https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052505050209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

PERSONAL IDENTITY AND POSTMORTEM SURVIVAL

By Stephen E. Braude

I. Introduction

As many have noted, what is often called the "problem" of personal identity can be understood either as a metaphysical issue or as an epistemological (and somewhat more practical) issue. Metaphysicians typically want to know *what it is* for one individual to be the same person as another. People undergo many changes over time, and some people resemble others quite closely. The metaphysician wants to know, for example, what makes me—the chronologically challenged, mostly bald philosopher Stephen Braude—the same unique individual as the infant who appeared on the scene many years earlier, despite the considerable evolution in my appearance and in my psychology during the interim. However, epistemologists are concerned (at least sometimes) with a different problem: how to *decide* if an individual is the same person as someone else. For example, are these decisions rooted in judgments about physical continuity, psychological continuity, or both? In virtue of what, for example, do we identify a person as me, despite (so I'm told) my remarkable resemblance to other chronologically and follically challenged individuals? Granted, in real life this potential problem seldom stops us in our tracks. Although some have trouble distinguishing identical twins, and although we sometimes mistake a person for someone else, those problems are uncommon, and usually they are quickly resolved. In fact, that is about as difficult as it gets for everyday identifications. Fortunately, we seldom deal with drastic or sudden changes in a person; physical or psychological changes in those we know are usually subtle or at least gradual. And few of us are forced to deal with really rare or exotic puzzles over a person's identity. For example, we needn't worry about whether our acquaintances are being skillfully impersonated; we seldom receive phone calls or other communiqués from people we thought had died; and most of us never contend with identity puzzles generated by cases of DID (dissociative identity disorder—formerly, multiple personality disorder).

However, there are some severe and real cases, suggesting the survival of bodily death and dissolution, which are not all that uncommon, and which many people have pondered even if they have not dealt with them personally. And here, the metaphysical and epistemological problems of personal identity seem to converge. That is because our interest in postmortem survival concerns something more interesting and personal than

© 2005 Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation. Printed in the USA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the scenario envisioned by some Eastern religions and New Age pundits: a kind of merging with the infinite, or being-in-general (a grand soup of consciousness). Although that might count as a form of *life after death,* it is certainly not the *survival of death* that people have anticipated, feared, or desired for centuries. Merging with the infinite would be a condition that obliterates whatever is distinctive about us, including our merely numerical individuality. But people who wonder about personal postmortem survival wonder about such things as whether *they* will be able to meet up with their deceased relatives, communicate with the still-living members of their families, reincarnate, or enjoy a postmortem existence in which they simply get their hair back. In general, they wonder whether *they* will continue to exist in some form or another after bodily death. And they wonder whether that future individual bears something like the same relationship to their present self that their present self bears to their physically and psychologically remote infant self. As a result, these cases present the epistemological challenge of deciding whether they provide evidence for postmortem persistence of a specific individual. And they present the metaphysical challenge of explaining how such persistence is possible.

Thus, when mediums appear to channel information from, or dramatically impersonate, our deceased friends or relatives, or when children seem to display the memories, traits, and abilities of deceased strangers in cases of ostensible reincarnation, we have good reason to be puzzled, whether we are metaphysicians or folk who are less relentlessly abstract. Metaphysicians often wonder whether we can use the concepts *identity* or *person* intelligibly when we talk about postmortem survival. For example, if we believe (as many do) that our personhood and personal identity are intimately and essentially tied to our physical embodiment, then we might wonder whether *anything deserving to be called "Stephen Braude"* could survive my bodily death. And for those not troubled by this metaphysical problem, there remains a difficult practical problem. If the deceased's body no longer exists, "it is hard to see what . . . could possibly count as distinguishing between Jones having survived the death of his body (though we don't understand how) and its being now and again transiently *as if* he had survived it (though again we can't make sense of it)." [1]

In the next section, I shall argue that metaphysical worries about postmortem survival are less important than many have supposed. In Section III, I shall consider briefly why cases suggesting postmortem survival can be so intriguing and compelling, and I shall survey our principal explanatory options and challenges. In Section IV, I shall consider why we need to be circumspect in our appraisal of evidence for mind-body correlations. And in the final section, I shall try to draw a few tentative and provocative conclusions.

[1] Alan Gauld, "Philosophy and Survival: An Essay Review of R. W. K. Paterson's *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death*," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 62 (1998): 453–462, p. 458.

II. The Primacy of the Practical

Initially, it might seem that we need to solve the metaphysical problem of identity before we can decide what to say when confronted with a good case of ostensible mediumship or reincarnation. That is, if we cannot even begin to explain how survival *could* occur following bodily death and dissolution, and especially when we have philosophical concerns about whether disembodied survival is even possible, then how could we decide if postmortem survival has occurred in fact? But that position is questionable for a number of reasons.

First, it is clear that most of us satisfactorily make decisions about *pre*mortem identity without having anything of interest or substance to say either about the nature of personal identity or about the empirical basis for our successful everyday judgments about identity. Obviously, we do not need a theoretical grasp of the metaphysics of identity simply to make correct identifications. Most people know nothing about the metaphysics of identity, and those who do don't come close to a consensus on the issues. In fact, probably any of several different metaphysical theories will be compatible with our everyday, preanalytic judgments of personal identity. If a metaphysical theory plays any *useful* role at all, it might merely be to show how we could theoretically ground our successful practice of identifying persons. Moreover, most people are largely ignorant of the received medical, biological, or psychological basis for determining bodily or psychological continuity. Nevertheless, our strategies for identifying others are generally workable, and probably they have remained stable for millennia. At the same time, however, our prevailing philosophies and scientific background theories have changed profoundly. Apparently, then, we have not been prevented, either by our ignorance, theoretical naiveté, or shifting conceptual trends, from making successful judgments about identity.

The philosopher R. W. K. Paterson, in a generally sensible and well-informed book on postmortem survival, makes a related observation about our ability to identify persons successfully without the aid (or hindrance) of a well-developed underlying metaphysics.[2] After commenting on the intractability of familiar philosophical puzzles about identity, he writes:

> From our failure to discover the *fons et origo* [source and origin] of the continuing and unique identity we ascribe to living persons it follows that we have no special, imperative, inescapable intellectual obligation to discover it and set it forth in the case of deceased persons.[3]

[2] R. W. K. Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
[3] Ibid., 23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

More contentiously, however, Paterson argues further that we can dispense with the usual metaphysical puzzles, because personal (or at least numerical) identity is one of a large number of unanalyzable facts that we unhesitatingly accept as facts. Now I would agree that some facts are unanalyzable,[4] but it is not clear that Paterson and I are making the same claim here. In fact, it is not clear what sort of impossibility Paterson has in mind when he claims that some concepts cannot be analyzed. In any case, I want to focus on another feature of his view. To illustrate what he has in mind, Paterson argues that "although we all understand what time is, we cannot give a clear explication of what it is; we cannot say what we mean when we speak of a 'past' event . . . and yet we and our hearers know perfectly well what we mean."[5] Similarly, "even if we are unable to give a full and correct analysis of the claim that some disembodied person is numerically absolutely identical with the ante-mortem Winston Churchill, we understand *what* is being claimed and are entitled to weigh up such evidence as is available on behalf of this claim."[6]

That does not seem quite right, however. First, whether we are making claims about time or about identity, it is somewhat misleading, or at least unclear, to say that we understand (or "know perfectly well") what we are saying. In fact, I would argue that not even metaphysicians are as clear about their claims as they sometimes like to believe, and the rest of us needn't have even a shared idea of what we are saying—much less a metaphysical view of *what it is* for an event to be past or of *what it is* for a postmortem individual to be the same person as a premortem individual.

