

# **The Next Phase of the Journey:**

## **The Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death**

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## Introduction

In many ways, I am a typical academic and intellectual. I'm a psychologist who gives lectures and supervises PhD students. I conduct research, publish papers in academic journals and give presentations about my research at conferences. However, I have come to realize that there are some ways in which I am considered unconventional, and that I have certain views which my colleagues find puzzling.

A few years ago, I was at the annual conference of the British Psychological Society, having lunch with a few other psychologists. We were browsing through the schedule of events, and someone noticed a presentation on the psychology of religious belief, which led to a discussion about religion.

At one point, one of my lunch companions said, "Isn't it amazing that some people still believe in an afterlife, in this age of science and rationality?"

"I'm open-minded about the idea of an afterlife," I responded. "In fact, I think it's highly likely that there is an afterlife."

There was silence for a few seconds, with knives and forks frozen in mid-air. "But – I didn't know you were religious," one of my companions replied. "So you're a Christian?"

I shook my head. "I'm not religious at all. The only times I've ever been inside a church are for weddings and funerals."

"But...How can you believe in an afterlife without being religious?"

"I don't *believe* in an afterlife – I've just looked at the evidence and think it's highly probable that there is one."

"*Evidence?* How can there be any evidence? There can't be an afterlife. It's impossible!"

My companions were genuinely shocked by my comments. And over the years, I've found that their attitude is typical. In the world of academia, it's taken for granted that rational people don't believe in an afterlife. It's assumed that human consciousness – our inner thoughts and feelings, including our sense of being "somebody" – is produced by the brain, and that when the brain ceases to function, consciousness will end. To believe otherwise would mean that there was a non-physical part of our being that continues to exist when the body dies. But surely, we know that life can be entirely explained in terms of physical processes, without concepts of a soul or spirit?

Most intellectuals view the idea of an afterlife as a pre-scientific superstition, like the belief in fairies or witchcraft. Surely, it's as irrational to believe in an afterlife as it is to believe that the world was created in seven days, or that illnesses are caused by evil spirits? Surely freedom from illusory concepts of an afterlife is one of the victories of the Enlightenment movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when scientists and philosophers realized that the Biblical view of the world was false, and freed human beings from the oppressive dogma of religion?

However, I don't believe that this is the case. In my view, it is completely rational to accept the idea that human consciousness can survive permanent bodily death. To begin with, there are some theoretical and philosophical reasons why we should be open to the possibility of survival, which contradict the assumption that "there can't be" life after death. But most importantly by far, it's a question of evidence. Rationality means evaluating evidence and reaching a conclusion based on that evidence. And I believe that anyone who evaluates the evidence for survival with an open mind will find the evidence convincing.

In this essay, I will present a case for the survival of human consciousness beyond death – based on what I believe to be the best evidence – that I hope would convince even the psychologists I met over lunch at the conference.

### *The Approach of this Essay*

My case for the survival of consciousness beyond physical death consists of two main lines of argument. In the first part of the essay, I take a theoretical approach, explaining why we can't exclude the possibility of survival from our view of reality. My main point here is that the possibility of the survival of consciousness largely hinges on whether consciousness is wholly produced by brain activity. Obviously, if consciousness is wholly produced by – or is wholly equivalent to – brain activity, then it will cease when brain activity ceases, in which case it can't survive the death of the physical body. However, I will show that there are many reasons for doubting that the brain is the source of consciousness. Of course, consciousness is *associated* with the brain, but I will suggest that it is much more likely that consciousness comes *through* the brain rather than directly from it. This would mean that the death of the physical body doesn't automatically mean the end of consciousness.

In the main part of the essay, where I summarize the best evidence for survival, I focus on evidence from five areas. First, I examine the evidence from near-death experiences (NDEs), when people appear to "die" for a short time before returning to life. Second, I

examine the evidence from after-death communications (ADCs), when ordinary people have unexpected encounters with or communications from deceased individuals. This can occur in a variety of contexts – for example, when recently deceased people appear to distant friends or relatives (who are not yet aware of their death), or when dying people appear to encounter relatives who have previously died.

Third, I examine another type of after-death communication – not when deceased people communicate with the living, but when living human beings communicate with the deceased. This is when mediums appear to contact deceased people, and relay information from them. Doubtless, some people who profess to be mediums are simply charlatans (or self-deluded individuals) who deceive vulnerable bereaved people. However, there are some highly proficient mediums who are able to elicit remarkably detailed and accurate information about deceased individuals which can't be explained in any conventional way. As we will see, some mediums have demonstrated these abilities in tightly controlled scientific studies.

Fourth, we examine the evidence from reincarnation, looking mainly at the research on young children who provide very specific and detailed accounts of their previous lives, and take on personality traits and even physical traces of their previous personalities. Then I conclude with some indications – not evidence exactly - from my own research into “spiritual awakening.” This is when people undergo an expansion and intensification of awareness, often following a period of intense psychological turmoil or suffering. They shift into a higher-functioning state, in which they feel that their consciousness has “opened up,” giving them a wider and deeper vision of reality. One frequent aspect of their transformation is a conviction that physical death doesn't mean the end of human consciousness.

In my view, all of these strands of evidence are significant in themselves. Considered objectively, each one of them should be sufficient to open anyone's mind to the possibility of life after death. But of course – as with any type of case, be it legal or academic – the full force of my argument comes from the combination of all factors.

Another “legal” aspect of my case is that each strand of evidence is supported by eyewitness testimonies. There are testimonies from people who have had near-death experiences, from others who have had apparent communications with deceased people, from children who carry over memories and traits from previous lives, and so on. As we will see, all these testimonies are remarkably consistent, suggesting that we are dealing with a real phenomenon.

It is significant enough that there are theoretical reasons for being open to the idea of life after death, but when these reasons are supported by such a wide variety of empirical evidence – including so many consistent testimonies - then it all adds up to a very compelling case.

### *My Own Perspective*

I find it easy to understand many people's resistance to the idea of an afterlife because I used to share it. My upbringing in the 1970s and 80s was completely secular. My parents never talked about Jesus or God or took me to church. Through my education and my parents and peers, I absorbed a materialist worldview. I took it for granted that I was nothing more than the physical stuff of my body and brain, and that my thoughts were just projections of my brain. I learned that the universe functions according to rigid physical laws, like a giant machine, and that that human behavior is determined by tiny units called genes. And of course, I adopted the assumption that there is no life after death. This is the standard materialist view of reality that has become dominant in modern secular cultures such as the US and Europe.

In my youth, I was interested in philosophy, and thought of myself as an existentialist. Existentialism suggests that life is essentially absurd and meaningless. There is no God, there is no life after death, and it is a mere accident that we were born. It doesn't really matter how we spend our few short decades on the surface of this planet, before we return to the nothingness from which we came. This sounds extremely bleak – which it is – but there is a positive aspect in that the absurdity of life confers *freedom*. We have the freedom to choose how we live, and paradoxically, this freedom brings a kind of meaning.

One of my favorite philosophers was Friedrich Nietzsche, a forerunner of the existentialists. Nietzsche famously proclaimed the “death of God.” Living in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, he was fiercely opposed to Christianity, especially to the idea of an afterlife. He believed that the basis of Christianity was “disgust with life” and “hatred of ‘the world’”<sup>1</sup> and felt that the concept of an afterlife exemplified this. He believed that an afterlife devalued this world, by treating our present life as a temporary sojourn before our *real* eternal life began at death. Nietzsche felt that by rejecting the afterlife we could live more fully in this life. We could savor and celebrate the world and concentrate on achieving our potential.

