

SURVIVAL AND DIMINISHED CONSCIOUSNESS

ARTHUR R. MILLER

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO

ABSTRACT: This paper represents an attempt to formulate an alternative naturalistic account of alleged, but well-documented, cases of medium telepathy to rival variants of the so-called Super-ESP hypothesis. The attempt proceeds by extrapolation from an analogy between contemporary criteria and methods for determining the point of death and those employed a century ago, a difference which is a matter of *kind*, and not one merely of degree. It is argued (1) that the suggested hypothesis of “diminished consciousness” is logically possible and no more empirically improbable than Super-ESP, and (2) that there is a genuine sense in which its empirical standing is much better established insofar as it lends itself more readily than Super-ESP to the test of falsifiability. In a way, this could be read as investing Kant’s metaphysical hypothesis of diminution of consciousness with empirical content.



Allow me to place my cards on the table at the outset, lest the reader think that I am a disinterested and impartial inquirer. I am not. For various reasons, I find myself unwilling and unable to countenance the hypothesis of personal immortality beyond death. At the same time, however, one can hardly fail to be impressed by (some of) the evidence of medium telepathy—the alleged communication with the personalities of the deceased. Thus, if one wishes to adhere to the skeptical stance in the face of such “evidence,” *some* naturalistic explanation of these phenomena must be forthcoming—as opposed to a mere stubborn refusal to weigh or take seriously the evidence forthcoming from the area of parapsychology.

Accordingly, what I propose to do during the course of this brief discussion is offer a logically viable alternative to the so-called “Super-ESP”

hypothesis which, if credible, would allow us to acknowledge the evidence of medium telepathy without forcing us to postulate personal immortality. Moreover, I find the very notion of *disembodied personality* logically inconceivable. A 'person' is, essentially, a being which, among other things, perceives, acts, and thinks. Normally, perception requires sense organs, action requires limbs, and thinking (in the broadest, Cartesian sense) requires a brain; I cannot *see* and read the billboard unless my eyes are open, I cannot *kick* the football without a leg, I cannot *imagine* Santa Claus without a cerebral cortex, and so on. In the total absence of such physical accoutrements, I cannot see how any of the sorts of activities constitutive of personhood are or could be possible. But things are not quite so simple as they might at first appear. Some have argued that it is sufficient to render *conceivable* or, at least logically possible the concept of disembodied personality if we can provide appropriate analogues for perception, action, etc., which do not require the normal physical apparatus. Terence Penelhum, for example, following H. H. Price, has suggested that merely having various sorts of sensations (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) may furnish an appropriate analogue for perception not involving organs of sensation. Or, even less problematic, it is clear that I can experience various, vivid sensations while asleep. As far as action is concerned, Penelhum suggests telekinesis, i.e., moving objects about "at will" as a possible analogue. All of this seems plausible enough. But, in the final analysis, even phenomena such as dreaming and telekinesis presuppose *at least* the presence and functioning of a relatively viable brain and central nervous system. Of course, none of this should be taken to mean that a being must be "whole" in order to qualify as a person. I might be lacking one or more functional sense organs, (think of Helen Keller), I may be missing one or many limbs, and so on, and still enjoy the moral and metaphysical status of personhood. It is simply that a being which *could* not engage in *any* of these essentially constitutive activities could not possibly enjoy the designation of *personality*, whatever else such a being might be. Thus, I am forced to the position that personality, whatever else it may involve, presupposes at least embodiment to some extent. I will leave this now to return to it later.

I

Having said this, we are now in a position to tackle head-on alleged cases of communication between a deceased person and his/her survivor(s) using the intermediary of a medium. Here I intend to restrict myself solely to those cases which have been so thoroughly documented and so closely-monitored as to merit our serious attention. I explicitly refuse to consider the sensational claims splashed across the front pages of the various tabloids prominently displayed at the local supermarket, or the "intellectual" gyrations foisted upon us by a successful television series in the U.S., "In Search Of . . .". Among such (serious) cases must be included the various studies conducted by the

Society for Psychical Research (SPR) headquartered in London. This is not the time to chronicle the long and venerable history of this august body. But, it is impressive to note that the list of past presidents of the SPR reads like the *Who's Who* in western intellectual and academic circles during the past century, including such luminaries as the philosophers C. D. Broad, William James, H. H. Price, the psychologists William McDougall, Gardner Murphy, R. H. Thouless, and the physicists Sir William Crooke, Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir William Barrett.¹

When we begin to investigate such occurrences, we must be, as the SPR invariably is, very careful in our selection of cases. First, and most obviously, we must take meticulous precautions to rule out the possibility of outright and deliberate fraud, deception, collusion, etc. For example, if I were to visit my local medium tomorrow and inform her² that I would like very much to communicate with my recently deceased Uncle Joe, who died last month, lived so-and-so, did such-and-such, and was then told to return for a sitting in two weeks, I've left the door wide open to deliberate fraud. The so-called medium, with ample time to do some careful in-depth research, could easily be in a position two weeks hence to astound me with the details of my Uncle Joe's life, personality, and activities. If she's right on all these counts, what reason would I have to disbelieve "his" pronouncements, directives, etc. from beyond the grave? This possibility is so obvious that it scarcely deserves mention, but I do so only to dismiss it at the outset.