One problem here concerns fundamental issues in the philosophy of language, and for reasons of space, I must wax dogmatic for a moment. Some would contend—I believe, correctly—that neither meanings nor concepts are determinate or clear things at all, and in fact that the meaning of a sentence is no more determinate or specifiable than the humor or compassion of a sentence. If that is true, however, then to think that we know or can specify what exactly we are saying when we make these judgments presupposes an untenable view of language and meaning. It presupposes not simply that meanings can be determinate but that some expressions must be intrinsically unambiguous—that is, the ones we reach when disambiguation comes to an end.[7] As far as identity judgments are concerned, at best we know—only roughly—what sorts of considerations would lead us to *decide* that two individuals are the same. Whatever personal identity amounts to, whatever we mean when we talk about

[4] Stephen E. Braude, *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science,* rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997).

[5] Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death,* 44.

[6] Ibid., 45, italics in original.

[7] I use the term "disambiguation" here to refer to the general process of clarifying the meaning of our utterances, which involves rendering them both less ambiguous and less vague.

identity, or whatever justifies or undergirds our decision that two things are (or are not) identical, is then something we can try to determine or (more likely) dispute indefinitely.

Every sentence we utter rests on numerous tacit background assumptions, which ordinarily need not be considered, evaluated, or even understood by the speaker in order to determine what the sentence means or whether the sentence is true. For example, when I say, "The table is brown," I make numerous assumptions about the nature of observation and the stability of physical objects and their properties over time. It is only when we are engaged in philosophical analysis, or when actual problems emerge in communicating with others, that we are likely to recognize some of those assumptions and appreciate the role they play in determining what our utterances mean. Perhaps more importantly, it is only in these problematical contexts that we are likely to realize how vague and ambiguous our statements are.

Admittedly, analyzing our utterances and arguments is often a fairly straightforward matter. But that is seldom (if ever) because our statements on those occasions are inherently clearer or more precise than on other occasions. Rather, it is usually because the prevailing context of inquiry is relatively undemanding. Understanding or clarifying what we mean is challenging only in relatively arcane contexts, or when the need for clarification is unusually urgent or the requirements particularly exacting. In most cases, however, we tolerate a great deal of ambiguity and vagueness, and we seldom need or demand further clarification. But that is not because our utterances in those cases are inherently clear, or significantly clearer than in contexts where disambiguation is more difficult or pressing. It merely reflects the pervasiveness of shared background assumptions underlying our linguistic practices generally and the specific topic of conversation in particular. That is why we might take a sentence to be deeply obscure in certain contexts but not in others (e.g., where there is no need to question or examine our background assumptions).

For example, the sentence "We create our own reality" might seem perfectly intelligible and acceptable at a conference celebrating so-called New Age thinking, whereas in many academic contexts it would be considered mysterious at best or blatantly false at worst. Similarly, "Good neighbors come in all colors" might seem both clear and true at a town meeting on racial integration, but in other contexts (e.g., a logic or art class) the sentence would be considered false, because no humans are (say) forest green, aquamarine, or vermilion.

If these observations are correct, then it is not the case that either ordinary or philosophical talk about persons or identity is especially or helpfully clear and precise. Nevertheless, it is significant (as Paterson recognizes) that when we make identity judgments we are able in most cases to get along quite nicely, despite our apparently inevitable conceptual fuzziness. To the extent we even have *a* concept of personhood or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

personal identity, it is as loose and elastic as most of our concepts. And ordinarily it serves us quite well; we have little if any trouble deciding who's who. Moreover, when we identify persons, we rely generally on both physical and psychological continuity, and under optimal conditions we can identify people with respect to continuity of both sorts. In many cases, however, our empirical resources are less robust. We might interact verbally with someone via telephone or email but not see the person's body. We might see a person but observe no psychologically significant behavior. And even if we believe all along that a person's psychological properties supervene on the bodily, in making identity judgments we weight psychological and physical continuity differently in different cases, relying sometimes on only one of them.

Of course, philosophers like to concoct various science-fiction or theological scenarios to challenge our general strategies for judging identity and (allegedly) thereby sharpen our thinking about identity. But real-life cases do this as well—among them, cases of dissociative identity disorder (DID) and cases suggesting postmortem survival. I would say that none of these real or imagined cases threatens to undermine our ordinary concepts of a person or personal identity.[8] There is no reason to think that an adequate concept should handle all cases it might be thought to cover, no matter how exotic. Our ordinary concepts tend to be just fine for ordinary cases. The weird cases are ones we cannot resolve without an uncommonly reflective decision on the matter. Moreover, "some hypothetical cases may not be decidable by any means at all, let alone by some 'criterion'."[9] At any rate, the ostensible postmortem cases strike us as particularly vexing because they apparently undercut both our familiar reliance on bodily continuity as well as common assumptions about how psychological properties depend on physical states of affairs. However, some observations about this predicament are in order.

First, we need to keep in mind the cultural variability in the concept of a person, which might help combat our tendency to assume smugly that there is something privileged about our common presuppositions about personhood. For example, although for many of us the presumption of one person/one body is the default presumption in most instances, that is not the case in other cultures (e.g., the Ndembu, the Ashanti, and the Bushmen of the Kalahari) that have interesting approaches to what they perceive as the conceptually problematic birth of twins, triplets, etc.[10]

[8] For a fuller discussion, see Stephen E. Braude, *Immortal Remains: The Evidence for Life after Death* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

[9] Bruce Aune, *Metaphysics: The Elements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 91.