I completely agreed with Nietzsche. I was quite happy with the idea that death is the end. I felt that death brought meaning to my life, creating a sense of urgency that stopped me procrastinating and being lazy. It made life seem precious and beautiful. As Nietzsche recognized, it also focused my attention on the wonder and strangeness of the world. For me, nothing could have been more boring than the idea of living for eternity.

Later I began to feel that the existentialists were too pessimistic and developed an interest in spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and Indian Vedanta and Yoga. My favorite book was no longer Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* but the ancient Indian spiritual text *The Upanishads*. Such spiritual traditions imply that our present "normal" state of awareness is limited and doesn't provide a reliable picture of reality. They also offer practices and paths to expand our awareness of reality.

This meant that my view of the afterlife evolved slightly. From a spiritual point of view, I could conceive of a *kind* of afterlife, in which death still meant the end of the individual personality but led to a union with a universal consciousness or spiritual force. This fitted well with the spiritual idea that the ego-self is not our real identity. At death we cast off the superficial shell of the ego and our true formless nature merges into an ocean of pure consciousness. There is a satisfying circularity about this process: at birth, we emerge from the ocean of consciousness, taking on our physical form and identity, and at death we let go of our physical form and identity, and return home to the ocean.

However, in a way this kind of afterlife isn't so different from the existentialist or materialist views. It still points to the end of our individual personality. Whatever happens when we merge with universal spirit, we won't actually be conscious of it ourselves, because the self will no longer exist. We will be like waves that have broken and merged with the ocean again. This type of spiritual interpretation of an afterlife was also quite amenable to me, since it still gave me a sense that time was limited, and so provided me with a sense of motivation and meaning.

However, about 15 years ago, I began to seriously study the evidence for survival. While researching cases of spiritual transformation, I met people who had undergone near-death experiences. While close to death due to an accident or medical emergency, they found themselves out of their bodies, looking down from above. In some cases, they reported details (such as about their own operations) which were later verified. They talked about encountering deceased relatives and seeing "reviews" of the events of their lives. I also led a research project on the transformational effects of bereavement, in which some participants reported communications from deceased loved ones, which led me to collect more examples

of after-death communications. I began to read research studies on high-level mediums, who relayed incredibly specific information that couldn't be explained away in terms of fraud or coincidence, or even in terms of psi abilities such as telepathy or precognition.

As a result, I realized that I had no choice but to seriously consider the idea of *personal* survival. I had to accept the idea that it wasn't just consciousness in general which survived the death of the body, but *individual* human consciousness.

However, even now, I am a somewhat reluctant advocate of the idea of survival. In some ways, I would prefer it if my individual personality *didn't* continue after death. I'm still attracted to the idea that life is a journey with a definite conclusion, and that one day – at the end of the journey – I will sink into oblivion. It seems like a fitting end to the journey of life.

Another issue is that the idea of an afterlife creates uncertainty. In the famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet contemplates suicide but decides against it due to fear of what comes afterwards. He describes death as the “Undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns” and states that this fear of the unknown “puzzles the will and makes us rather bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of.”<sup>2</sup> My research has convinced me that there is nothing to fear about the afterlife, but I would still prefer a definite end. It's a little like reaching the end of a round the world boat trip and then discovering that you haven't reached the end after all. There is another phase to the journey that no one told you about, and you don't really know what this entails or where it will take you.

However, this is the essence of true science: the willingness to revise your views in the face of evidence, no matter how strange or unpalatable it may seem.

### *Beyond Religion*

Before we begin our investigation proper, I would like to make a point about religion. It's important to detach the idea of life after death from a religious background. In fact, this is another reason why many intellectuals and academics resist the idea – because they find it impossible to separate life after death from religion. Believing that they are fighting a battle against religion, many materialists see the afterlife as simply one of the many absurd religious superstitions that they are attempting to dispel. As rational human beings, they see it as their duty to free others from such irrational beliefs.

However, it is perfectly possible to believe in an afterlife without being religious. In fact, recent surveys have shown that such a perspective is not uncommon. A 2016 UK survey

into religious attitudes found that that a quarter of people who called themselves agnostic believed in life after death.<sup>3</sup> A similar US survey in 2013 found that 32 per cent of those who identified themselves as agnostics and atheists believed in an afterlife of some form.<sup>4</sup>

I think this is a promising sign, in that it suggests a movement beyond the belief systems of both religion and materialism. Many intellectuals believe that there is a simple binary choice between religion and materialism. Either you believe in heaven and hell, or you believe that there is no life after death. Either you believe in a God who overlooks and controls the events of the world, or you believe that life is random and meaningless. But this is a false dichotomy. There is an alternative to these two worldviews, which in my view is more rational than either.

In fact, strictly speaking there are *lots of* alternatives, although we could group them all together under the umbrella of “post-materialism.” This includes philosophical approaches such as idealism (which itself has many varieties), panpsychism, panspiritism or dual-aspect monism. Such approaches dispute the fundamental tenets of the materialist belief-system. They don’t believe that the primary reality of the world is physical stuff. They don’t believe that human beings are just biological machines. They suggest that that the primary reality of the universe is not matter, but consciousness or spirit. They believe that human consciousness can’t be reduced to brain activity but derives from the fundamental consciousness of the universe. In contrast to materialism, post-materialist approaches allow for the possibility of the survival of human consciousness beyond the body (even if, in some cases, this is simply survival in an impersonal rather than individual sense).<sup>5</sup>

### **Part One: Consciousness Beyond the Brain**

Let’s begin by examining whether it is theoretically possible for consciousness to survive the death of the physical body, based on what we know about consciousness and the human brain. Is it possible that, after death, we could still have a sense of identity, with our own individual thoughts and feelings?

As noted above, many people’s opposition to survival is based on the assumption that consciousness is produced by – or equivalent to - brain activity. If this assumption can be proven, or is at least strongly supported by evidence, then we can reject the possibility of survival, since our consciousness will cease when the brain stops functioning at death. On the other hand, if the assumption can’t be proven, and is even shown to be flawed or false, then it would open up the possibility of some form of survival.



## *The Search for Consciousness*

Francis Crick was one of the most eminent scientists of the twentieth century. In 1953, along with James Watson, he broke the genetic code by discovering the structure of the DNA molecule. Later in his scientific career, Crick turned his attention to what seemed to him the biggest remaining problem in science: consciousness.

Crick fully expected the riddle of consciousness to be solved within a few years, with the help of the latest brain-scanning and imaging technology. However, consciousness proved to be much harder to crack than the genetic code. Crick devoted the last two decades of his life to the riddle of consciousness but made frustratingly little progress. He made a number of suggestions - for example, that consciousness was related to the brain's visual cortex, to short term memory or "some form of serial attentional mechanism"<sup>6</sup> - but none were confirmed by evidence.

Other researchers took up the mantle from Crick, determined to find out how the brain produces consciousness. But even now, in 2021, little progress has been made in this direction, despite decades of intensive research and theorizing. It is still not clear how the neuronal networks of the brain relate to consciousness. Many further suggestions have been made - for example, that consciousness is related to interactions between the cortical layer and other deeper layers of the brain<sup>7</sup> or is linked to both the temporal lobes and a part of the frontal lobes called the cingulate gyrus.<sup>8</sup>

The varying nature of these suggestions tells its own story. When very little consensus exists in explanations, it implies that the causal assumption underlying the explanations (in this case that the brain produces consciousness) is doubtful. We can make a legal analogy here: when witness statements are wildly varying, with no consensus between them, then they should all be considered unreliable, leading to the collapse of a case. At any rate, it appears that Crick's confidence in the possibility of solving the mystery of consciousness was misplaced.