Suppose, instead, that I show up at the medium's doorstep unannounced, and demand a sitting right there and right then. (Of course, I'd better be prepared to cough up a hefty fee, for sure.) Let us suppose further that I provide her with only the most minimal bits of information (no names, dates, or places, etc.). I just say that I'm interested in communicating with a relatively recently deceased (unnamed) friend. Suppose this medium is able to provide as full and as detailed—and equally astounding—information as the first, admittedly fraudulent, medium. What are we to make of this? Must we concede that *somehow* the medium was able to communicate with and deliver messages from my surviving unnamed friend? We could, but we don't have to, replies the skeptic. We could hypothesize instead, that the present hypothetical medium in question happens to be one of those rare persons gifted with such incredibly well-developed telepathic abilities that she was able to "read my mind," so to speak (with or without any obvious or subtle verbal or non-verbal cues on my part) and from this information could reconstruct the personality of my deceased friend.³ At least it's possible. The survivalist has not won the day by any means—at least at this point.

Finally, let's complicate the situation (in the survivalist's favor) even further in two quite different directions: first, the nature of the sitting itself and, secondly, the *kind* of information acquired during the sitting.

First, the sitting itself. To guard against the possibility of telepathic communication (conscious or unconscious) with the living sitter, namely myself,

as depicted in the last scenario, we arrange instead for a so-called “proxy sitting.” This would involve the designation of some third party (let’s say by representatives of the SPR) entirely unknown *both* to myself as well as to the deceased. Again the medium would be provided only with the most minimal bits of information as in the previous scenario. Suppose, again, however, that our present medium’s pronouncements are just as precise, detailed, and accurate—or even more so, if you wish—than those of our previous mediums! Must we not *now* concede that *somehow* the personality of the deceased has survived and is continuing to communicate—via the medium via the proxy—with his/her survivors? Not *necessarily*, replies the skeptic again. But, before examining the skeptic’s stock response to such apparently astounding and impressive cases, let us quickly take note of the second complicating feature mentioned above, namely, the kind of information acquired during the sitting.

In every case considered so far, from outright fraud to the proxy sitting, let’s assume that two different types of information are being “communicated”: those dealing with the life, times, activities, personalities, etc. of the pre-mortem Uncle Joe or unnamed friend, which are all factually accurate (slender, good-looking, a real womanizer, . . . that’s Uncle Joe, all right); and pronouncements from “beyond the grave” (“I sure do miss my family,” “I wish I could be present at the christening of my newest grandchild,” and so on). Notice that these, unlike the former, cannot, even in principle, be verified. But suppose that some of information known *only* to the deceased (as far as we know) is imparted and is such that its veracity *can* be tested (“I never told anyone this, but a couple of years before I died, I secretly buried a small treasure in the northernmost corner of the pasture,” or something of this nature). The proxy conveys this to the survivor(s), they in turn check it out and, lo and behold, there it is! (Of course, the more such items of testable information, the stronger the *prima facie* case in favor of the survivalist becomes). *Now* what are we—the skeptics, the disbelievers—to say; are we not at this point silenced—*finally*?

II

Thus far the discussion has been framed exclusively in hypothetical terms: “Supposing that . . .,” “if we assume that . . .,” “but what if . . .,” “and so on. Perhaps now is the appropriate time to introduce those reported cases which conform to the strict constraints imposed in the preceding paragraphs, particularly the latter two concerning the nature of the sitting (*viz.*, by proxy) and the type of information acquired from the personality of the “deceased.” It is precisely such recalcitrant cases which constitute such bugbears for the skeptic and which beg for *some* naturalistic explanation—however fanciful—if we are to resist the hypothesis of survival beyond death. Conversely (and not surprisingly), these are the very same cases which make those who espouse the survivalist hypothesis deliriously happy. Neither time nor space

permit relating the details of any one (much less all) such cases documented by the SPR. For this, I refer the reader to C. D. Broad's fascinating *Lectures on Psychical Research*.⁴ For our present purposes, a brief, synoptic account of *one* of the most celebrated of such cases, that of the British inventor, Edgar Vandy, will suffice.⁵ Vandy had died under somewhat mysterious circumstances (apparently a drowning incident) while accompanied by a friend, N.J., during August, 1933. His two surviving brothers, George and Harold, contacted various mediums on several occasions on the chance that they might be able to shed some light on the case because they were unsatisfied with the results of the official inquest. (It is worth noting that George Vandy was *not* a believer in survival, although he had been and was at the time a member of the SPR.) Among the sittings in question, George wrote to Drayton Thomas, a well-known member of the SPR and asked him to make arrangements with a medium and act as proxy-sitter. The *only* information given to Mr. Thomas was that "information was being sought about a brother who had died recently, particularly about the cause of death" (no names, dates, places, etc.). As William Rowe rightly notes, "[A]lthough the messages received from the mediums did not satisfactorily clear up the matter, *information was given* by the mediums both about Edgar's death and about the nature of his work [which, supposedly, was known only to Edgar himself and, perhaps, by one or at most a very few close friends; as an inventor, his work was necessarily conducted highly in secret] *that is quite impossible to account for by any normal means.*"⁶ For purposes of brevity, I allude to only two such reports, the first concerning the circumstances surrounding Vandy's death, the second having to do with the nature of the professional work he was engaged with just prior to his death.⁷

An example of one of the messages (recorded verbatim) related to the purported drowning:

(The sitter interpolated the question: "Can he tell us exactly what happened?") and the medium continued as follows . . . He passed out through water. I don't think it was a *swimming-bath*. I am in a *private kind of pool*, and I am getting *diving* and things like that. Yes, I am *out of doors*, I am not enclosed—it is like a private swimming-pool . . . You know he had a *blow on the head* before he passed out . . . There was a *diving-board*, and whether someone knocked him or not, I don't know . . . He remembers going under and feeling a distinct blow on the head. He could not come up, as he apparently *lost consciousness under the water* . . . It is an open-air pool, and he says he must have *fallen forward*, and *crashed in*, and *knocked his head* . . . I will try to re-enact his passing, which he is trying to show me: I was sliding to the pool in this very fainting condition, owing to pitching forward in some way and knocking my head just before . . .⁸

All of this sounds plausible enough, and it certainly accords with the findings of the official inquest which suggested that he had struck his jaw (there

were bruises under the chin and his tongue had been bitten through), lost consciousness, and had then drowned. There are two things to notice about this report and others of its kind. I will only mention the first at this point because I will return to the latter later during the course of developing my (skeptical) hypothesis. The first concerns the nature of the information conveyed. Plausible sounding though it is, there is simply no way to confirm or disconfirm the facts of the case as related by the medium. According to N.J., he arrived at the scene after the incident had already occurred and encountered the dying Edgar fluttering in the water. Only Edgar and/or N.J. could either confirm or disconfirm the information as related, which is why the second sort of “message” is so crucial for our present purposes.

Supposedly, at the time of his death, Vandy had just invented an elaborate “Electroline Drawing Machine.” His work had been conducted in great secrecy (it had not yet been patented) in a room in the house of one of his cousins. Neither of the brothers—George or Harold—claimed to know anything about it. We don’t know whether the cousin himself had knowledge of the invention. During one of the sittings, Harold (who never identified either himself or the deceased) asked: “Can he (Edgar) describe the nature of his principle work?” The medium responded as follows:

He was extremely clever at something he was doing, and it has upset him terribly because all his work on earth has stopped. That is his greatest grief . . . He shows me a room, and I don’t know if it has to do with wireless or radio, but it is like machinery and machines going very rapidly, as though they were producing something. All this machinery seems to go up and down. I don’t say that it is electrical, the machines are actually producing something . . . He seems to have something to do in tending them. I don’t get it quite accurately. There is a terrific noise . . .⁹

Harold continued: “Were there several machines?” (Other rooms in the cousin’s house are known to have contained various business machines.) The medium continued:

. . . Not in the room he was in. There are in *other* parts, but there seems to be *only one with him* . . . There were more machines, but he did a particular thing . . . Would lithography or something of that sort come into it? He says “*lithography* or something to do with *printing*”. . . . I don’t know whether *photography* comes into it as well, but he is trying to show me *plates* or something . . . It seems to be *very fine* work, but in the room he is in I do not get many machines, but *one special* machine. In other parts of the building there are more, but he had a special thing. He was very accurate in it and took a great pride in it.¹⁰

Notice in this instance that, unlike the reports dealing with the circumstances surrounding the drowning, we do have information “imparted” which

can be confirmed—and it was—information that very few (perhaps only Edgar himself) was privilege to.

What, then, are we to make of such apparently incredible “messages”? (I repeat that the Vandy case is only *one* of a considerable number of such cases reported in the archives of the SPR. I choose it only for convenience and the relative brevity with which the salient features of immediate interest to us can be related.) Surely, believer or disbeliever alike must be tempted, at least initially, to agree with Broad (a sincere and committed *disbeliever*) that “It is quite incredible that the amount and kind of concordance actually found between the statements made by the various mediums at the various sittings should be *purely a matter of chance coincidence.*”¹¹

III

Certainly, even the most hard-boiled and die-hard skeptics—with the possible exception of the most stubborn, recalcitrant and disingenuous—are forced to admit in the face of such cumulative evidence¹² in cases like these, that it really *is* simply too much to be written off as a mere instance of chance coincidence. But this does not mean that the skeptic is now prepared to throw in the towel, give up or, perhaps more appropriately, *give in to* the ghost. On the contrary, it is precisely the apparent “ghost” in question that he is at such great pains to expunge in order to resist the survivalist hypothesis.

It is at this point that the skeptic, sometimes in spite of himself, is forced to a final resort, a last-ditch attempt to formulate *some* (logically possible) naturalistic hypothesis to account for or explain away such *prima facie* extraordinary findings. This is where we, at last, encounter one or more variants of the Super Extra-Sensory Perception (or Super-ESP) Hypothesis. Basically, what the proponents of the Super-ESP Hypothesis contend is that some very few persons are so tremendously gifted (whether by birth, training, or whatever—it doesn't really matter)¹³ with telepathic abilities that they are able to reconstruct the personalities of the deceased from the minds of his or her survivors.¹⁴ (Such persons would include, presumably, the various mediums directly involved in the Vandy case.) What is being claimed is that the medium in question is somehow able to “contact” or “get in touch” with all and only the relevant living survivors (relatives, friends, acquaintances, business associates, etc.) and/or the relevant documents (e.g., birth, marriage, and death certificates). The medium then pieces together the various bits of information thus gleaned to reconstruct whole or in great part the personality and activities of the deceased. For purposes of convenience (and for later contrast), it may be useful to distinguish between two major variants of the Super-ESP Hypothesis which I will term (solely for purposes of expository economy) the “chain-link” model and the “machine-gun” model.