[10] See Stephen E. Braude, *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995). Dan Gowler, "On the Concept of the Person: A Biosocial View," in Ralph Ruddock, ed., *Six Approaches to the Person* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 37–69.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moreover, in our culture, our rough-and-ready ordinary concept of a person is largely *normative* (what Locke termed a "forensic" concept). When we use the term "person" in everyday life we are not picking out a *natural kind*—that is, either some a priori specifiable piece of ontological furniture or at least something whose nature scientific inquiry will decide (for example, something that inevitably links persons to the biological species *Homo sapiens*).[11] Our ordinary concept of a person concerns things we value about ourselves and each other, and it rests on various presuppositions about the ways people should be treated. In our culture at least, we typically regard persons as (among other things) entities who have (or could have) an inner life relevantly similar to our own, who have various rights and perhaps obligations, and who deserve our respect, consideration, and so on. And we accept the normativity of this conception of personhood irrespective of our views (if any) about how persons might (or must) be configured biologically or otherwise—for example, whether fetuses, dolphins, computers, brains in a vat, alternate personalities, or disembodied spirits, could be persons. In fact, I would argue (along with philosopher Anthony Quinton)[12] that what we value most about persons are their psychological traits and that this is why we are often content to make identity judgments (even in exotic cases such as DID and apparent postmortem survival) solely on the basis of psychological continuity.

Some might protest that although the concept of a person is loose and variable, the concept of identity is not. Paterson, for example, claims it is a simple fact that something is strictly identical with another thing, or (even more clearly) that it is self-identical.[13] In the same spirit, philosopher Steve Matthews (in an exchange we had recently regarding DID) argues, "I agree . . . that the concept of personhood is elastic. But the concept of numerical identity of self over time is necessarily not elastic because the concept of numerical identity is not: everything is identical with itself and no other thing."[14] Arguably, a similar position on the concept of identity underwrites the recent revisionist view in philosophy that identity is not what matters in survival.[15]

[11] For a discussion of the slippery concept of a natural kind, see Barry Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 70, no. 2 (1996): 43–55.

[12] Anthony Quinton, "The Soul," in John Perry, ed., *Personal Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 53–72; originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy* 59, no. 15 (1962): 393–409.

[13] Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death,* 44–45.

[14] Steve Matthews, "Blaming Agents and Excusing Persons: The Case of DID," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 10 (2003): 169–74, p. 169. See also Steve Matthews, "Establishing Personal Identity in Cases of DID," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 10 (2003): 143–51; and Stephen E. Braude, "Counting Persons and Living with Alters: Comments on Matthews," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 10 (2003): 153–56.

[15] Raymond Martin, *Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

But the concept of numerical identity is not especially clear or simple. For one thing, there is no single preferred thing we mean when we say "everything is self-identical." And for another, concepts are not isolable or independent entities. In fact, the concept of numerical identity seems to be elastic and variable in a way similar to that in which the concept of a person is elastic and variable.

First, as I noted earlier, our talk about both persons and identity—in fact, our language generally—is fundamentally vague and ambiguous. Second, as I also mentioned above, whether we regard something as a person depends on various other beliefs we hold—for example, beliefs shaped by culture, religious upbringing, general education, or philosophical training. It also depends on the practical needs of situations we actually confront or at least might confront. For example, it depends on whether we are dealing with aliens, androids, or (more realistically) ordinary cases of recognizing people, or even with the urgent need to decide how our spouse's alternate personality—or a criminal defendant suffering from DID—should be treated.

Apparently, then, it is implausible to suppose that there is something that qualifies as *the* concept of a person, or that there is an inherently privileged analysis of what we mean by "person," or that this meaning can be specified with the kind of crispness or finality to which some philosophers aspire. But an analogous situation holds in connection with numerical identity. To see this, consider first the expression

$$(x)(x = x)$$

usually interpreted as "anything x is such that it is identical to itself," or more colloquially, "everything is self-identical." The acceptability of this alleged law of identity is not something we can decide by considering this law alone. Regarded merely as a theorem of a formal system, it has no meaning at all; it is nothing more than a sanctioned expression within a set of rules for manipulating symbols. As an interpreted bit of formalism, however, it is acceptable only with respect to situations in which we attempt to apply it. And perhaps more interesting, it is *intelligible* only as part of a larger network of commitments. That is, what we mean by "everything is self-identical" depends in part on how we integrate that sentence with other principles or inferences we accept or reject.

To see this, consider whether we would accept as true the statement

(1) Zeus = Zeus.

To many, no doubt, that sentence seems as unproblematical as the superficially similar

(2) Steve Braude = Steve Braude.

However, in many systems of deductive logic containing the rule of existential generalization (EG), from the symbolization of (1)—namely,

(1′) z = z

we can infer

(3) (∃x) x = z

or, in other words,

(4) Zeus exists,

and of course, many consider that result intolerable.

Not surprisingly, philosophers have entertained various ways of dealing with this situation. One would be to taxonomize different types of existence and interpret the rule of existential generalization as applying only to some of them. Another approach would be to get fussy about the concept of a *name.* We could decide that "Zeus" is not a genuine name and that genuine names (like "Steve Braude") pick out only real existent individuals—not mythical or fictional individuals, for example. Both these approaches concede certain (but different) sorts of limitations to standard predicate logic and the way or extent to which it connects with ordinary discourse. Others prefer to tweak the logic directly, either syntactically or semantically. For example, some simply reject the rule of existential generalization and endorse a so-called (existence) *free* logic. Alternatively, some retain EG but adopt a substitutional interpretation of the quantifiers "(x)" and "(∃x)," so that instead of reading (3) as

(3′) There is (or exists) some x such that x is identical with z (Zeus),

we read it as

(3″) Some substitution instance of "x = z" is true.

The latter, they would say, is acceptable and carries no existential commitments.

The reader needn't understand all these options. The moral, however, should be clear enough. All these approaches raise concerns about what should be regarded as a *thing* in certain contexts. The statement "everything is self-identical" is not simply true *no matter what.* Its truth (and indeed, meaning) turn on a number of other decisions as to which other principles or inferences are acceptable, and that whole package of deci-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

sions can only be evaluated on pragmatic grounds. Moreover, it is perfectly respectable to decide that some solutions to this conundrum are appropriate for some situations and that other solutions are appropriate for others. We are never constrained to select one solution as privileged or fundamental.

III. Confronting the Evidence

As I noted earlier, we often make identity judgments satisfactorily on the basis of psychological continuity alone, even if we suspect or believe strongly that the psychological supervenes on the physical. Moreover, we typically make these judgments in the face of considerable philosophical ignorance or indecision about what constitutes identity, as well as scientific ignorance about the physical or biological basis for asserting bodily continuity. That is enough, I think, to undercut the claim that we cannot acceptably make identity judgments in cases of ostensible postmortem survival when we do not know how to explain survival in the apparent absence of bodily continuity. So let's consider briefly how, in a state of comparative metaphysical or scientific innocence, we would assess apparently good evidence for postmortem survival. Presumably (and as we will see), what we would want to say depends largely on the same thing that concerns us most deeply in everyday cases: *how we value persons.*

However, empirical considerations still matter, and the empirical landscape is strewn with obstacles. The issues here are numerous and complex, and I have discussed them at length elsewhere.[16] For present purposes, we need only note the following key points.