## *Mismatches between the Brain and Consciousness*

If brain activity equals conscious experience, we would expect to find a direct and consistent relationship between them, in the same way that there is a direct and consistent relationship between the internal electronic workings of a computer and the images and functions that appear on its screen. However, the relationship between brain activity and conscious experience is somewhat erratic – in some cases, even puzzling and paradoxical.

Some discrepancies are relatively minor. For example, many scientists assume that our conscious experiences – our feelings, thoughts, sensations and so on – are produced when brain cells “fire” in certain parts of the brain. However, the relationship between conscious experiences and the firing of neurons is inconsistent. Sometimes intense experiences arise without any significant degree of neuronal firing. As neuroscientist Giulio Tononi has stated, the “firing of the same cortical neurons may correlate with consciousness at certain times, but not at others.”<sup>9</sup> (Cortical neurons are simply the brain cells in the cerebral cortex, the largest part of the brain.) As Tononi has also noted, brain cells fire almost as much in deep sleep as in the wakeful state. They also fire significantly during epileptic absence seizures (when a person blanks out) even though consciousness is lost.

Other findings emphasize this discrepancy even more strongly. In 2007, the medical journal *The Lancet* reported the case of a 44-year-old French man who had managed to live a normal life despite the fact that there was a huge hole in his skull, where most of the brain normally lies. For the first time in his life, the man had a brain scan, which showed that there was a huge, fluid-filled space in his skull. His brain tissue was compacted in a thin sheet around the edges of his skull. He was estimated to have around ten per cent of normal brain tissue. The man was married with two children and worked as a civil servant. Up till that point, there was never any indication of anything abnormal about him.<sup>10</sup>

Although this is quite a rare phenomenon, many similar cases have been found. A 24-year-old Chinese woman had the entire cerebellum missing from her brain. (The cerebellum is usually seen as the most important part of the brain, containing about half its neurons.) Although the woman had some minor ailments - for example, slurred speech and an unsteady walk - she was married with a daughter and had lived a normal life, never suspecting there was anything seriously wrong with her.<sup>11</sup> A man had the entire left hemisphere of his brain removed at the age of 5 to control his epileptic seizures but grew up with higher than normal levels of intelligence and language skills.<sup>12</sup> Other people have been found to function normally with as little as 5 per cent of the normal amount of brain tissue.<sup>13</sup>

If one takes the conventional view that consciousness is directly produced by (or is equivalent to) brain activity, these cases are very difficult to explain. It is true that the brain is very flexible. After brain injuries such as a stroke, the brain sometimes reorganizes itself, creating new connections and pathways to the undamaged parts of the brain. But it is difficult to explain how people who lack so much brain matter (and so many brain cells) can be conscious in the same way as others. Neuroscientists sometimes compare the brain to an incredibly complex computer, but imagine a computer that only 5 per cent of its normal circuitry, or with essential parts of its hardware missing. How could that computer function possibly function in a normal way?

This suggests that the brain isn't analogous to a computer after all.

### *Negative Correlations*

Sometimes the mismatch between brain activity and conscious experience becomes so extreme that there appears to be a *negative* correlation between them. In some unusual states, a very high intensity of conscious experience seems to be associated with an extremely low level of brain activity.

One example is when coma patients have intense conscious experiences. Eben Alexander was in a coma for six days due to an acute bacterial infection in his brain. His medical notes stated that his brain cavity was swollen with pus, and that there was severe damage to his cerebral cortex and brain stem. His doctors believed he had little chance of survival and that if he did, he would never recover normal brain functioning. The notes also stated that he was extremely close to death, and in a state of deep unconsciousness, with a bare minimum of brain activity. Despite this, Alexander underwent a series of remarkable life-changing conscious experiences and felt that he was intensely awake and aware in a way that he had never been before.<sup>14</sup>

I investigated a similar case of a student called Max, who was put into a medically induced coma after a brain seizure. While deeply unconscious with minimal brain activity, Max also became intensely conscious. He had an out of body experience in which he “observed doctors and nurses regularly checking my vital signs and running a variety of tests on my unresponsive body. I witnessed them adjusting wires attached to what I can only describe as a metal helmet connected to a monitor and secondly to inject my stomach with an unknown substance.” Following this, Max became aware of bright light, which “engulfed

both my physical and non-physical self...My only awareness was of the brightness of the light, filling me with peace and nourishment.”<sup>15</sup>

Then Max met his great-grandmother, who had died during his childhood. She was Greek, and only spoke that language, so that as a child he had never been able to speak to her directly. She spoke Greek to him now too, but somehow Max was able to understand her. Most strikingly, his great-grandmother told him information about his grandparents and father that he later verified with his family. She described her upbringing in Greece, told him how she had met his great grandfather and talked about their lives together, including their suffering during and after the Second World War.

Apart from the other remarkable aspects of Max’s experience, it is difficult to understand how such an intense experience can occur in a situation of such low brain activity. If there was a direct relationship between the brain and consciousness, we would expect both Eben Alexander’s and Max’s conscious experience to be very limited. Such a low level of brain activity should only give rise to very vague and confused mental experience. But the opposite seems to be the case.

Besides comas, there are many cases of intense conscious experiences occurring while people are when they are deeply unconscious under anesthetic, or even when they are clinically “dead” for a short time following a medical emergency. For example, such experiences are common following cardiac arrest. Once a person’s heart has stopped beating, their brain shuts down quickly, within 15-20 seconds, resulting in a flat electroencephalogram (EEG). And yet, as we will see in the next section (where we discuss such near-death experiences in detail), it is common for people to report very intense conscious experiences between the shutting down of their brain and their resuscitation. Clearly, if consciousness is purely the result of brain activity, this wouldn’t be possible. Even if there were some very minimal type of brain activity during such experiences – so minimal that it isn’t detectable by technology – this still leaves the problem of how such minimal brain activity could give rise to such intense conscious experiences.

If consciousness is simply a product or a function of the brain, none of this seems to make any sense.

## *The Hard Problem*

There is an important philosophical aspect to this discussion too. If you held a brain in your hand, you would find it to be a soggy clump of grey matter, a bit like putty, and about as heavy as a bag of flour. I don't want to denigrate the brain, which contains about a hundred billion cells which interact in incredibly complex ways. Many neuroscientists admit that the brain is so complex that we have barely begun to understand its functioning. Nevertheless, the brain is just *physical stuff*. How could this physical stuff give rise to the richness and depth of your conscious experience? As the philosopher Colin McGinn has put it, to say that the brain produces consciousness is like saying that water can turn into wine.<sup>16</sup>

Some philosophers have suggested that consciousness naturally emerges in living beings once their brains reach a certain level of complexity.<sup>17</sup> However, when a property emerges from the components of a system, the property is usually inherent within the system's components. But there is nothing about conscious experience that can be traced back to the physical stuff of the brain. At the most microcosmic level, the brain consists of sub-atomic particles, which have qualities like mass, spin and charge. These qualities don't relate to the qualities of consciousness, such as thought, taste, pain or anxiety. In other words, the idea that consciousness emerges from complexity is magical thinking. In another of Colin McGinn's analogies, "You might as well assert that that numbers emerge from biscuits or ethics from rhubarb."<sup>18</sup>

The Australian philosopher David Chalmers has referred to this as the "hard problem."<sup>19</sup> As Chalmers sees it, there are some aspects of the relationship between cognitive activity and brain activity that are quite well understood. For example, we have a fairly good idea about the brain functions involved in memory, attention and information processing. But these are just the "easy problems." The problem of how the brain might give rise to consciousness is on a completely different scale. The "hard problem" may not be soluble at all.