To illustrate the first, the “chain-link” model, let us consider the case of the proxy-sitting described above. Remember that the proxy-sitter, Drayton

Thomas, did not know the deceased, Edgar, although he did know Edgar's brother George who had asked Thomas to arrange for the sitting and to act as proxy; remember, also, the minimal information that was given to Thomas in writing prior to the sitting. The "chain-link" explanation proceeds along the following general lines (the reader is invited to fill in as many "gaps" or details as necessary to make the account as plausible as one can: the incredibly gifted medium is somehow able to start from the minimal information provided by Thomas, then reach out (and read) the contents of George's mind, and then (another link in the chain) those of the other brother, Harold . . . to N.J. (the friend who accompanied Edgar on the day of his death), . . . to the cousin (in whose house Edgar's inventions were located), . . . to . . . , to . . . , and so on. From all of these various sources, then, the medium is able to construct much of Edgar's personality, presumably from his brothers and friends, the circumstances surrounding his death (presumably from N.J. and the medical examiners), and the nature of the invention, the "Electroline Drawing Machine," that he was working on at the time of his death (presumably from Edgar's cousin). What are we to make of such an account? For our present purposes, only three questions are crucial: (1) is it logically possible?—of course; (2) is it empirically credible?—barely; (3) can its (minimal) empirical credibility be established *without* presupposing extraordinary powers of human consciousness or unconsciousness for which we (at present) have very little if any evidence whatsoever?—a resounding "No!"

The second variant of the Super-ESP Hypothesis, the "machine-gun" model, though logically possible, is even more incredible than the first. According to this account, it doesn't even matter who the sitter may be—a total stranger to the deceased or his/her closest friend. Rather, according to this explanation, the medium herself is simply able to "cast out" *ab initio*, as it were, in a random or helter-skelter fashion, and again, somewhat extraordinarily, make contact with George, Harold, N.J., the medical examiner, Edgar's cousin, etc., and/or the relevant documents and accomplish the same results as her predecessor who relies on the "chain-link" model. The same three questions arise: (1) logically possible?—again, of course;¹⁵ (2) empirically credible?—I suppose so (but, even at that, much less so than the other model); and (3) can its credibility (however minimal) be taken seriously without presupposing powers of the human consciousness or unconsciousness for which we (at present) have any evidence whatsoever? This time, an even more emphatic "No!!!"

But, in all fairness to the skeptic, what *is* he to do faced with such recalcitrant cases? It would *appear* that he is left with only three options: (a) to remain steadfast in his refusal to consider any such putative cases by writing each and every instance off as a case of fraud, deception, or collusion,¹⁶ (b) to concede defeat to the survivalist, or (c) avail himself, as much as he might dislike the idea, of one or more variants of the Super-ESP Hypothesis as outlined above.¹⁷

IV

I approach this final section of our discussion with some hesitation; to say fear and trepidation may be somewhat too strong. (I trust that the reader will appreciate my tenuous situation and hesitant attitude in due time.) What I wish to do is introduce and entertain an alternative naturalistic explanation of the evidence in question. Like the Super-ESP Hypothesis, my proposed account, unlike option (a) mentioned above, will take seriously the alleged evidence of medium telepathy of the kind documented by the SPR. Being naturalistic, it will also, like the Super-ESP Hypothesis, permit us to resist option (b), the survivalist's position. Again, like Super-ESP, it is an account which is both logically and empirically possible,¹⁸ and which, I trust, will allow us not only to *explain*, but also *illuminate*, some of the extraordinary data with which we are presented by alleged cases of medium telepathy. At the same time, however, it will also obviously differ from the Super-ESP Hypothesis in several important respects. One of these may be worth mentioning by way of anticipation. I want to argue (among other things) that, however fantastic or incredible my proposal may appear, it nevertheless enjoys a privileged position vis à vis the Super-ESP Hypothesis with respect to its status as a *genuinely empirical hypothesis* (whether this should turn out to be its crowning glory or, rather, its kiss of death or a damning blow remains to be seen.) All of this is by way of introduction.

Before beginning to formulate and detail my hypothesis explicitly, I will try to prepare the reader psychologically to entertain a supposition which, to say the least, must appear initially incredible. Let me proceed by suggesting an analogy. As an analogy, it is to be regarded only as that—provocative and suggestive, but by no means telling or definitive in any sense.

As recently as the nineteenth century, and certainly before that time, cases of what are termed “premature burial,” though rare and infrequent, were not unheard of.¹⁹ This is not surprising in light of the fact that, at least by our current standards, rather crude and primitive methods were employed to determine whether the victim had, in fact, expired: no detectable heart beat or pulse, no signs of respiration, complete physical immobility, etc. Today, equipped as we are with all the resources compliments of our sophisticated medical technology, none of these patients or “victims” would ever have been declared “dead” to begin with. Not only are we armed with much more sophisticated devices for detecting even the “primitive” indicators of death (e.g., highly sensitive stethoscopes as opposed to hands pressed to the chest cavity or a thumb on the wrist for measuring the pulse), but we also have the sort of equipment for detecting and measuring different and more subtle *kinds* of indicators of life—techniques and devices hardly envisioned by our predecessors. For example, we now have very sophisticated machines for detecting even the slightest activity ongoing in the cerebral cortex; it now makes sense to speak of a person as being “brain dead” (in spite of the fact that, ironically,

all of the “primitive” indicators—respiration, heart beat, etc.—are still quite detectable, aided by artificial ventilators or respirators). In the case of the patient who has been declared “brain dead,” after life-support systems (including respirators, etc.) are removed or withdrawn, both primitive and modern indicators normally point to the same conclusion: physical death.