Generally speaking, a case suggests postmortem survival because (a) some living person demonstrates knowledge or abilities closely (if not uniquely) associated with a deceased person, and (b) we have good reason to believe that this knowledge was not obtained, or the abilities developed, through ordinary means. For example, suppose that a medium purports to channel information from my late Uncle Harry. And suppose that she provides information—for example, the location of a secret will—that no living person besides Harry ever knew (at least by normal means). And suppose that, although the medium never met my uncle, she takes on various of his characteristics, such as his quirky interests and perspective on politics, his distinctive laugh and caustic sense of humor, and his idiosyncratic syntax and inflection. And suppose the medium also demonstrates Uncle Harry's ability to speak Yiddish, even though she never studied (or better, was never exposed) to that language.

Before we can accept even an impressive case as indicating postmortem survival, however, we have to rule out a number of counter-hypotheses,

[16] Braude, *Immortal Remains.*

some more obvious and easier to eliminate than others. First, we need to consider what I call the Usual Suspects: fraud, the closely related misreporting and malobservation, and cryptomnesia or hidden memories (the ability to remember something without consciously realizing it). For some cases, these are clearly live options, but for others they are not. That is one reason the topic of postmortem survival is so interesting: the best cases easily deflect counter-explanation in terms of the Usual Suspects.

But the Usual Suspects are merely the first wave of skeptical counter-explanations, and they posit nothing more than relatively normal (or possibly abnormal) processes as alternatives to postmortem survival. However, a second wave of more exotic counter-explanations are more refractory, and these proposals fall into two classes. The first class posits clearly abnormal or rare processes, such as dissociative pathologies, rare mnemonic gifts, extreme or unprecedented forms of savantism, or equally rare latent creative capacities. For example, it is significant that prodigies and other gifted people manifest various abilities without having first to undergo a period of practice. And it is significant that savants display abilities that seem radically discontinuous with their usual, limited repertoire of capacities. Some calculating savants, for instance, can factor any number presented to them, even though they cannot add the change in their pockets. One famous musical savant was spastic until he sat down to play the piano. Clearly, these cases must be considered when evaluating a medium's suddenly manifesting an ability associated with an ostensibly deceased person.[17] I call these alternatives the Unusual Suspects, and although they seem to be ruled out in the very best cases, advocates of the survival hypothesis (hereafter *survivalists*) have, in general, done a poor job of countering them.

The second class of exotic counter-explanations posits something even more difficult to rule out—namely, *psychic functioning among the living,* presumably displayed in a way that simply gives the appearance of postmortem survival. This counter-hypothesis is actually difficult—perhaps impossible—to rule out in principle, since apparently any evidence suggesting postmortem survival can be explained solely in terms of (perhaps convoluted) psychic processes involving the living. For example, so long as obscure information provided by a medium can be verified, it can be explained by appeal to extrasensory perception (ESP). Intimate facts verified by consulting someone's memories can be explained by telepathy, and facts verified by consulting physical states of affairs (for example, the location of a hidden will) can be explained by clairvoyance. Advocates of postmortem survival cannot object to these counter-explanations as a matter of principle, because ironically they also must posit comparably impressive feats of ESP, simply to explain how mediums interact with

[17] For examples of how anti-survivalists would frame counter-explanations in terms of these abnormal or unusual capacities of the living, see Braude, *Immortal Remains.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

deceased communicators and how deceased communicators are aware of current physical states of affairs.

At any rate, these types of counter-explanation will not be entertained by anyone who refuses to accept the existence or possibility of ESP or psychokinesis (i.e., remote control by the deceased of the medium's body).[18] And clearly, this is not the place to review the evidence, either for relatively humdrum forms of psychic processes or for the more refined or extensive forms believed necessary to accommodate the evidence for survival—what is often called "super psi." I *will* lay my cards on the table and say that I believe the evidence for both ESP and psychokinesis has been satisfactorily demonstrated.[19] For now, however, we needn't worry about that. What matters here is what we would say if we were confronted with a slam-dunk, ideal case suggesting postmortem survival, and what impact such a case would have on our thinking about identity.

Presumably, an ideal survival case would be one for which appeals to the Usual and Unusual Suspects have no plausibility whatever. It would also be one that, while perhaps not conclusively ruling out appeals to psychic functioning among the living, nevertheless strains that hypothesis to the breaking point—that is, a case where even people sympathetic to such paranormal conjectures would be inclined to throw in the towel. In *Immortal Remains*, I offered a list of desirable features of a postmortem survival case, some of which are as follows.

(1) The case would be etiologically distinct from cases of DID or other psychological disorders. For example, in a reincarnation case the phenomena should not manifest after the subject experiences a traumatic childhood incident. (2) The manifestations of a previous personality (or discarnate communicator) should not serve any discernible psychological needs of the living. (3) Those manifestations should make most sense (or better, should only make sense) in terms of agendas or interests reasonably attributable to the previous personality. (4) The manifestations should begin, and should be documented, before the subject (or anyone in the subject's circle of acquaintances) has identified and researched the life of a corresponding previous personality. (5) The subject should supply verifiable, intimate facts about the previous personality's life. (6) The history and behavior of the previous personality (as revealed through the subject) should be recognizable, in intimate detail, to several individuals, preferably on separate occasions. (7) The subject should also display some of the previous personality's idiosyncratic skills or traits. (8) These skills or traits should be as foreign to the subject as possible—for example, from a

[18] Conceptually, the distinction between this form of psychokinesis and telepathic influence is very hazy. For a discussion of this and related terminological issues, see Stephen E. Braude, *ESP and Psychokinesis: A Philosophical Examination,* rev. ed. (Parkland, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2002).

[19] I have defended these conclusions at length in Braude, *The Limits of Influence* and *ESP and Psychokinesis.*

significantly different culture. (9) Skills associated with the previous personality should be of a kind or of a degree that generally require practice, and that are seldom (if ever) found in prodigies or savants. (10) In order for investigators to verify information communicated about the previous personality's life, it should be necessary to access multiple, culturally and geographically remote, and obscure sources.

It is one thing to consider the issues here purely in the abstract, and another to imagine in more detail what an overwhelmingly impressive case would look like. However, I think the latter is precisely what we need to do, not simply to appreciate how the evidence might challenge us conceptually, but to show how, in practice, concerns about bodily continuity may play no role whatever. Consider, then, what we would do if confronted with the following case of ostensible mediumship.

Mrs. B is a gifted medium. As far as her education is concerned, she never completed primary school, and as a result she has only an average fourth-grader's level of literacy. Moreover, Mrs. B's exposure to the world has been confined exclusively to her immediate small-town environment in the American Midwest. She has never traveled beyond her hometown or expressed any interest in books, magazines, or television shows about other locales. Similarly, she has had no exposure to the world of ideas, to literature (even in cinematic form), or to the arts. In fact, when she is not channeling communications or caring for her home and family, she devotes her time to prayer and developing her psychic sensitivity.

