

## **The Demise of the Survival Hypothesis—or the Errors of Harvey Irwin?**

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Harvey Irwin's article (Irwin, 2002) in which he argues not merely for the abandonment of the survival hypothesis but for its specific exclusion from the area of legitimate parapsychological studies is important, timely, stimulating and challenging. It is also wrong.

Dr. Irwin errs in two ways. One arises from factual errors or misrepresentations when he discusses the strength and nature of evidence which appears to support a survival hypothesis. The second is his conclusion that survival research can never meet the conditions required for acceptable scientific (i.e., pragmatic) work. After commenting on the disturbing implications of Irwin's thesis for scientific progress in general and psychical research in particular, I examine these errors in some detail below.

Irwin's major contribution to the subject has been as boil-lancer. The embarrassment of the survival hypothesis, and work on it, has long been an incubus for most professional psychologists. Many of them would welcome a clear message that parapsychology is concerned solely with what goes on in the minds of living people, individually and collectively, and has no connection with occult mysteries and the fate of dead souls. In that way, the attitude of suspicion and obstruction which characterises orthodox science towards the paranormal investigator can be appeased. The painful ascent begun by J. B. Rhine towards the summit of the mountain of scientific respectability will near attainment, albeit posthumously. The association with séances, mediumistic frauds and dubious physical antics in darkened rooms could thenceforth be repudiated, not simply ignored. Such would be the pathway enabling full entry into the scientific community, without prejudicing prospects of academic advancement or incurring the odium of one's peers. Hence Irwin's tantalising rationalisation of his wish to be rid once and for all of an area of research which can never satisfy the stern scientific mistress in a way that parapsychologists regularly demonstrate by their single and double blind tests and their obedience to probability calculations: areas forever beyond the aspiration of the survivalist.

By articulating so clearly what constitutes the divide between psychical research (which embraces all aspects of the paranormal) and parapsychology (which doesn't, and doesn't want to), Irwin has performed a valuable service from which I trust the harshness of my criticisms will not detract.

There are four areas of research bearing on survival listed by Irwin, and all of which he finds wanting. Probably the most important, and one which has occupied more time and space than all the rest, he classifies as *séance* phenomena. Both the physical and the mental aspects he dismisses as scientifically inconclusive. That means that if a large number of scientists declare themselves dissatisfied with the validity of the phenomena, or simply retain doubts about their authenticity, regardless of whether they have studied the evidence or subjected it to intelligent criticism, it is unworthy of further consideration. Applying any such criterion to many of the greatest discoveries of the past two centuries would leave us in medieval ignorance. That physical phenomena occur has been repeatedly demonstrated. *How* it occurs remains uncertain, and a proper province for scientific investigation. Scientific investigation simply involves the application of methods of thorough, dispassionate, intelligent and critical examination. It no more presupposes dedication to replication than does work in the fields of astronomy or geology, where replication may be impossible.

The more important reservation Irwin expresses, however, relates to mental *séance* phenomena. Here he sees no end of the seemingly interminable debate between the protagonists of super-ESP and the survival hypotheses. It is true that neither theory holds prospect of scientific proof, but one is founded on an indefinite extension of macro-telepathic and clairvoyant precognitive powers, of whose existence there is not one whit of demonstrable evidence; while its alternative is based on cases which strain the super-psi hypothesis well beyond the limits of human credulity. The survival advocates base their conviction on inference from a huge assembly of evidence. They cannot send expeditions of scientists to the next world to report on their findings and return with specimens susceptible to analysis in human laboratories, but inference is a perfectly respectable scientific tool. If it is not, then what of medical diagnosis? If I am convinced that all around me plot my downfall and spy on my every move, the medical inference is that I am afflicted with paranoia, but it can be neither replicated, smelled, measured, seen, felt, touched nor heard.

The fact is that the evidence for the existence of intelligent communications which cannot reasonably be attributable to any form of ESP among the living, is both overwhelming and thoroughly neglected. It is regrettable, but hardly surprising, that Irwin's paper exemplifies that neglect.

His failure to mention the cross-correspondences, for example, equates with the essayist who analyses Hamlet without referring to the Prince of Denmark. It would unduly extend the length of this comment were I to attempt to list all the examples which make the super-psi hypothesis an affront to commonsense. I would refer doubters to the exchanges on super-Psi and Survival between Professor Stephen Braude and others to be found on <[www.Survivalafterdeath.org](http://www.Survivalafterdeath.org)> disseminated by the International Survivalist Society; or to Professor Archie Roy's challenge to skeptics to confront some or all of the twenty best cases which he listed in the Society for Psychical Research's *Psi Researcher* (later, the *Paranormal Review*) in July 1995, a challenge that has been ignored ever since.