Now consider the following: if we can compare the situation of our predecessors to the relatively privileged position we now enjoy thanks to the recent dramatic improvements in medical technology, what is to prevent our speculating and projecting into the future and comparing the even more privileged position of our hypothetical successors in medical technology and related fields, *vis à vis* the relatively “primitive” standards (to *them*) which *we* now employ? Surely this is *possible*. It might very well be that their hypothetical brain-activity detectors would make our own appear as rudimentary and crude as our own do those of our predecessors. And if so, they (then)—like we (now)—may speak of historical cases of “premature burial” when assessing the methods and practices of twentieth-century medicine as practiced even in the most “advanced” and affluent societies of that (*viz.*, our) time. But notice throughout that we are speaking still wholly in terms of a matter of *degree*: we are still relying on our own contemporary indicators of life, and simply supposing that certain kinds of more sensitive and sophisticated devices could be—or might be—developed at some time in the near or distant future which would indicate a different answer to the question: “Is the patient now, finally, dead?”. This is one possibility—but not the only one. It is, to my mind, not all too likely or probable.

To introduce yet another type of possibility, let us return to our earlier analogy. There we saw that we are in a privileged position *vis à vis* our predecessors not only insofar as (1) we are able to detect with more precision the indicators of the endurance of life that they—and we, too, to some extent—were employing, but also that (2) we have discovered and introduced new kinds of considerations into the equation for determining whether life (however that is defined) is present in the patient. These could include the detection of what are called in common parlance “brain waves,” or indicators of activity in the cerebral cortex. (1) again, simply represents a matter of degree; (2) however, introduces a much more important difference in kind. It is this second type of possibility which may or may not turn out to be of far greater importance for our present purposes.

May we suppose (i.e., entertain as logically possible—not empirically probable or likely) that there are other kinds of activity present or ongoing in the brain and/or central nervous system of a given person whose presence or activity is simply not detectable by even the most sensitive or sophisticated devices we now employ or that our successors might develop? Could there be centers of conscious or semi-conscious activity which we simply have not seriously investigated? Does it sound preposterous? Of course it does—to us! Devices designed specifically to monitor the activity of the cerebral cortex

probably would have seemed preposterous to Shakespeare's contemporaries! This, I think, is more a reflection on a smug, parochial, complacent psychological attitude born of a falsely inflated sense of self-confidence on our own part than it is on what is or may be empirically possible or likely. The history of science in general, not only neurophysiology, is replete with such "astounding" discoveries which become, more or less quickly but certainly in their own time, mere "commonplace."

In this context, I am reminded of certain remarks of William James and Huston Smith in their respective discussions of the nature of human mystical experience. Although their concern is not ours at present, I think their ruminations are suggestive. In discussing whether or not the content (or "noetic" quality) of such experiences should be regarded as veridical, James observes:

They [mystical experiences] break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth . . . ²⁰

Perhaps even more directly relevant to our present purposes, during the course of his discussion of the nature of mystical experiences which are drug-induced by various hallucinogens, which, incidentally, are phenomenologically indistinguishable from those which are not drug-induced), Huston Smith invites us (much in the same spirit as I am inviting the reader now) to simply entertain the following speculative hypothesis:

Consider the following line of argument. Like other forms of life, man's nature has become distinctive through specialization. Man has specialized in developing a cerebral cortex. The analytic powers of this instrument are a standing wonder, but the instrument seems less able to provide man with the sense that he is meaningfully related to his environment . . . The drugs do not knock this consciousness out, but while they leave it operative they also activate areas of the brain that normally lie below its threshold of awareness . . . Perhaps the deeper regions of the brain which evolved earlier . . . can sense this relatedness better than the cerebral cortex which now dominates our awareness. If so, when the drugs rearrange the neurohumors that chemically transmit impulses across synapses between neurons, man's consciousness of his submerged, intuitive, ecological awareness might for a spell become interlaced. *This is*, of course, no more than a hypothesis, but . . . ²¹

But what, then, does all of this speculation have to do with alleged cases of medium telepathy and its bearing on the survivalist's hypothesis? Let's see.

The occurrence of mental telepathy is by now a firmly established empirical phenomenon. The statistical results forthcoming from the current (serious) ongoing research is quite impressive, and its significance would never be dismissed in the context of any other ("hard") scientific research. This is happy

news for *both* the survivalists, who suppose that the telepathic communication is being conducted *between* the deceased and his/her survivors—presumably via the intermediary of mediums, and the adherents of the Super-ESP Hypothesis, who assume that the communication is occurring solely among the obviously living survivors. The explanation I am proposing seeks to “steer a middle course” between those two competing hypotheses, although to leave it at this would be somewhat misleading. This alternative naturalistic explanation also rests on and exploits the occurrence of mental telepathy—this time, though, between the so-called “deceased” (as defined by our *current* criteria of physical expiration, certainly not the “truly deceased?” in the survivalist’s sense) and his/her survivors (either directly or via the intermediary of one or more mediums). Given our current understanding and knowledge (which, to put it bluntly, is tantamount to virtual ignorance) of the laws which govern such phenomena as mental telepathy and clairvoyance, I would suggest that the present, logically possible explanation is no more—perhaps no less—but still no more incredible than the Super-ESP Hypothesis *per se*. It remains true that both presuppose powers of the human consciousness (or unconsciousness or even semi-consciousness) for which we *at present* have little if any confirming evidence. But the verdict is still out.