One day Mrs. B gives a sitting for Mr. X, who lives in Helsinki. The sitting is what is known as a *proxy* sitting, because the person interacting with the medium is substituting for someone who wants information from the medium. In the most interesting cases, proxy sitters have little or no information about the person they represent, and they know nothing about the individual the medium is supposed to contact. Clearly, then, good proxy cases help rule out some Usual Suspects, because we cannot plausibly assert that the medium is simply extracting information from the sitter by means of leading questions, subtle bodily cues, etc. In the present case, Mr. X (using a pseudonym) sends a watch, once owned by a dear friend, to the Parapsychology Foundation in New York, requesting that someone there present it to Mrs. B on his behalf. So no one at the Parapsychology Foundation knows (at least by normal means) the identity of either Mr. X or the original owner of the watch.

When Mrs. B handles the watch, she goes into trance and, speaking English as if it were not her native tongue and with a clear Scandinavian accent, purports to be the surviving personality of the Finnish composer Joonas Kokkonen. She also speaks a language unknown to anyone at the séance, which the sitters record and which experts later identify as fluent Finnish. At subsequent sittings, native speakers of Finnish attend, along with the proxy, and converse with Mrs. B in their language. All the while, she continues to speak Finnish fluently, demonstrating an ability not only

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

to utter, but also to understand, sentences in Finnish. In both Finnish and accented English, Mrs. B provides detailed information about Kokkonen's life and his music, demonstrating in the process an intimate acquaintance with Finnish culture, a professional command of music generally, and a knowledge of Kokkonen's music in particular. For example, on one occasion she writes out the final bars to an uncompleted piano quintet and requests that they be given to Kokkonen's former colleague, Aulis Sallinen, who she claims has possession of the original score, so that the quintet can be assembled into a performing edition. In fact, Sallinen does have the original score, in the condition described by the Kokkonen communicator.

These sittings cause a minor sensation in Finland and elsewhere, and before long many of Kokkonen's friends travel to have anonymous sittings with Mrs. B. Because Kokkonen was a major international musical figure and had friends and colleagues throughout the world, many of those friends are not Scandinavian. So at least those sitters provide no immediate linguistic clue as to whom they wish to contact. In every case, however, Mrs. B's Kokkonen-persona recognizes the sitters and demonstrates an intimate knowledge of details specific to Kokkonen's friendship with them. When speaking to Kokkonen's musician friends, the Kokkonen-persona discusses particular compositions, performances, or matters of professional musical gossip. For example, with one sitter, the Kokkonen-persona discusses the relative merits of the Finlandia and BIS recordings of his cello concerto (neither of which the sitter has heard), and then complains about the recording quality of the old Fuga recording of his third string quartet. With another sitter, the Kokkonen-persona gossips enthusiastically and knowledgeably about a famous conductor's body odor. When speaking to nonmusician friends, the trance-persona speaks in similar detail about matters of personal interest to the sitter. Some of these later sittings are themselves proxy sittings. For example, the composer Pehr Nordgren arranges, anonymously, to be represented by a Midwestern wheat farmer, who takes with him to the séance a personal item of Nordgren's. Mrs. B goes into trance immediately, mentions a term of endearment by which Kokkonen used to address Nordgren, and begins relating a discussion the two composers once had about Nordgren's violin concerto. Communications of this quality continue, consistently, for more than a year.

I submit that if we actually encountered a case of this quality, we would have to agree with philosopher Robert Almeder that it would be irrational (in some sense) not to regard it as good (if not compelling) evidence of survival,[20] even if we did not know how to make sense of it theoretically, and (in the most extreme scenario) even if our underlying metaphysics

[20] Robert Almeder, *Death and Personal Survival* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

was clearly uncongenial to the idea of postmortem survival. Moreover, if several cases of (or near) that quality appeared, they would have a cumulative force. They would obviously comprise precisely the kind of evidence that could lead us to revise, abandon, or at least seriously reconsider a conventionally materialist worldview. Philosophical intransigence in the face of such cases would not demonstrate admirable tough-mindedness. Instead, it would betray indefensible intellectual rigidity.

Unfortunately, we do not encounter cases of this quality; even the best of them disappoint in some respects. Nevertheless, the very best cases are rich enough to give us pause—at least if we do not have a metaphysical axe to grind. At any rate, one virtue of looking at hypothetically ideal cases is that they remind us it is not an idle enterprise to consider less-than-ideal cases, even if the evidence is consistently frustrating in one way or another. The quest is not futile; the evidence *can* point persuasively (if mysteriously) to postmortem survival, at least in principle.

Interestingly (as philosopher C. J. Ducasse noted),[21] the mediumistic scenario we have been envisioning is similar in critical respects to a more familiar situation, one in which identity judgments are—and more importantly—*need to be* made without relying on evidence of bodily continuity. Suppose I received a phone call over a noisy connection from an individual purporting to be my friend George, whom I thought had died in a plane crash. Although I cannot establish the speaker's identity by confirming his bodily continuity to the George I knew, and although the noisy phone line sometimes makes it difficult to hear what the speaker is saying, nevertheless my conversation can provide a solid practical basis for concluding that George is really speaking to me. The speaker could demonstrate that he had certain memories that no one but George should have, and he could exhibit characteristically George-ish personality traits, verbal mannerisms, as well as idiosyncratic motives and interests. Whether or not the persistence of these traits satisfies a metaphysician's criteria of identity, they will often suffice for real-life cases.

Similarly, if my phone conversation were with a person who claimed to be speaking to George and relaying his words to me (and vice versa), this situation would be analogous to cases where a medium conveys messages from communicator to sitters. Obviously, it is more difficult to discern the communicator's personality traits under these conditions, and that clearly deprives us of one type of evidence of survival. Nevertheless, if the content of the conveyed information is highly specific and intimate, it might justify concluding that George lives and is communicating directly to the person on the phone.

Apparently, then, we should be able to apply to postmortem cases the same psychological criteria of identity that we apply, usually unproblem-

[21] C. J. Ducasse, *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life after Death* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1961).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

atically, in everyday cases. Granted, we might still feel puzzled by the postmortem cases, and we may be unable to explain (or say anything interesting about) how survival could occur following bodily death. We may simply be at a loss philosophically and scientifically. As I noted earlier, however, that is hardly unique to postmortem cases. Besides, it is pretty much irrelevant—although it may still be annoying—that hypothetically ideal postmortem cases challenge us conceptually and even violate some people's physicalist assumptions. Although philosophers are often reluctant to admit this, practical considerations trump abstract philosophy every time, and if we really encountered a case as good as those we can construct, and especially if the case mattered to us personally, our reflective metaphysical scruples would count for nothing. We would not hedge our bets and say that it is not really survival, but only the persistence of what matters to us in survival. We would say that the deceased individual had actually (if mysteriously) survived bodily death.