I have singled out three varied cases. All are in theory susceptible to an explanation which confines a psychic faculty to the living mind, but only by postulating the most improbable, speculative and evidentially unsupported extensions of psi. The first comprises the responses of the deceased Frederic Myers to George Dorr's and Oliver Lodge's invitation via Mrs. Piper in Boston, Mass., and Mrs. Willett in England, respectively, to say what the word *Lethe* conveys to his mind (Lodge, 1911; Piddington, 1910); the second is the most recent and striking case of communication from a newly murdered woman via an unknown medium of very large numbers of specific, accurate and relevant statements relating to the murder and the murderer, and some of them not confirmed until many years later (Playfair & Keen, 2003). The third is the Edgar Vandy case, which has been recently re-examined (Keen, 2002).

I accept that the evidence from mediumistic communications for survival of consciousness is not conclusive; but it is the only viable alternative to a super-psi explanation which for most informed observers would be considered less persuasive. If that is enough to warrant its rustication from the University life, it is founded on the same misapprehensions that afflict other arguments advanced by Irwin. One of them is that mediumistic statements are inherently incapable of submission to orthodox disciplines, i.e., quantification through measurement and probability calculations. No doubt Irwin's paper was written before he was aware of the contents of recent accounts of two quite distinct but equally important methods of disproving that widely held assumption. They are contained in the several papers published in the SPR's Journal in 2001/2 by Professor Gary Schwartz and his several associates in the University of Arizona at Tucson, and the papers of Professor Roy and Mrs. Robertson describing their MIA (Medium Information Analysis) experiments. The former shows how controlled, recorded blind readings by five mediums of subjects who have suffered bereavements can be conducted in a fashion which conforms to the rigorous requirements of scientific orthodoxy, and

presented analytically as probability calculations. The Roy/Robertson experiments, now in their fourth or fifth year, have tested and thoroughly trounced the hypothesis that information from mediums to recipients is acceptable and relevant equally to the intended recipient as to non-recipients. There may be holes to be picked in the protocol, as there continue to be in conventional ganzfeld tests, despite adherence to the Hyman/Honorton concordat reached some ten years ago; but parapsychologists are well aware that there is no limit to the ingenuity and obduracy displayed by the determined critic when prejudice has priority over reason.

I comment more briefly on Irwin's other three parapsychological experiences appearing to support survival. The first relate to poltergeists and apparitions. True, these errant entities remain unsusceptible to the disciplines of a laboratory test. But even if it had thus far proved impossible to obtain objective records amenable to scientific examination (which it has not), this is no reason to disbar investigation, especially when the evidence favours a discarnate origin over a psychological explanation. Thus when the child Janet, as the human epicenter of the Enfield Poltergeist, produced *basso profundo* messages from false vocal chords (*plica ventricularis*), it was later discovered that the coarse and degenerate communicating entity gave correct but hitherto unknown information about his identity and his life and fatal illness many years earlier in the family's house (Playfair, 1980). That for scientists counts for more than the independent confirmatory testimony of some thirty witnesses over a period of a year, since it appears to be an essential part of the official scientific credo, to which Irwin and others wish to do obeisance, to discount any witness evidence as the product of imagination, exaggeration, self-delusion or plain lies, no matter how numerous or normally reliable the observers.

True, the Enfield case provides far stronger evidence of discarnate intrusion than does the equally famous and probably more typical 1967 Rosenheim poltergeist reported by Bender, Karger and Zicha in PPA 5. 31-35. But this simply emphasises the importance of continuing scrupulous investigations of such cases, where the psychological implications (regardless of the origin of the phenomena) are of such outstanding importance in understanding the nature and operation of psi.

Still less worthy are the reasons given for abandoning investigation of those cases suggesting reincarnation which clearly presuppose survival of some sort, however brief the duration of transfer. To cite Stevenson's prudent preference for the non-committal phrase "cases of the reincarnation type" in support of the claim that that there is no evidence that reincarnation has necessarily occurred, dodges the question: what alternative explanation is there to offer?

