychological (i.e., ostensibly paranormal) experiences that appear superficially to be compatible with the survival hypothesis. The survivalist interpretation of these experiences

nevertheless remains a hypothesis; in itself the mere occurrence of the experiences is not evidence for the hypothesis, in part because alternative explanations are available which do not posit postmortem survival and indeed, in some instances there is encouraging empirical support for these alternatives.

IS SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION OF THE SURVIVAL HYPOTHESIS VIABLE?

A fundamental assumption of contemporary parapsychology is that its hypotheses are accessible to empirical scrutiny; such access is of course a defining characteristic of a scientific enterprise (Popper, 1963). Arguably the major contribution by J. B. and Louisa Rhine to this field (see Mauskopf & McVaugh, 1980) was to show that both the ESP hypothesis and the PK hypothesis are empirically testable and amenable to a sustained program of scientifically rigorous investigation.

The same status has not been achieved for the survival hypothesis. As indicated above, the investigation of parapsychological experiences with a putative bearing on the survival hypothesis typically has not succeeded in subjecting the survival hypothesis to critical scrutiny but rather, it has merely involved the documentation of the occurrence and phenomenological content of the experiences and the empirical evaluation of testable alternatives to the survival hypothesis rather than the survival hypothesis itself. Occasional declarations to test the survival hypothesis in a direct manner have been ill-conceived and ineffectual.

At present it seems fair to say that the scientific investigation of the survival hypothesis strictly speaking is not viable because the hypothesis has not been shown to be empirically testable in any direct sense. The inaccessibility of the survival hypothesis to definitive empirical scrutiny in turn raises the fundamental issue of whether this hypothesis warrants retention as one of the key domains of parapsychological research. There are three major potential justifications for its retention; each of these will be enunciated and then countered.

First, retention of the survival hypothesis would serve to maintain for the field of parapsychology a sense of conceptual continuity from the early days of psychical research. In response to this view, I would readily acknowledge the values of appreciating the history of one's discipline (see Irwin 1999), but a sense of history also entails an eye for progress and development. In short, if an objective of the field is proving inefficacious its retention is actually an obstacle to conceptual progress and this is a greater danger than that of neglecting the objective's historical significance. Parapsychology should not be allowed to become stagnant because of a reluctance to abandon futile aspirations.

Second, the survival hypothesis may be held to provide at least a nominal rationale for the study of OBEs, reincarnation, and other experiences under the rubric of parapsychology. Without the imputation of postmortem survival there would seem to be little reason to construct these experiences as “paranormal” or scientifically impossible, and in the absence of this construction in mainstream psychology there appears to have been little sense of a need to investigate these experiences. There is certainly a grain of truth in the latter observation: although some researchers (including myself) think the above experiences deserve study in their own right, most people who think this way are self-declared parapsychologists or else scientists (e.g., medical NDE researchers) with at least a nominal interest in the viability of the survival hypothesis. At the same time the fact that research into these experiences may largely be undertaken only by parapsychologists does not require parapsychologists to justify such research in terms of the survival hypothesis. In this regard there is a strong case to be made for redefining parapsychology more in terms of the study of scientifically *anomalous* experiences instead of the study of scientifically impossible events. Such redefinition would not only legitimise the continued study of reincarnation experiences, NDEs, and like experiences by parapsychologists, but would also facilitate the timely acceptance of the demise of the survival hypothesis as a major impetus to parapsychological research.

A third possible rationale for the retention of the survival hypothesis is that while this hypothesis may currently be empirically inaccessible, it would be injudicious to claim that this will always be the case. Perhaps scientific progress will create future opportunities for direct empirical investigation of the hypothesis, and in any event current inaccessibility to investigation should not be used to prohibit researchers from continuing their pursuit of such access. In response to this position I would not wish to deny anyone another opportunity to show that the survival hypothesis is empirically testable, but both the feasibility of this aspiration and the need for its nominated centrality to the discipline are moot. It is not unduly pessimistic to note that after more than one hundred years of research effort parapsychology has made no decisive progress in garnering support for the survival hypothesis. Further, at present there do not appear to be any indications of the prospect of scientific measurement of the nonmaterial dimension in which postmortem survival is hypothesised to take place. Thus, if only by default, it is becoming increasingly feasible that postmortem survival will always be a matter of faith (whether belief or disbelief) rather than a testable scientific hypothesis. In this circumstance it is highly tenuous to retain the survival hypothesis as a major conceptual framework for the field of parapsychology, in essence for the following

reason. Although the domains of ESP and PK have been shown to be open to empirical evaluation, the fact that this has not been satisfactorily demonstrated for parapsychology's third domain, postmortem survival, signifies a clear limitation to parapsychology's claim to be a science. Contemporary survival research is *proto-scientific*, that is, it may well embrace scientific methodology but it has yet to establish conclusively that its subject matter is accessible to direct empirical scrutiny. In light of the failure of considerable past research effort to redress this problem and in the absence of any contemporary indications that the problem is imminently likely to be resolved, it is foolhardy to persevere with this intractable and severe compromise to the standing of parapsychological research as a legitimate scientific endeavour. The survival hypothesis needs to be substantially set aside as a provocative but ultimately unproductive facet of the history of parapsychology.

In summary, it seems the current compromise position in parapsychology is to retain two somewhat conflicting items on the research agenda: first, to undertake rigorously scientific study of the *psychology and neuropsychology* of OBEs, NDEs, apparitional experiences, reincarnation experiences, and the like; and second, to seek a means to test the survival hypothesis by direct empirical means. As argued above, I have little optimism for the second of these objectives and indeed, I deem it a major impediment to the acceptance of parapsychology among mainstream scientists. Among my principal recommendations are the displacement of the survival hypothesis from its central conceptual position in parapsychology and the redefinition of parapsychology in terms of the study of anomalous experiences. Thus, in no sense am I proposing that research on NDEs, reincarnation experiences, OBEs, and like experiences be abandoned. On the contrary, these parapsychological experiences are thoroughly worthy of empirical study in their own right. What is suggested here is that parapsychologists (and the readers of parapsychological research) should not be driven to expect such research to illuminate the survival hypothesis.

As long ago as 1974 J. B. Rhine himself declared spirit communication to be an "untestable hypothesis" and proposed that parapsychology should cease "its long and wasted preoccupation with unsolvable questions without necessarily dismissing them with finality" (Rhine, 1974, p. 137). A similar stance should now be taken in regard to the survival hypothesis as more generally conceived.

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