V

Allow me to bring our present discussion to a close by making a number of loosely related observations regarding my alternative account, an account which we might term the hypothesis of “diminished (or alternate) consciousness”:

1. First, and perhaps most obviously, the hypothesis of diminished consciousness as sketched above is just as “naturalistic” as the Super-ESP hypothesis. As such, it provides the skeptic with an alternative response to the (non-naturalistic) survivalist hypothesis. Furthermore, both accounts are equally capable of logically explaining or accounting for the apparently extraordinary data encountered in such well-documented cases of alleged medium telepathy as those we have been discussing. Which, if either, of these two competing hypotheses is empirically credible or probable, I repeat, remains to be seen.

2. It will be recalled that very early on during the course of our discussion (p. 1-2), I argued against the very conceivability of *disembodied* personality, insisting instead that, whatever else personality itself may involve, it at least presupposes embodiment to some extent the presence and potential functioning of a relatively intact and viable brain and central nervous system. Presumably, this is precisely what we have in a case such as that of Edgar Vandy—entombed, as it is, in a corpse which has been recently interred. If the centers of consciousness or semi-consciousness which may be activated during the process of telepathic communication are other than those measured by even our currently

most sophisticated “life-detecting” devices, there is no necessity in supposing that these must cease to be operative simultaneously with the latter, including heart beat, respiration, mobility, presence of detectable “brain-waves,” etc. It *might* be that these centers could sometimes continue to function for a period (probably for a relatively short duration, to be sure) after a person has been declared “dead” by the standards we currently employ. One of the perhaps disturbing or unnerving implications of such an account, if sound, would be that we may sometimes, albeit unwittingly and without any ill-intentions whatever, still be guilty of burying some persons prematurely. However, in our present fanciful cases it remains highly unlikely that such a “mistake” would be brought to our attention by a person’s suddenly stirring in the casket or rapping on the lid of the coffin.

In developing this second point, I have made reference to the (probably) relatively short duration of “diminished consciousness” as well as the logical necessity for the (at least partial) embodiment of human personality. Both of these may turn out to be of subsequent importance. Consider:

3. It is singularly noteworthy that in cases of alleged medium telepathy of the sort that we have been discussing (e.g., that of Edgar Vandy), the alleged “communication” almost invariably occurs within a relatively short period after the “deceased’s death.” If, *ex hypothesi*, the centers activated during periods of mental telepathy operate for only a relatively short period after the deceased’s declared death, this would accord nicely with the data. On the other hand, according to the Super-ESP Hypothesis (in which the medium is able to telepathically reconstruct the personality of the deceased from living survivors and/or documents), there is no more reason to suppose that such reconstruction could not be just as possible as long as most of the survivors and/or documents persist for, let’s say, a period of fifty or sixty years, or even longer. But, as a matter of fact, this is not what the evidence indicates.²² To this minimal extent at least, perhaps the hypothesis of diminished consciousness enjoys a (slight) empirical advantage over its naturalistic competitor, the Super-ESP Hypothesis.

4. Putting aside for the moment the issues of empirical possibilities or probabilities, I want to argue that, given my insistence on the (at least partial) embodiment of human personality, the hypothesis of diminished consciousness enjoys a considerably advantageous position as compared with the Super-ESP Hypothesis. To begin with, it is extremely difficult—at least at the present—to conceive of what sorts of empirical data might serve to confirm (or at least render plausible) either of the two competing hypotheses. So, in terms of the current possibility of verifiability, both of them seem to be on a logical par. But the situation is quite otherwise when we turn to the question of the possible falsification of the two hypotheses. What sort of evidence might the proponent of the Super-ESP Hypothesis be willing to admit as a disconfirming

instance? The answer is—quite frankly—none! The champion of Super-ESP will *always* have an answer or reply.²³ For example, let's say we are examining the Vandy case in general, and his recent invention, the "Electroline Drawing Machine," in particular. Suppose we were to ask each of the principals (the brothers, George and Harold, Edgar's cousin, Edgar's friend, N.J., etc.) "Did any of you have any knowledge of that most recent invention of his which was locked up in a room in the cousin's house?". Suppose, further, that each of them *sincerely* answers: "No, I had no idea of what he was working on at the time of his death." Is the defender of the Super-ESP Hypothesis forced to give in so easily? *Of course not!* He could always hypothesize that, for example, one or more of the principals involved had previously seen the invention and/or been told about it by Edgar himself, but had subsequently *forgotten* about it, or *repressed* it into his subconscious, etc. This too can apparently be picked up by our supposed extraordinary medium. There simply is no conceivable evidence which could possibly count against his cherished hypothesis if he chooses to cling to it so desperately. But, fortunately or otherwise, things are not the same for the proponent of the hypothesis of diminished consciousness. Since he is, by hypothesis, committed further to the thesis of (at least partially) embodied personality, the possibility of disconfirming instances are not only conceivable, but very easily and precisely describable. Thus, for example, if in a case like that of Edgar Vandy, the corpse were cremated shortly after death, or if the person in question were the victim of a physically traumatic death which rendered his brain and/or central nervous system virtually non-existent in its normal, operative form, then this would immediately give the lie to the hypothesis of diminished consciousness. (There is a perfectly natural temptation to assume a symmetry between the possibility of verification and falsification of genuinely empirical hypotheses, but such is not always the case, and instances of such asymmetry are not confined to the present debate concerning the logical status of the competing hypotheses: Super-ESP vs. diminished consciousness.)²⁴ In short, it seems to me that the hypothesis of diminished consciousness enjoys a decided advantage over its naturalistic competitor in terms of being a genuinely empirical hypothesis.