This has also been described as the "explanatory gap." Even if we did somehow manage to precisely identify the neural networks associated with consciousness, what would this tell us? There would still be a gulf between the physical stuff of the brain and our conscious experience.

All of the above casts doubt on the idea that human consciousness is produced by – or equivalent to – brain activity. In fact, more and more philosophers and scientists are beginning to doubt this assumption, as a result of the issues I’ve summarized. As the psychologist Edward Kelly has recently written, “We have no understanding whatsoever of how consciousness could be produced by physical events in the brains, and recent theoretical work in the philosophy of mind has convinced many that we can never achieve one.”<sup>20</sup>

There are so many anomalies that we need to consider other possibilities. This obviously doesn’t mean that there is no association between the brain and consciousness. There clearly is a strong link between them. After all, my conscious experience can be radically changed when my brain functioning is altered by drugs, or if I have a brain injury. But in view of the lack of direct and consistent link between the brain and consciousness, we should consider the possibility that consciousness comes *through* the brain, rather than directly from it. Perhaps, as many post-materialist philosophers have suggested, consciousness may not be just a quality that is produced by brains, but a quality which is in some way fundamental to the universe. Perhaps our own consciousness *derives from* this universal consciousness, with the brain perhaps acting as a mediator, or receiver.

For this essay, the most important point is that, since we can’t say with any confidence that consciousness equates with brain activity, we can’t say with any confidence that consciousness will cease with the death of the physical body. In other words, we can’t rule out the possibility that consciousness survives the death of the body, although we would still have to clarify whether this means impersonal or personal survival.

And now that we have established the possibility of survival, we will now consider the evidence for it.

## **Part Two: Near-Death Experiences**

Since we have touched on the topic already, let’s begin with near-death experiences. They are also a good place to start because they incorporate different aspects of the hard evidence for survival. As well as indicating that consciousness can continue in the absence of brain activity, they often feature after-death communications.

I’ll begin with an eyewitness testimony. About twenty years ago, I worked with a college tutor called John who had had a heart transplant a few years earlier. During the transplant operation, John suddenly found himself awake and alert, looking down on his own body from above, observing the surgeon and his assistants performing the procedure. He

could hear classical music in the operating theatre. He felt himself floating further away from his body, into a darkness that felt strangely peaceful, towards a bright light in the distance. Then he encountered his father, who had died a few years earlier. His father seemed surprised to see him, and told him, “You shouldn’t be here - it’s not your time yet.” Then John felt himself moving back down towards his body, and lost consciousness. The next thing he knew, he was awake in recovery.

Soon afterwards, when the surgeon arrived to check on his progress, John said to him, “I liked the classical music you were playing in the operating theatre.” The surgeon was amazed, since John had obviously been deeply unconscious during the operation.

John wasn’t sure what to make of his experience. He was a scientifically minded person and the idea that he could float outside his body and witness events while unconscious didn’t fit with his view of reality. At the same time, he was certain that the experience was too real to be a hallucination. I told him that such experiences were by no means uncommon, and had been intensively studied, and gave him a book about near-death experiences. He seemed relieved to find that he wasn’t alone, and that he wasn’t crazy.

### *The Characteristics of NDEs*

In popular discourse, the term near-death experience (or NDE) is sometimes used to refer to any close brush with death - perhaps due to an accident, a drug overdose or an illness. But in the strictest use of the term, a near-death experience is when a person appears to be clinically dead for a short period. Their heart stops beating, their brain registers no sign of activity, and the other vital signs indicate death. Despite this, they report a continuation of consciousness.

The core features of an NDE are as follows: there is a feeling of separation from the body, sometimes with a humming or whistling sound. There is a journey through a dark passage or tunnel towards a place of light. There is a feeling of serenity and intense well-being, a sense of calmness and wholeness, which is often so pleasant that some people are reluctant to return to their bodies, and even feel disappointed when they regain consciousness. Often people meet deceased relatives (as with John) or non-human beings, who they sometimes describe as “beings of light.” In a smaller proportion of cases, people have a “life review experience” in which the events of their life are replayed. Although it is unusual for all of these characteristics to occur in a single near-death experience, they typically feature most of them.

Throughout the experience, people feel that their senses have become heightened. In contrast to dreams or hallucinations, the experience feels much more real than our ordinary experience. There is also a sense of being outside time. Even though a person may only be unconscious for a few seconds in normal time, they may undergo a complex succession of experiences that may appear to last for hours. In addition, people report powerful feelings of connection, as if they are no longer separate beings but one with the universe.

As the above shows, NDEs are normally extremely positive experiences. As one person who had an NDE during a heart attack commented, “There is no comparable place in physical reality to experience such total awareness. The love, protection, joy, giving, sharing and being that I experienced in the Light at that moment was absolutely overwhelming and pure in its essence.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a woman who had an NDE during childbirth said that the most striking aspect of the experience was “the absolute peace, the oneness, the completeness.”<sup>22</sup>

However, NDEs can sometimes be negative. Occasionally, people feel frightened when they find themselves out of their bodies, or when they meet deceased relatives. Sometimes they find the life review experience distressing, when they relive sad or tragic events. Some people experience the darkness of the NDE as a void and feel a sense of desolation and aloneness. In a small minority of cases, NDEs may feature “hellish” visions of suffering people and malevolent beings.<sup>23</sup>

One recent study of 123 NDEs found that 14 per cent featured some of these negative elements.<sup>24</sup> It isn’t clear why some people have negative NDEs. It doesn’t seem to be connected to different personality types, or whether a person has lived a “good” or “bad” life. However, it is significant that negative NDEs feature the same core elements as positive NDEs, such as an out of body experience, a journey through darkness and encounters with deceased relatives. What differs is the emotional atmosphere.

NDEs are especially common following cardiac arrests. In 2014, an international study (led by Dr. Sam Parnia at the State University of New York) of more than 2000 cardiac arrest patients found that 40 per cent reported some form of awareness during the period when their hearts had stopped beating and their brains had shut down.<sup>25</sup> In a similar 2001 study by the Dutch Cardiologist Pim van Lommel - who began to investigate the experiences after so many of his patients talked about them following resuscitation - 64 out of 344 cardiac patients reported NDEs.<sup>26</sup> More generally, the research of Bruce Greyson has suggested that between 10-20 per cent of patients who are close to death have NDEs.<sup>27</sup>

So as I told my colleague John, near-death experiences are by no means uncommon.



## *The Significance of NDEs*

There are two main aspects of NDEs that support the notion that human consciousness can survive permanent bodily death. The first is that they suggest that consciousness is not directly produced by the brain and can continue without brain activity. Admittedly, in NDEs it is not clear *how long* this consciousness continues for. After all, in normal time, NDEs only a few minutes at the most, so they don't prove that consciousness continues indefinitely without the brain. This might even fit with the "spiritual" view of the afterlife I described above. Perhaps the individual consciousness that was transmitted through the brain sustains itself briefly after death, like an echo. Then it slowly dissolves away, losing its association with the individual but merging with universal consciousness.