To that extent I sympathize with the "Minimalism" advocated by Mark Johnston.[22] Johnston writes:

> The Minimalist has it that although ordinary practitioners may naturally be led to adopt metaphysical pictures as a result of their practices, and perhaps a little philosophical prompting, the practices are typically not dependent on the truth of the pictures. Practices that endure and spread are typically justifiable in nonmetaphysical terms. To this the Minimalist adds that we can do better in holding out against various sorts of skepticism and unwarranted revision when we correctly represent ordinary practice as having given no hostages to metaphysical fortune.
>
> In the particular case of personal identity, Minimalism will imply that any metaphysical view of persons that we might have is not indispensable to the justification of our practice of making judgments about personal identity and organizing our practical concerns around those judgments.[23]

IV. Dueling Metaphors and Hidden Assumptions

I realize that, for many, the foregoing considerations will not dispel the lingering lure of physicalism. One reason, no doubt, is the clear—and still growing—body of evidence indicating an intimate connection of some kind between brain states and mental states.[24] That body of evidence

[22] See, e.g., Mark Johnston, "Reasons and Reductionism," *The Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 589–618.

[23] Ibid., 590.

[24] For both a detailed summary and philosophical criticism of the empirical literature, see M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

obviously cannot simply be ignored. But survivalists contend that our mental states—indeed, characteristic dispositions and large chunks of personal psychology—can persist after bodily dissolution. It seems fair, then, to ask them why our mental capacities and states at least *seem* to be so bodily dependent. Traditionally, survivalists deal with this question by claiming that the deceased's brain is merely one kind of *instrument* for expressing mental states. After death (they would say), either the deceased uses some other instrument (for example, the medium's brain or an astral or secondary body), or else the deceased uses no physical or quasi-physical instrument at all (for example, if communication is telepathic).

I am fully aware that many will be unmoved by this gambit, and this reaction is not difficult to understand. However, it may not be defensible, and to see why, consider the following.

The evidence suggesting postmortem survival is evidence counting prima facie against reductionistic physicalism and epiphenomenalism. Granted, some have tried to demonstrate the compatibility of physicalism and postmortem survival,[25] but their proposals cannot accommodate the more interesting case-types studied by psychical researchers.[26] At any rate, it is fair to say that the evidence suggesting survival (however mysterious it may be, at least right now) calls into question familiar forms of physicalism. In that case, however, it is unclear to what extent physicalists can cite neurophysiological data in support of their objections to postmortem survival. After all, the reason people seriously entertain the survival hypothesis is that some evidence seems at least prima facie to support it. But that suggests that our mental states may not be dependent on our brain states in the ways many suppose. But in that case, we should be prepared to entertain alternatives to the received interpretations of some neurophysiological data.

We need to remember (a) that scientific data do not come preinterpreted and (b) that there is no such thing as a purely empirical science. Every science rests on numerous abstract presuppositions, metaphysical and methodological, and all too often we lose sight of what those presuppositions are (especially as a science becomes more developed). Moreover, even though a background theory may be well entrenched, it is always subject to challenge, especially in the light of new data. In fact, apparently obvious interpretations of novel data may reveal more about our unexamined theoretical presuppositions (or lack of imagination) than they do about the phenomena in question. One of my favorite episodes from the history of psychology illustrates the point nicely.

[25] See, e.g., Kevin Corcoran, "Physical Persons and Postmortem Survival without Temporal Gaps," in Kevin Corcoran, ed., *Soul, Body, and Survival* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 201–17. See also Trenton Merricks, "How to Live Forever without Saving Your Soul: Physicalism and Immortality," in Corcoran, ed., *Soul, Body, and Survival,* 183–200.

[26] For details, see Braude, *Immortal Remains.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the 1920s, Karl Lashley thought he could determine the location of a rat's memory in its brain. He trained rats to run a maze, and then he excised the portion of the brain where he believed the acquired memory to be. To his surprise, the rats continued to run the maze. So Lashley cut out even more of the brain, but the rats still navigated the maze (though with a bit less panache). This surprising result persisted as Lashley continued excising portions of the rats' brains. Only when a small fraction of the brain remained were the rats unable to run the maze. Unfortunately, at that point they also could do little else.[27] Later, others looked at these results and concluded that the rats' memories must have been located in the brain in the way information is distributed diffusely in a hologram. In fact, Karl Pribram has been heralded as a pundit for that questionable inference and his resulting holographic theory of memory traces.[28] In my view, however, Pribram's apparently easy recourse to a holographic model indicates that he was merely in the grip of a standard mechanistic and physicalistic picture. To those not antecedently committed to mechanistic analyses of the mental, Lashley's data take on a different kind of significance. In fact, they can easily be taken to support the view—held in some quarters—that the *container metaphor* (i.e., that mental states are *in* the brain) was wrong from the start and that memories are not localized *anywhere* or *in any form* in the brain. Moreover, that antimechanistic position can be supplemented by deep and apparently fatal objections to trace theories of memory generally. For example, some claim that trace theories must posit an infinite regress of homunculi (or additional rememberers) to explain how the appropriate trace is activated, or else that trace theories must rely on the unintelligible notions of *intrinsic similarity* (to explain how traces relate to things in the world) or *intrinsic meaning*.[29]

The evidence suggesting postmortem survival invites similar displays of metaphysical myopia. For example, in a recent interesting article on reincarnation,[30] physician and economist David Bishai challenges the famil-

[27] Karl S. Lashley, *Brain Mechanisms and Intelligence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), and Lashley, "In Search of the Engram," *Symposia of the Society for Experimental Biology* 4 (1950): 454–82. See also F. A. Beach et al., eds., *The Neuropsychology of Lashley: Selected Papers of K. S. Lashley* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).

[28] Karl H. Pribram, *Languages of the Brain* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970); Pribram, "Holonomy and Structure in the Organization of Perception," in U. M. Nicholas, ed., *Images, Perception, and Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1977). See also Karl H. Pribram, M. Nuwer, and Robert J. Baron, "The Holographic Hypothesis of Memory Structure in Brain Function and Perception," in David H. Krantz, R. Duncan Luce, and Patrick Suppes, eds., *Contemporary Developments in Mathematical Psychology,* vol. 2 (San Francisco: Freeman, 1974).

[29] For detailed criticisms of trace theory, see Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience;* Howard A. Bursen, *Dismantling the Memory Machine* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978); John Heil, "Traces of Things Past," *Philosophy of Science* 45 (1978): 60–67; Norman Malcolm, *Memory and Mind* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); and Braude, *ESP and Psychokinesis.*

[30] David Bishai, "Can Population Growth Rule Out Reincarnation? A Model of Circular Migration," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 14 (2000): 411–20.

iar anti-survivalist argument that, as philosopher Paul Edwards has put it, "reincarnation appears to be refuted by population statistics"[31]—namely, by the fact that the world's population continues to increase. Bishai shows how various assumptions about the "dwell time," or period between incarnations, yield different predictions about the rate of human population growth. Then he sketches a simple "circular migration model" that does, in fact, account for the data from a reincarnationist perspective. He also shows that the alleged incompatibility between the reincarnation hypothesis and the facts of population growth rests on a very controversial assumption: namely, that "the mean duration of stay in the afterlife has been constant throughout human history."[32] Apparently, Edwards did not realize that his condescending and allegedly hard-nosed attack on reincarnationists was as deeply (and inevitably) metaphysical as the view he opposed. And no doubt he would have been hard-pressed to defend his required assumption about dwell time against alternative reincarnationist assumptions. At any rate, the major lesson of Bishai's study is that metaphysical assumptions are unavoidable no matter where one stands on the issue of reincarnation and population growth.