A number of further points could be made regarding the hypothesis of diminished consciousness, but I will mention just two more points which may prove interesting. Paradoxically, each in its own way would, at least on the face of it, force me sooner or later to adopt *either* the Super-ESP Hypothesis or that of the true survivalist, though, of course, not both at the same time since they are logically incompatible.

5. Some might argue that the hypothesis of diminished consciousness could be accommodated by or included within the Super-ESP hypothesis if the champion of the latter were willing to accept one significant amendment to his explanation: namely that, among the personalities reached by the extraordinary

medium, we not only include the obviously living survivors (e.g., George and Harold Vandy, Edgar's cousin, N.J., etc.) but *also* the recently deceased (and prematurely buried) personality of the "deceased" himself (viz., Edgar Vandy). I would have no serious objection to such a recommendation. Nevertheless, it would remain the case that there exists an enormous difference in *spirit*—if not precisely in *letter*—between the hypothesis of diminished consciousness and the Super-ESP Hypothesis (at least as it is now and has traditionally been developed by its proponents).

6. On the other hand, and quite contrary to the aforementioned observation, *others* might insist that the hypothesis of diminished consciousness commits me (whether I like it or not), at least to some extent or at least in some sense, to the supposition of survival beyond death—even if it doesn't go so far as to demonstrate personal immortality. It is curious how easily and how frequently proponents of the latter, much stronger claim—viz., that the personality continues to survive *forever*—either ignore or fail to appreciate the enormous gap between this claim and the supposition of mere survival or persistence. Or, as one of my students put it to me during a recent conversation regarding "life after death," in general: "Don't the first-hand reports of those who have survived their own physical death and subsequently, having returned to those of us among the living, reported their own post-mortem experiences itself settle the issue in favor of survival beyond death—period?"; or, in effect, don't the facts "speak for themselves?". Of course, the answer is obviously—no. The alleged "facts"²⁵ merely force a conceptual decision on our part at present (pending further empirical evidence). One could say, as my student and others of his persuasion most certainly would, that the person in question had, in fact, died (remember, given our current criteria for the final determination of death), and had then returned from beyond the threshold to astound us with accounts of his post-mortem experiences and sensations. One could, of course, say this, but one need not do so. One could just as easily insist (as proponents of the hypothesis of diminished consciousness certainly would) that the person in question had not finally "died" or expired in the first place—but only that our current "life-detecting" devices pointed to that conclusion. Logically, the position is no different than that of the "premature burials" of centuries gone by; in such (primitive) cases, we would never be tempted (although their contemporaries might have been) to say that such persons had "survived their deaths." In a similar fashion, we might just as easily say that Edgar Vandy, for example, had not *finally* expired—even though all of our contemporary sophisticated devices indicated that he had. What would then be called for is a redefinition of "death"—a formidable task that I, for one, do not wish to tackle at this point.

An entire host of further questions could be raised and pursued at this point. Why is it that there are apparently so relatively few cases of such alleged communication if the possibility persists beyond one's declared death

and his final expiration? Even if such cases (such as that concerning Edgar Vandy) do represent genuine cases of inter-communication, why does it appear to be achieved only with such difficulty and effort? Notice, for example, in the verbatim reports cited above, the apparently tentative, hesitant, even groping nature of the “messages” beginning, as they normally do, with rather vague and general observations reported by the medium and then—only step after laborious step—achieving an astounding degree of accuracy and vividness of detail. I can only assure the reader at this point that several (logically possible) answers—some more credible than others—can be and are forthcoming within the framework of the hypothesis of diminished consciousness. But, to even ensure that such further investigation is worthwhile, perhaps now is the time to pose a very simple and straightforward question: is the hypothesis of diminished consciousness—*logically* possible as it most certainly is—in the final analysis really any more incredible than the Super-ESP Hypothesis? If the reader answers in the negative, then my relatively modest aim will have been achieved: to provide an alternative, naturalistic account which, while taking the evidence of parapsychology seriously, nevertheless allows the skeptic to resist the hypothesis of genuine survival beyond death.

ENDNOTES

¹During the past quarter century or so, a number of reputable research centers have been established and are presently engaged in significant—and serious—work. Included among these should be mentioned those institutes associated with Duke University and Stanford University in the U.S. But their studies have focused almost exclusively on alleged paranormal processes and phenomena involving only the *living*. For this, as well as the reasons mentioned above, I intend to confine my attention to the studies relevant to our present concerns reported and documented by the SPR.

²I choose the feminine pronoun deliberately, for virtually all mediums—reputable or otherwise are, for reasons that we do not fully understand—women, and not men.

³It is important to note that the medium herself may even be unaware that this is what, in fact, is happening (although, in some cases, she may very well be). In the former case, it would seem unfair to attribute fraud or deception, although the evidence of survival (as opposed to telepathic reconstruction) would not be strengthened in spite of her innocence or ignorance of the processes involved. (“I don’t know how I’m able to do this—I just can and do, that’s all.”)