However, there is another aspect of NDEs that supports the idea of personal rather than impersonal survival. This is the fact that NDEs often feature encounters with deceased relatives and friends. According to Bruce Greyson, almost a half of near-death experiencers reported meeting someone who had died.<sup>28</sup>

On the surface, you might think that these encounters can easily be explained as hallucinations or wishful thinking. However, there are some aspects of the encounters that defy such an interpretation. Firstly, occasionally deceased relatives or friends provide information that was unknown to the experiencer, and later verified. Max's story in the previous section is a good example – his great-grandmother told him details about her life and her father's life which were later confirmed by his father. In addition, there are cases where the experiencer encounters a deceased relative they had never met during their lives, and whose existence they were unaware of. For example, Pim van Lommel reported an NDE in which a man saw his deceased grandmother with an unknown man. His mother later revealed to him that he was the child of an extra-marital affair, and that his real father had died during World War II. When shown a picture of his real father, he recognized him as the man from the NDE.<sup>29</sup>

There are also cases where the near-death experiencer encounters a relative or friend who has died very recently, without their knowledge. Bruce Greyson reported the case of a seriously ill man, whose nurse told him that she was celebrating her birthday that weekend. Shortly afterwards, the man had an NDE during a respiratory arrest, and encountered the nurse. She told him that he had to return, and asked him to tell her parents that she loved them, and was sorry she had wrecked her new car. When he returned to life, the man

discovered that the nurse's parents had bought her a sports car for her birthday, which she had crashed, dying from her injuries.<sup>30</sup>

It is also significant – as an additional aspect of NDEs that points to survival – that almost everyone who has an NDE becomes convinced that there is an afterlife. Because NDEs have such a powerful quality of reality, most people are convinced that they have briefly experienced death. And since most NDEs are blissful experiences - so blissful that people are sometimes disappointed to return to their bodies – most people become free of fear of death.

### *Explaining NDEs*

However, what if NDEs are just hallucinations? If they are just an elaborate kind of dream, then obviously all of the points I've made above are invalid, and they can't provide any evidence for the survival of human consciousness beyond the body.

Certainly, there have been many attempts to explain NDEs in materialist terms. In fact, perhaps because they offer such a massive challenge to their worldview, materialist scientists have put forward a dizzying array of different neurological or physiological explanations of NDEs. I don't have space to assess them all in this essay, so I will limit myself to some of the most popular theories.

One of the most popular materialist theories of NDEs is the "Dying Brain Hypothesis." This suggests that NDEs don't actually occur during the period when the person's brain is inactive, but shortly before then, as a hallucination generated by a dying brain. Some of the characteristics of the NDE are – so the theory goes - linked to a lack of oxygen to the brain (cerebral anoxia), while the sense of well-being could be caused by the release of endorphins.<sup>31</sup> A similar theory is that NDEs are hallucinations that happen as a person "comes to," either after a medical procedure as their anesthetic wears off, or as they recover consciousness after a coma.<sup>32</sup>

Another theory is that NDEs are due to the release of psychedelic chemicals in the brain during periods of intense stress. One candidate for this is DMT, a hallucinogenic that our bodies naturally produce. Normally our bodies only produce tiny amounts of DMT – nowhere near enough to produce any changes in consciousness - but the theory is that when a person is close to death, a large amount is suddenly released, creating the experience of the NDE.<sup>33</sup> Other theories of NDEs include: paroxysm of the temporal lobes; a high concentration of carbon dioxide; altered serotonin activity; REM sleep patterns; a

psychological defense mechanism of depersonalization, an electrical surge in the brain at the point of death; and so on.

Although most these theories may initially seem viable, they all collapse under close scrutiny. With regard to the dying brain hypothesis, NDEs are completely different to the normal experiences that occur when the brain is starved of oxygen. Cerebral anoxia brings chaotic, distressing and varied experiences, whereas NDEs are usually very clear and ordered experiences, featuring the same core characteristics (including, in most cases, an intense sense of well-being). The experience of “coming to” after anesthetic or coma is also completely unlike NDEs. In the former, mental functioning is usually very confused and impaired, lacking the clarity and alertness of NDEs.

DMT experiences are certainly more similar to NDEs, often featuring the same spiritual aspects of heightened awareness, feelings of unity, altered time perception, a bright light, and so on. However, DMT experiences do not feature any of the most significant aspects of NDEs, such as encountering deceased relatives, a life review and journeying through a tunnel. There is also no evidence that the brain releases DMT when a person is close to death. (There are similar issues with another psychedelic candidate for NDEs, ketamine.)

Besides these specific points, there are three more general ones that apply to all the theories mentioned above. Firstly, there is the strong subjective sense of reality of NDEs. When we wake up out of a dream, or emerge from drug-induced hallucinations, there is usually a clear sense that we are returning to reality from a delusory state. We usually feel that the dream or hallucination was less authentic and reliable than ordinary consciousness. This also applies to altered states of consciousness that occur in cerebral anoxia or when we come to after an anesthetic. But in NDEs, the opposite is the case. The NDE feels *more real* than our normal state. A review of over 1122 NDEs by Jeffrey Long found that 95.6 per cent of people felt their experiences were “definitely real,” with only three reporting that it was “probably not real” and only one saying it was “definitely not real.”<sup>34</sup> As one person told Bruce Greyson, “Never, ever did I think it might have been a dream. I knew that it was true and real, more real than any other thing I’ve ever known.”<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, there is the powerful transformational effect of NDEs. Once they have accepted and integrated their experiences, people usually undergo a profound transformation. They become less materialistic, more altruistic, with a heightened sense of love and compassion for other people. They feel more connected to nature, and their perception of their surroundings becomes more vivid, with a heightened sense of beauty. Some people

develop new creative abilities, and even psychic abilities. (I interviewed a man named David Ditchfield who started to paint and to compose classical music after his NDE.<sup>36</sup>) Bruce Greyson has found that around a third of near-death experiencers change their careers, while three-quarters make significant changes to their lifestyle and hobbies.<sup>37</sup> Three quarters also said that they felt calmer and more willing to help others after their NDE, while two-thirds reported improved mood and higher self-esteem.

It's truly remarkable that one single experience that usually lasts no more than a few seconds (at least in normal time) can have such a profound, long-lasting transformational effect. And this makes it seem extremely unlikely that NDEs are a hallucination. After all, hallucinations do not have such transformational after-effects. They are usually quickly forgotten. Studies of hallucinatory experiences caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain or temporal lobe stimulation have shown none of the type of transformational effects of NDEs.<sup>38</sup> Psychedelics may sometimes have a transformational effect, but nothing like to the same extent as NDEs.<sup>39</sup>

### *Veridical Perceptions*

The third general argument against the view that NDEs are hallucinations is so important that it deserves to be treated in more detail. It's common for near-death experiencers to report accurate details of what they witnessed while apparently "dead" or unconscious, usually during the initial stage of an out of body experience, when they were floating above their bodies. This argues against the theories that NDEs occur as a person loses consciousness, or as they regain it. These are important eye-witness testimonies that indicate that consciousness can continue in the absence of brain activity.

The report of John's case above includes this feature: he saw the nurses and medics attending to his body, and also heard classical music playing in the operating theater, as confirmed later by the surgeon. NDE researchers refer to such experiences as "veridical" - as in truthful - perceptions. In a review of 93 reports of out of body experience during NDEs, 92 per cent were verified as accurate by external sources.<sup>40</sup>

There are many cases in which NDE patients have provided remarkably specific observations which were later verified by the medical professionals present during procedures. There are so many well-documented examples that it is difficult to know which to choose. A recently published study of NDEs called *The Self Does not Die* contains over

100 cases.<sup>41</sup> Again, I am limited by space here, so let me simply summarize one of the most remarkable cases reported in that book.