Irwin affirms that contemporary psychology makes the fundamental assumption that its hypotheses are accessible to empirical scrutiny, "a defining characteristic of a scientific enterprise." He appears to equate this with replicable experiments. But empirical simply means evidence based on observation, not theory: it relates to the derivation of knowledge from experience alone. Thus the several critics of the Scole Report (Keen et al., 1999) based all their criticisms on the theory of fraud, without producing the slightest evidence that there was any; whereas the protagonists, Professor Ellison, Professor Fontana and I produced overwhelming empirical evidence. The fact that an event cannot be repeated, or declines to exhibit itself in accordance with the requirements and to the satisfaction of experimenters under controlled conditions, neither detracts from the reality of the event nor excuses parapsychologists from investigating it.

It is dumbfounding to read Irwin's statement that 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." Is he not aware of the volumes of analyses and debates on this very issue in the Proceedings and Journals of the SPR and its American sister publication?

Based on this misinterpretation of empiricism, and with apparent lack of familiarity with the literature, Irwin gives three reasons to suggest that retention of the survival hypothesis is no longer viable. The first is that retaining the hypothesis has proved an obstacle to conceptual progress. But if, by eliminating all the evidence supporting survival, we concentrate on constructing theories based entirely on the laboratory type experimentation promoted so effectively by the Rhines, we are in the position of the theorist attempting to explain in terms of electro-magnetism the operation of the dowsing twig, without acknowledging the evidence of map-dowsing which effectively torpedoes the theory. To construct theories of psi based on the fundamental rule that it must be a product of and limited by the human psyche, disappearing with human death, is arbitrary and irrational, unwarranted by the evidence, contemptuous of the rules of free scientific investigation, and ultimately self-defeating, by reducing the parapsychologist to the role of medieval seamen mapping out the contours of a continent they are too timid to circumnavigate.

Secondly, Irwin advances an interesting but questionable linguistic device which, by outlawing anything touching on survival, could make the phenomena investigated by parapsychologists no longer "paranormal or scientifically impossible." If all the aspects of ESP which come within the parapsychologist's current purview are to be redefined as normal, hey presto! The doors of academia are flung open and all is forgiven. But

Irwin's definitions are not mine; nor is his world. ESP is by current definition, paranormal, in that its evidence breaches current scientific orthodoxy. Crawling under the door of the palace of Establishment Science by ostentatious repudiation of any connection with the tawdry bunch of relatives who stare into crystal balls and commune with spirits is not going to do the trick, because the Establishment does not accept that telepathy and clairvoyance, let alone precognition and psychokinesis, are compatible with their immutable philosophy.

Perhaps I have misunderstood Irwin's second reason for jettisoning the survival hypothesis. He appears to argue that it may become scientifically acceptable, and no longer considered paranormal, to continue to study reincarnation, among other matters, so long as one talks only of anomalies and abandons any suggestion that it may be connected to survival. That sounds like studying sailing without allowing for the possibility of floating. Irwin is eager to ensure that we continue to research subjects traditionally accepted as appearing to favour the survival hypothesis so long as the researchers do not expect their work to illuminate it. To make sure than our critics won't suspect anything so dangerous and damaging, call it the study of anomalous experiences. That'll fool 'em. Euphemisation always does.

There is a deeper malaise underlying Irwin's plea. He takes psychical research to be a branch of parapsychology instead of the other way round. This leads him to argue that, no matter how persuasive the evidence for discarnate communication may be, it will transgress the rules if it is not somehow explained as a manifestation of the living mind, fitted into some form of the super-ESP hypothesis. A century of argument has shown how extravagant and evidentially ill-supported this belief is; but it is an essential requirement so long as psychical research is shoe-horned into the ill-fitting boot of parapsychology, which allows nothing beyond the living psyche.

Parapsychologists have had to struggle long and hard to gain a tenuous foothold on the scientific rock-face. There have been marked successes, notably in the UK where parapsychologists now breed in a dozen or more university psychology departments. It is unquestionably true that recognition continues to be made more difficult by the contamination of occult association. It is also true that anyone foolish enough boldly to declare his conviction in the truth of some aspect of the paranormal, particularly if it hints at let alone embraces survival, is henceforth relegated to the realm of the intellectually unstable and scientifically unreliable.

The answer is not to kow-tow to bigotry, but to challenge the ignorance and expose the prejudice of those unwilling to study the evidence and unready to engage in open debate. Our fault lies not in the poverty of the material but in failure to proclaim its existence.

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