One would think, then, that both in this case and in the case of apparent mind-brain correlations, we need to be circumspect in our assertions about what the data shows. Nevertheless, survivalists still need to address the more obvious cases suggesting at least the causal dependency of the mental on the physical. For example, it is undeniable that changes in or damage to the brain can affect (and sometimes seem to obliterate) memory. Even if we grant that the brain is an instrument that needs to be intact in order to respond properly, we might still be reluctant to assert further (as survivalists do) that memory and other cognitive functions do not require that instrument. As physiologist, parapsychologist, and Nobel laureate Charles Richet put it, "It is as if I were to say that in an electric lamp the passage of the current and the integrity of the mechanism of the lamp are not necessary for the production of its light."[33]

This analogy, and others like it, are initially seductive. Their appeal may, however, reflect little more than our familiarity with a certain conventional picture of how the world works generally and of what the mind is in particular. If we are really engaged in an open-minded appraisal of exotic and challenging bodies of evidence, then we must be ready to entertain alternative pictures and alternative analogies. And in fact, other analogies—much more congenial to the survivalist—are not that difficult to find, as philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart demonstrated some time ago.[34]

[31] Paul Edwards, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 227.

[32] Ibid., 419.

[33] Charles Richet, "The Difficulty of Survival from the Scientific Point of View," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 34 (1924): 107–13, p. 109.

[34] J. M. E. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1930/1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Indeed, McTaggart's discussion is an exemplar of somewhat old-fashioned, but admirably cautious, metaphysics.

To appreciate McTaggart's contribution to this debate, we should note first that survivalists apparently must express their position in terms that many will find either simply unfamiliar, quaint, or downright peculiar. Because they reject physicalistic reductionism, survivalists claim that the self (whatever, exactly, it is) is not something identical with one's physical body or a part of the body (for example, the brain). And because they reject epiphenomenalism, they must claim that the self is also not merely a by-product of bodily activity, or something totally causally dependent (or supervening) on (part of) one's physical body. Survivalists must say that the self (whatever, exactly, it is), as we know it introspectively and through our earthly commerce with others, is something that *has* a body.

Of course, anti-survivalists might object that this language is question-begging, because it presupposes precisely what is at issue: namely, that the self might not be embodied. That is false, however. Granted, the language makes room for the claim that the self might be disembodied. But (as we will see below) it seems only to presuppose that the self might not have *its current body.* In any case, survivalists must be allowed to use the locution that the self has a body. *Pretheoretically,* it is no less legitimate than the competing, and equally theory-laden, terminology of physicalists (i.e., that the self is, or supervenes on, a body). Granted (as I have noted), physiological evidence apparently casts doubt on the survivalist position. It is precisely what draws many people to some form of the identity theory or epiphenomenalism. According to McTaggart, however, survivalists can concede that physiological discoveries pose at least an initial challenge to their position. That is why Richet's analogy seems compelling. But good survival evidence has a theoretical pull in the opposite direction and poses an apparently comparable prima facie challenge to the anti-survivalist. Moreover, as we will see below, McTaggart believed that survivalists can appeal to analogies of their own, and he believed that they are at least as weighty as analogies more congenial to physicalists.

McTaggart's discussion merits a close study, but for present purposes the following paraphrase will suffice. What McTaggart wanted to do was to expose several inferential leaps that we make all too unreflectively. We can grant that our sensations and our mental life *seem* invariably linked to bodily processes of some kind. No matter how intimate the mind-body connection seems to be, however, the data would show, at most, "that *some* body was necessary to my self, and not that its present body was necessary."[35] And even that may be going too far; strictly speaking, the data show us only what *is* the case, not what *must be* the case. If our evaluation of the evidence for postmortem survival is to be genuinely open-minded, then we need to suspend (if only temporarily) our familiar

[35] Ibid., 104, italics in original.

physicalist or reductionist assumptions or biases. But in that case it is clear that the data do not establish limits on the *possible* manifestations of selfhood. In particular, nothing in the data compels us to conclude that a self must be linked to a physical body. Thus, on a more circumspect or conservative appraisal of the data, we might conclude simply that "*while a self has a body,* that body is essentially connected with the self's mental life."[36] McTaggart argued:

> [I]t does not follow, because a self which has a body cannot get its data except in connexion with that body, that it would be impossible for a self without a body to get data in some other way. It may be just the existence of the body which makes these other ways impossible at present. If a man is shut up in a house, the transparency of the windows is an essential condition of his seeing the sky. But it would not be prudent to infer that, if he walked out of the house, he could not see the sky because there was no longer any glass through which he might see it.[37]

McTaggart made a similar point with regard to the more specific, and apparently intimate, relation between brain states and mental states:

> Even if the brain is essential to thought while we have bodies, it would not follow that when we ceased to have brains we could not think without them. . . . It might be that the present inability of the self to think except in connexion with the body was a limitation which was imposed by the presence of the body, and which vanished with it.[38]

McTaggart's view is important and insightful. Strictly speaking, the physiological evidence does not show that selfhood or consciousness is *exclusively* linked to bodily processes, much less the processes of any particular physical body. Probably, physicalistic interpretations of the data seem initially compelling because physicalistic presuppositions are widespread and deeply rooted. If so, it may be a useful intellectual exercise to try to divest ourselves of those presuppositions and then take a fresh look at the data. We might find, then, that McTaggart's (or the survivalist's) interpretation seems more immediately appealing.

V. Conclusion

I think it is clear, then, that we can have at least prima facie evidence for postmortem survival, however mysterious that evidence may be to us, both scientifically and philosophically. Hypothetically ideal cases illus-

[36] Ibid., 105, italics in original.
[37] Ibid., 105.
[38] Ibid., 106.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

trate how compelling the evidence *could* be, and the best actual cases illustrate further that thinking about postmortem survival is not just idle speculation. And I think it is clear that, if the evidence is compelling enough, our ignorance about how such survival could occur is simply an annoyance we would have to accept but which we can hope to dispel.