The case featured a man from New England called Al Sullivan who had an emergency heart operation at the age of 56. During the operation, he became conscious, and felt himself rise out of his body. He saw himself lying on a table, covered by light blue sheets. He could see the incision that had been made to reach his chest cavity, with his heart inside. His chest was being held open by metal clamps. Al recognized the surgeon he had met before the operation, who he saw - to his surprise - “flapping” his arms as if trying to fly. The surgeon was standing near his opened chest, while two other surgeons were busy working on his leg. (This confused Al, until he learned later that leg veins are often used in heart bypass surgery.) After this, Al became aware of powerful yellow light and intense feelings of joy and love and saw deceased members of his family.

When he was able to speak after the operation, Al told his cardiologist, Anthony LaSala, about the experience. LaSala was initially skeptical, until Al talked about the surgeon flapping his elbows. This was a peculiar habit of the surgeon, whose name was Hiroyoshi Takata. When not operating, Takata would rest his palms flat on his chest, and direct his assistants by pointing with his elbows. He did this to avoid touching anything with his sterile hands. LaSala was amazed that Al had mentioned this and told the surgeon about it.

In 1997, the NDE investigator Bruce Greyson interviewed both Anthony LaSala and Hiroyoshi Takata. Both confirmed that Takata had a habit of flapping his elbows to give instructions, and LaSala stated that he was unaware of any other surgeons who did this. LaSala also confirmed that Al’s eyes had been taped shut during the operation and that there was a drape over his head, so that he would have been unable to see the surgeon’s movements even if he had been conscious. Another investigative team confirmed that Sullivan had deeply unconscious under anesthetic at the time that surgeon made the flapping movements. Later, Hiroyoshi Takata himself commented on the incident, noting that although he had heard other doctors talk about anesthetic wearing off during operations so that patients could hear conversations, “I have never encountered one in which the patient describes such details of the operation as if he/she saw the process. Frankly, I don’t know how this case can be accounted for. But since this really happened, I have to accept it as a fact.”<sup>42</sup>

Is it possible that people could just be imagining the scenes of their own operations, based on stories they’ve heard or TV programs they’ve seen? This seems unlikely, since the reports often contain specific details that were completely unknown to the patients beforehand, such as the surgeons working on Al’s leg. In fact, this possibility has been

investigated by NDE researchers. Penny Sartori asked a group of cardiac patients who had been resuscitated without having an NDE to describe what they thought were resuscitation procedures, then compared these to the descriptions of NDE patients.<sup>43</sup> Another researcher, Dr. Michael Sabom, did the same but with a group of cardiac patients who had not been resuscitated.<sup>44</sup> In both cases, the groups' descriptions were much less accurate and believable than those of the NDE patients. The NDE patients included many accurate and specific details, while the other groups made significant errors. Some members of the non-NDE groups had no idea at all about the resuscitation procedure, while others appeared to have a distorted picture a result of TV shows. Both Sabom and Sartori concluded that the accuracy of reports of resuscitation procedures from NDE patients couldn't be explained in terms of expectation, prior knowledge or guess work.

It is also worth pointing out that, as shown by Al's case above, the reports of NDE patients often manage to convince physicians of their veracity. In fact, one of the striking things about NDE researchers is that they are usually not parapsychologists, but physicians. Penny Sartori worked as an intensive care nurse for seventeen years and began to research NDEs after so many of her patients reported them. The same is true of Pim Van Lommel, who spent 26 years as a cardiologist. Similarly, one of the most renowned American NDE researchers, Dr. Martin Sabom, was a cardiologist who specialized in resuscitation. Another example is Jeffrey Long, who is a radiation oncologist.

Even academics who favor materialist explanations of NDEs admit that the theories described above are problematic. As Harvey Irwin and Caroline Watt have stated, "It is fair to say that no current neurophysiological or psychological theory of NDEs is satisfactory."<sup>45</sup> Earlier I suggested that when there are so many divergent suggested causes of a phenomenon (in that case, on how the brain might produce consciousness), it is likely that the assumptions that underlie the different suggestions are flawed. (Or in legal terms, a case based on so many varying testimonies would collapse.) And this applies even more to NDEs. The variety of different theories is bewildering, and there is almost a sense of desperation about some of them. You could compare it to a lazy school pupil who uses endless excuses to explain why they haven't done their homework. No matter how ingenious the excuses, their sheer number diminishes the pupil's credibility. There is also a similarity with how some fundamentalist Christians deny the evidence for evolution, based on their determination to defend a worldview, and a refusal to consider contrary evidence.

The most logical way of looking at NDEs is to accept that they can't be explained in materialistic terms. Like consciousness itself, they can't be accounted for in terms of brain activity. They strongly suggest that our consciousness and identity are not simply brain functions, since they can continue when the brain is inactive. Together with the encounters with deceased relatives that NDEs often feature, and the conviction of life after death that they generate, this lends support to the idea that human consciousness may survive the death of the physical body.

### **Part Three: Communication Between Worlds**

Modern secular cultures are probably the first ever in human history not to believe in some form of life after death. Archaeological evidence shows that 50,000 years ago, human beings were buried with food and tools, suggesting a belief in an afterlife. The world's indigenous tribal cultures unanimously conceive of some form of afterlife. Interestingly, however, their concepts of the afterlife are mostly very different to those of monotheistic religions such as Christianity or Islam. Rather than conceiving of life after death as an idyllic reward for the sufferings of life on Earth (or the opposite, if they have the misfortune to go to hell), they tend to see it as a more mundane affair, which isn't so different from their present life. The Cheyenne Indians, for example, believe that after death people carry on living in the same way, but as insubstantial spirits, like shadows.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, members of the Lengua tribe of South America told the missionary W.B. Grubb that, "The *aphangak* or departed souls of men in the shade world...merely continue their present life, only of course in a disembodied state."<sup>47</sup>

It is also interesting to note that for some indigenous tribal cultures, life after death doesn't involve the indefinite survival of the personality. For them life after death rarely means immortality. As the anthropologist Levy-Bruhl pointed out, "Everywhere primitives believe in survival, but nowhere do they regard it as unending."<sup>48</sup> The Dyaks of Sarawak (in Malaysia), for example, believe that everyone dies between three and seven times, until their souls become absorbed into the air.

For such indigenous groups, it's taken for granted that, as they live their lives, the spirits of deceased ancestors surround them. The afterworld isn't an entirely separate realm, like heaven or hell; it intersects with this world. Although they are on a different plane of existence, it is possible to interact with spirits, and for spirits to interact with the living. Spirits hover around, occasionally making their presence felt. At the signing of the Port Elliot

Treaty in 1855, when his tribal lands were ceded to European-Americans, Chief Seattle described this type of conception of the afterlife. Although there is some doubt about the accuracy of the translation and transcript of the speech, it vividly conveys the difference between the Christian and Native American concepts of survival:

*Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portal of the tomb and wander away beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being...*

*When the last Red man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the white man, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone...At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.*

*Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead – I say? There is no death. Only a change of worlds.<sup>49</sup>*

In many tribal cultures, a specific individual is assigned the role of communicating with spirits, often referred to by anthropologists as a shaman. The shaman cultivates altered states of consciousness – either through psychoactive plants or drumming or dancing – in order to gain access to the spirit world. Their role may be to ask spirits for help or guidance, or to bring back information about deceased relatives.

Such indigenous beliefs may seem archaic or even “primitive” to us, but we shouldn’t be too quick to dismiss them. Unlikely though it may seem from the standpoint of materialism, there is strong evidence that it is possible for us to encounter the deceased, and to communicate with them.