⁴C. D. Broad. *Lectures on Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd, 1962).

⁵The original report was published in the *S.P.R. Journal* (XXXIX, 1957). For a very detailed and in-depth description of this case, see Broad, pp. 350-383. In the brief summary that follows I have borrowed very freely from William L. Rowe’s brief account in his excellent *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Encino, California and Belmont, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1978), pp. 147-149.

⁶Rowe, pp. 147-48; my emphasis.

⁷As Rowe insists:

It must be remembered that the mediums had been given no information about these matters at all, nor were they told the identity of the departed person. Despite this, however, the mediums received messages to the effect that the person in question had died by some sort of strange accident, that he had drowned in an outdoor pool, that some sort of stunning blow had been received just prior to the drowning, and that someone else [presumably N.J.] was present, tried to help, but for some reason was unable to do so. [Rowe, p. 147]

⁸Broad, pp. 364-365.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 374.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 375.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 380.

¹²In the Vandy case, there were a total of six sittings (including the proxy sitting) using four different mediums—all with substantially the same results, varying one from the other only in terms of degree of specificity and of detail, the amount and kind of information “received,” etc. (i.e., the various accounts are all logically and empirically consistent).

¹³It remains a completely open question whether all, many, some, or only a few such persons are so gifted. For all we know, it may very well be that all of us have such potential, but that it is only realized in relatively few cases. But, to make the hypothesis viable, it is only necessary that at least one or a few such persons qualify.

¹⁴To this minimum extent, the Super-ESP Hypothesis is similar to the account proposed in the second scenario discussed above (Section II). But, as the reader will presently appreciate, the details of this minimal sketch will be expanded in rather elaborate detail.

¹⁵It might be well to remind ourselves just how minimal this condition really is: p is logically possible if its denial does not entail a contradiction.

¹⁶In the final analysis, there really is no way to refute one who tenaciously clings to this position. It is simply that, beyond a certain point, he no longer deserves to be taken seriously (just what *would* constitute *prima facie* plausible evidence for such a skeptic, one wonders with justification?). In this same way, neither you nor I (nor any of his contemporaries) could refute the 19th century paleontologist and literal biblicist, Phillip Gosse, who contended that God created the world in 4004 B.C., replete with the fossil evidence which would suggest that the earth is much older than 6000 years, in order to “test our faith.”

¹⁷As someone has remarked, it is curious that to the extent that the skeptic wishes to *deflate* the survival hypothesis, he finds himself forced to *inflate* the powers of human consciousness almost beyond the bounds of our credibility. Or, as Penelhum notes, again following H. H. Price, “(I)t is striking that when the hypothesis of survival seems the only reasonable alternative, many who do not wish to accept it will cheerfully postulate other paranormal processes such as telepathy or clairvoyance, which they would resolutely refuse to consider as explanatory possibilities in other contexts.” See Terence Penelhum (ed.), *Immortality* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), p. 6.

¹⁸By “empirically possible,” I mean consistent with the laws of physics. As innocuous as this might appear, it can raise thorny questions when we oppose it to “the laws of physics *as established at the present time.*” So, for example, the evidence available seems to indicate that the speed with which telepathic messages are communicated and received apparently does not necessarily vary with the distance traversed between sender and receiver. What are we to say? That this conflicts with the laws of physics—or rather, that we do not yet know all of the laws of physics, particularly those governing the occurrence of alleged paranormal phenomena? The choice is not an easy one.

¹⁹Perhaps the most celebrated case of the kind, though fictional, is that portrayed in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the potion taken by the young girl renders her apparently dead to any casual observer including, unfortunately and alas, Romeo himself.

²⁰William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 335.

²¹Huston Smith, “Do Drugs Have Religious Import?,” *Journal of Philosophy* LXI (1964) pp. 527-528.

²²Among the best attested cases are the so-called “Cross-Correspondence Cases” which persisted over a thirty year period. Here we are most emphatically *not* concerned with the alleged cases (also studied by the SPR) of a person’s sincerely claiming to have lived during one or more past lives. To entertain these cases as well would be to open another incredibly large can of conceptual and empirical worms that lie beyond the compass of our present investigation.

²³In situations like this, when one’s opponent *always* has an answer (i.e., when, apparently, nothing could be conceived to count against the hypothesis), I begin to become very suspicious—not concerning its truth (or probability)—but rather, regarding its status as a genuine empirical hypothesis. In spirit, this is very similar to the debate over the metaphysical thesis of determinism and the thesis of psychological egoism. (For example, all of the available evidence indicates that the agent’s strongest desire was to do *x* instead of *y*, though he went ahead and managed to do *y* anyhow. Determinist’s response: well, then, his strongest desire in this present instance *must* have been to do *y*. Opponent: what makes you so sure? Determinist: well, he *did* it (*y*), didn’t he? (But it seems that here we are putting the cart before the horse.)

²⁴See, for example, John Hick’s discussion of his notion of “eschatological verification” in his “Theology and Verification,” *Theology Today* Vol. XVII, No. 1 (April, 1960), esp. section II. This article is also reprinted (and easily accessible) in John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 252-274.

²⁵See, for example, Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D., *Life after Life* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1976) and his sequel, *Reflections on Life after Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977).