But how compelling *is* the evidence? That is a very complex matter we cannot assess here, and I have examined it elsewhere in considerable detail.[39] Moreover, other philosophers have taken a close and critically open-minded look at the evidence.[40] Regrettably, others are apparently more hasty and too easily dismissive. For instance, Derek Parfit concedes that we could in principle have evidence strongly supporting the belief in reincarnation, but then he adds—without supporting argument or even references—that there is no such evidence.[41]

Moreover, we have not yet addressed psychologist Alan Gauld's concern (mentioned at the beginning of this essay): "it is hard to see what . . . could possibly count as distinguishing between Jones having survived the death of his body (though we don't understand how) and its being now and again transiently *as if* he had survived it (though again we can't make sense of it)."[42] We cannot now consider this in great detail, because if we opt for the "as if" interpretation of survival cases, in the best of them we have no choice but to adopt an interpretation positing impressive psychic functioning among the living. To answer Gauld's question, then, we must evaluate the relative merits of super-psi and survivalist interpretations of the evidence. And of course, how we decide between those two options—both of which many take to be unsavory—is a complex matter, and I can only refer readers to my book *Immortal Remains.*

However, a different sort of point can be made now, about what is at stake conceptually if we feel pulled in the direction of accepting postmortem survival. My view du jour is similar to that expressed by philosopher Terence Penelhum.[43] Penelhum has suggested that because bodily continuity would be broken in any genuine case of postmortem survival, it becomes "optional" whether we say that the premortem and postmortem individuals are identical. Prior to that decision, it is neither true nor false that those individuals are identical. And in that case, it is up to us to decide whether to identify them on the basis of some kind of psychological continuity.

[39] Braude, *Immortal Remains.*

[40] See, e.g., Almeder, *Death and Personal Survival;* C. D. Broad, *Lectures on Psychical Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); David Ray Griffin, *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Raymond Martin, "Survival of Bodily Death: A Question of Values," in Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, eds., *Self, Cosmos, God* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), 141–56; and Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death.*

[41] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 227–28.

[42] Gauld, "Philosophy and Survival," 458.

[43] Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

If I understand Penelhum, the principal difference between us on this matter connects with issues noted in my earlier discussion about the deep fuzziness and context- and assumption-relativity of language. In my view, it is *always* up to us to decide what counts when making identifications (i.e., even when there is bodily continuity), and every one of those decisions is appropriate only against a background of needs and interests. In some cases, it is correct to say that I am not the same person I was as an infant, or before my first divorce. In other (possibly more artificial, philosophical) contexts, it would be correct to say that I *am* the same person. Neither claim has a privileged status conceptually, and the phrase "same person" has no preferred meaning. The fact that in some cases we decide very easily what to say indicates relatively little about the cases in question and more about us, our patterns of life, and various of our shared presuppositions.

And besides, as the literature on personal identity demonstrates all too clearly, it is difficult to figure out what to say even in a rigorously philosophical context. Depending on what philosophical enterprise we are engaged in, it is not a straightforward matter either to decide what a person is or to conclude that I am the same person now that I was as an infant. Like the principle of identity discussed earlier, these matters hinge on a variety of other philosophical decisions that are equally open to revision or rejection. For example, if we take persons to be real things, we might then consider whether they are the sorts of things that come into being and pass away. And then we might consider the consequences of taking those processes to be nongradual, unlike the process of becoming a human being.[44] A different set of issues hinges on how we handle Leibniz's Law: if two things are identical, then all properties of one are properties of the other, and vice versa. On certain interpretations of Leibniz's Law (and also on a decision to consider person-stages as persons), we might want to say that I had no youth. Alternatively, we might want to distinguish different senses of "identity."[45] Or we might want to distinguish different kinds of properties—for example, tensed and tenseless (i.e., time-variable and time-stable) properties—and consider different ways to reformulate Leibniz's Law with those distinctions in mind.[46] Or we might opt for something like the four-dimensionalism of David Lewis, according to which human persons are four-dimensional objects occupying specific regions of space-time.[47] But of course, once we are in this

[44] Roderick. M. Chisholm, "Coming into Being and Passing Away: Can the Metaphysician Help?" in John Donnelly, ed., *Language, Metaphysics, and Death* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978), 13–24.

[45] Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Loose and Popular and the Strict and Philosophical Senses of Identity," in Norman S. Care and Robert H. Grimm, eds., *Perception and Personal Identity* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1969), 82–106.

[46] For an interesting discussion along those lines, see George I. Mavrodes, "The Life Everlasting and the Bodily Criterion of Identity," *Noûs* 11 (1977): 27–39.

[47] David Lewis, "Survival and Identity," in Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 55–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular conceptual thicket, we have to contend with puzzles noted at least since the Middle Ages,[48] puzzles that reveal (once again) how philosophical problems cannot be solved—or even formulated—independently of a network of other complex philosophical decisions. And this is merely the tip of the iceberg. The literature on the nature of persons and identity is huge, and the range of approaches to the issues is daunting.

My suspicion, then, is that determining whether someone has survived bodily death is not radically different from determining identity in more familiar cases. Granted, due to the absence of (at least overt) bodily continuity,[49] there are empirical concerns in postmortem cases that typically do not arise in ordinary situations. And postmortem cases bump up against entrenched assumptions that more ordinary cases seldom threaten. In all cases, however, our decisions about identity turn on a variety of other assumptions, none of which are either privileged or immune from philosophical doubt. And even in ordinary cases where we rely on bodily continuity, we can raise interesting questions—not even touched on here—about what we mean by "same body" or similar locutions.[50]

If there is a big lesson to be learned from apparent postmortem cases about the so-called problem of identity, it applies both to the metaphysical problem of determining what personal identity consists in and to the epistemological problem of deciding whether two things are identical. In all cases, our judgments rest on a complex network of interrelated, often unexamined, and obviously controversial assumptions. Thus, it may be that the concepts of identity and personal identity are so deeply and inevitably flawed, system- or context-dependent, or arbitrary that we should simply abandon the quest for a generally satisfactory consensus on what the issues are—much less a one-size-fits-all solution to either our metaphysical or our epistemological concerns. Or, more likely, it may be that our varying everyday procedures for deciding identity are fine as they are and can (perhaps with occasional hesitancy) be extended to many (though not all) exotic cases. And that may allow us to end the interminable philosophical debates over identity and resolve them by the same means that work satisfactorily in life. In that case, there really is no *problem* of identity. There are only problem cases.

Philosophy, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

[48] See, e.g., John Buridan, *Sophisms on Meaning and Truth,* trans. Kermit Scott (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1966).

[49] By "at least overt" I intend to leave room for varieties of resurrectionist theories (see, e.g., Corcoran, "Physical Persons and Postmortem Survival"; and Merricks, "How to Live Forever without Saving Your Soul"), not to mention more exotic theories positing astral or secondary bodies (which, as C. D. Broad has argued reasonably, may not be as outlandish as many unreflectively suppose—see Broad, *Lectures on Psychical Research*).

[50] For a sample of the relevant issues, see, e.g., Harold W. Noonan, ed., *Identity* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1993); and David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250505209X Published online by Cambridge University Press