This is the second type of evidence I want to consider for the survival of consciousness beyond permanent bodily death: after-death communications (or ADCs). We have already seen that NDEs may feature encounters with deceased friends and relatives, and in this section we will explore some other contexts in which such encounters may occur.

## **Deathbed Visions**



As her first shift began, student nurse Penny Sartori was being briefed by the night shift nurse who she was taking over from. She was told about a man called Billy in bed six, who would be “gone” (meaning dead) by the morning. “He’s been talking to his dead mother since three o’clock this morning,” the nurse said. Sartori looked up and was surprised that none of the other nurses showed any reaction. She wondered if they were playing a joke on her, as it was her first day on the ward.

Over the next two hours or so, as she tended to the other patients, Sartori observed Billy making gestures and calling out to his mother. Then, as she writes, he “began smiling, put his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes for the last time. As predicted by the nurse on the night shift, he had died before the morning was through.”<sup>50</sup>

At first Sartori was taken back by the matter-of-fact way in which the nurse had predicted the man’s death. However, as her career as an intensive care nurse progressed, she realized how common it is for dying people to apparently “see” deceased relatives and friends. She also realized how common it was for nurses to interpret this as a sign of imminent death. As she puts it, “I realised that patients calling out or talking and gesturing to unseen people symbolised fast-approaching death and was commonly accepted by many nurses that I worked with.”<sup>51</sup>

Superficially, such experiences could be ascribed to hallucinations or wishful thinking. However, some aspects of the experiences suggest otherwise. For example, as Sartori notes, they don’t have the same characteristics of drug-induced hallucinations. They often occur when the patient’s consciousness is clear rather than impaired. They normally lead to a sense of calmness and acceptance of death, whereas hallucinations normally bring anxiety and agitation. Research by Elendur Haraldsson and Karlis Osis suggested that patients were actually less likely to have such deathbed visions if they were medicated, or if their consciousness was impaired by illness. Haraldsson and Osis also found that dying people were much more likely to have visions of deceased people than the living, which wouldn’t be the case if they were randomly hallucinating.<sup>52</sup> A skeptic might argue that it stands to reason that dying people would be thinking about deceased relatives, but it’s surely equally (or even more) likely that they would be thinking about the friends and relatives they are leaving behind.

Most significantly in terms of evidence, there are (as with encounters with deceased relatives during NDEs) cases of patients encountering a deceased person who recently died, but whose death they were unaware of. Penny Sartori cites the case of a critically ill man who told his relatives that he had encountered his deceased mother, grandmother and sister. His

family were shocked because his sister had only died the week beforehand, and they had kept the news of her death from him in case it made his condition worse.<sup>53</sup>

A similar case was described by one of the earliest investigators of death bed visions, the Irish author and social activist Francis Power Cobbe. In 1882, Cobbe published an essay called “The Riddle of Death” which described a number of deathbed scenes in which dying people appeared to encounter deceased children and other relatives (don’t forget, at that time childhood deaths were common). In her words, “The dying person is lying quietly, when suddenly, in the very act of expiring, he looks up, — sometimes starts up in bed, — and gazes on (what appears to be) vacancy with an expression of astonishment, sometimes developing instantly into joy.”<sup>54</sup> One of the most striking cases was a dying woman who encountered a brother whose death was not yet known. In Cobbe’s words, the dying lady “spoke of seeing, one after another, three of her brothers who had long been dead, and then, apparently, recognized last of all a fourth brother, who was believed...to be still living in India.” This horrified one of the lady’s companions so much that she rushed from the room. Shortly afterwards, “letters were received announcing the death of the brother in India, which had occurred some time before his dying sister seemed to recognize him.”<sup>55</sup>

In theory, these cases could be explained in terms of what is sometimes called the “living agent psi” hypothesis. This suggests that all forms of after-death communications (including the information gleaned by high level mediums) are due to the psi abilities of telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition. In the case above from Penny Sartori, it could be that the critically ill man telepathically picked up the knowledge of his sister’s death from the other members of his family. In the case described by Francis Cobbe, this type of explanation is trickier, because the other family members weren’t aware of her brother’s death at the time. However – so proponents of the living agent psi (or LAP) theory might argue – telepathy works independently of time and distance, so it could be that the woman was in direct telepathic with her brother in India or sensed his death through clairvoyance.

I have no doubt that psi abilities exist, and it’s possible that they could account for some ADCs, but certainly not all of them. To my mind, the LAP theory is a convenient, catch all explanation that is so broadly applied that it becomes almost meaningless. It is sometimes more appropriately referred to as the “superpsi” hypothesis, since some of the psychic feats it invokes go far beyond the abilities of even the most gifted psychics. (This is particularly the case with mediumship, as we will see shortly.) Often people who experience ADCs have never shown any evidence of psi abilities before, so it strains credulity to think that such powers could conveniently reveal themselves in these moments.

We will encounter the LAP (or superpsi) hypothesis a few times from now on, and I will evaluate it in more detail towards the end of the essay.

### *Crisis Apparitions*

Let's begin with another eyewitness testimony. One evening during her vacation, Raicheal was starting to feel concerned about a member of their group who hadn't returned to their Youth Hostel. He was a fell runner and had set off that morning to run up a mountain. Suddenly the man appeared before Raicheal, although not in his normal physical form. She saw him walking up the stairs of the Youth Hostel, then, as she told me, he "moved towards me as though he was floating and with his arm outstretched as though trying to reach out to me. I just sensed he had died and was visiting the people and places he knew as though trying to figure out where he was. I went downstairs to tell my boyfriend that I'd seen our friend and felt he had passed."<sup>56</sup> The man's dead body was found on the mountain the next day.

The above is an example of different type of after-death communication. This is when apparitions of people who are close to death or who have just died (usually due to accidents or injuries) appear to friends or relatives. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many examples of such experiences were collected by psychic researchers, who coined the term "crisis apparitions" for them. More recent investigation by the Icelandic psi researcher Erlendur Haraldsson has confirmed how common these experiences are. Haraldsson interviewed 337 people who reported ADCs with deceased relatives or friends and found that 14 per cent were "crisis apparitions."<sup>57</sup> The experiences are significant because, as in Raichael's case, the friends or relatives are usually unaware of the person's death at the time, only finding about later.

Crisis apparitions can take other forms besides visions, such as hearing the voice of a person around the time of their death, strangely vivid dreams, or an intense emotional reaction or physical sensation. In a recent general study of 1,667 ADCs, the psychologist and psi researcher Ken Vincent found that almost 11 per cent occurred when the experiencer was unaware of the person's death. Some of the cases occurred in dreams, such as a woman whose "aunt came to her in a dream and told her goodbye and that she had died. She woke up screaming and her phone was ringing. It was her sister telling her that her aunt had just died."<sup>58</sup> A similar testimony was given me by a lady called Hara:

*When my mum died (suddenly and unexpectedly) 130 miles away from me, I was asleep. At*

*the moment of her death I woke up and it was as if she took me with her part of the way. I had this amazing experience of utter joy, deep peace, understanding that everything was just as it should be and there was nothing to fear...At 8 o'clock that morning my sister called with the news that my mum had just died, at 6.45 am. That was the exact time when I woke up...I was 25 when my mum died. 30 years ago this month. Since that time I am completely unafraid of death.<sup>59</sup>*

### *Other After-Death Communications*

Crisis apparitions make up a significant proportion of after-death communications, but ADCs also commonly occur months or years after a person's death. In many cases, they occur regularly, so that people feel the deceased partners or relatives are still with them.

In 1971, a Welsh doctor named William Dewi Rees became intrigued by some of his elderly patients commenting that they had sensed the presence of their deceased spouse. He followed this up with a systematic study of 293 widows and widowers in his group practice. Dewi Rees found that almost half (46.7 per cent) of the widows and widowers had had a "hallucination" (in his term) of their spouse. He found that the experiences were strikingly universal, in the sense that there was no relationship to factors such as age, gender, social isolation or depression. The majority of participants felt that the visions were pleasant and helpful, and even that they seemed a normal part of the grieving process. Only around 6 per cent found them unpleasant.<sup>60</sup>

One of the most interesting findings of Dewi Rees's study was that only around a quarter of his participants had talked about their experiences before. This suggests a high degree of reluctance which might even have extended to Rees's study itself, meaning that his figure of 46.7 per cent of his patients could be an underestimate. Indeed, more recent studies (which also might be affected by reticence, of course) suggest that as many as three quarters of bereaved people have sensed the presence of a deceased loved one.<sup>61</sup> As with crisis apparitions, these experiences occur in a variety of different forms. Besides actually seeing the deceased person, it may be a strong feeling that they are nearby, watching or helping. It may be a sensory experience of smelling or hearing – for example, smelling their perfume, being touched by them or hearing them call out. Less directly, people may feel that deceased friends and relatives are making contact with them through animals, or by causing unusual events (such as doors or windows slamming shut for no reason). In Erlendur Haraldsson's

study of 337 ADCs, 69 per cent were visual, with 28 per cent auditory, 13 per cent tactile, and 4 per cent olfactory. (Some experiences included more than one sense.)<sup>62</sup>

### *Evidential and Purposeful ADCs*

A skeptic might explain these experiences as wishful thinking, self-delusion or even hallucinations. However, some ADCs are difficult to dismiss in this way, since they involve deceased people passing on messages which were later found to be relevant, or information that was later confirmed. Here is one example that was offered to me:

*My Grandma (H.) had a very vivid dream that she had made tea for her and my other Grandma (L.) who had been dead for many years. L. warned that my sister was in danger from her boyfriend and that she had tried to get through to the others but couldn't. At the time my sister was suffering all kinds of abuse from her boyfriend which she never told anyone about.*

*H. was reluctant to say anything at first but in her mind's eye she kept seeing my gran's face looking at her until she eventually told my mum and then the image lifted. Luckily my sister has now split up with her boyfriend after he gave out death threats.<sup>63</sup>*

In the language that researchers of ADCs use, this case was “evidential,” since the deceased grandmother provided correct information that no one else was aware of. It was also “purposive” in the sense that the deceased grandmother made contact for a specific reason.

A similar but more dramatic example was reported to me by a woman called LeeAnn, whose close friend Bruno was murdered while working as a nightclub bouncer. A few months later, LeeAnn was at home, sitting in her living room with her roommate, when Bruno made contact with her. LeeAnn's testimony is also significant because of her vivid description of the experience of making contact with a deceased person:

*The energy in the room just started changing on its own... We were completely sober and in a normal state of mind.*

*Our ceiling fanlight flickered. The light started changing and then all of a sudden, it was as if we were washed in gold. I thought, 'Am I having a stroke?' But my roommate was having the same experience. The room filled with this golden light. There was a sense of*

*peace that was overwhelming. I didn't even know anything so peaceful and beautiful could exist. It was bliss.*

*And then I saw Bruno in his human form. My eyes were closed, but he was standing there, surrounded by blue colors and light. He said to me, 'You keep asking for me to come back. Don't ask that — this is where I'm supposed to be.' There weren't a lot of words — just, 'This is where I'm supposed to be. I don't want to come back. Everything will be okay.'*

*Then it was as if Bruno plugged me into something, some kind of energetic field. It didn't scare me. Afterward I felt an amazing sense of wholeness, but at the same time I felt shaken. There was a lot of crying. My roommate had the same kind of experience and the same reactions. It lasted for about thirty minutes.*

*The next day I didn't really speak. I didn't have anything to say. I was just really trying to process what I'd just experienced...I was sitting there and heard Bruno speak to me. It was Friday night, about nine o'clock, and he told me that he wanted me to text his brother. I didn't want to do it...They were a Mormon family, and I didn't know how they'd react. So I was arguing with Bruno aloud, telling him I didn't want to do it. But Bruno kept saying to me, 'No, I need you to do that, I need you to text my brother, and this is what I want you to text.' So I sent the text. He dictated it to me. His brother called me immediately...He said the text answered questions from thoughts and conversations that he had that day, when he was alone and was speaking out loud to Bruno and to God. He said the words were so specific he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they came from Bruno. He was working on a car that day and was sure Bruno was with him. He said, 'There's absolutely no way that I was alone today. There were moments when I needed two people to do the work, and he was there with me, helping. It felt so effortless.'<sup>64</sup>*

LeeAnn's story is significant for a number of reasons. First, it was a shared experience with her roommate, who also sensed Bruno's presence. Bruno's brother was involved too, since he had sensed Bruno's presence the previous day. Most significantly, the contact was both evidential and purposive. LeeAnn received a message from Bruno that was passed on to his brother, who verified its relevance. This makes it difficult to explain away the experience as a hallucination or self-delusion.

In Ken Vincent's study of 1,667 ADCs, over 20 per cent of the cases were found to be evidential, featuring three different forms of evidence. First, there were crisis apparitions when the experiencer wasn't aware of the person's death but found out soon afterwards (as noted above, these were 11 per cent of the sample). Second, there were apparitions that

provided evidence that was later confirmed, which made up almost 6 per cent of the sample. Vincent gives the example of a man who went to his girlfriend's deceased father's house to collect his belongings. In the bathroom, he felt a presence, and saw an intense brightness, then "felt a hand on the back of my neck pushing my head down and my attention was instantly riveted to a small and what would normally be an unnoticeable drawer near the floor."<sup>65</sup> In the drawer (which his girlfriend didn't know about either) he found a bank passbook, for which his girlfriend was the co-signatory. Thirdly, Vincent found that 3.4 per cent of the cases were apparitions that appeared to more than one person, as in the case of LeeAnn above. He provides the example of a young woman and her fiancé, who both saw a vision of her dead grandfather.

Could the LAP theory explain some of the above cases? In the first case above, it's possible that Grandma H. unconsciously suspected that her granddaughter was being abused, and her unconscious mind created a dream scenario in order to relay the information to her conscious mind. In LeeAnn's case, perhaps she was having a hallucination of Bruno, and telepathically conveyed his image to her roommate, together with the other features of the altered state of consciousness that they both experienced. Perhaps she was also in telepathic contact with Bruno's brother. Perhaps she sensed the questions he was asking and created a response to them in her own mind, which she texted back to him. Similarly, in the example in the previous paragraph, you could speculate the man's father had told him about the drawer at some point and he had forgotten but was unconsciously aware of its existence. Alternatively, perhaps the father had told the man's girlfriend about the drawer, and she had forgotten, but unconsciously conveyed the knowledge to her boyfriend through telepathy.

However, these explanations seem extremely tenuous and convoluted. LeeAnn told me that she isn't aware of possessing any psi abilities, so it seems highly unlikely that, on this isolated occasion, she happened to show the kind of extraordinary powers that would enable her to transfer images to her roommate and to read questions from Bruno's brother's mind. (We will look at some other, more general problems with the LAP or superpsi theory later.)

#### **Part Four: Evidence from Mediumship**

In 1985, the strangest chess match in history began. Wolfgang Eisenbeiss, a Swiss amateur chess player with an interest in parapsychology, decided to try to arrange a match between a medium and a deceased grand master. He approached the living grand master, Viktor

Korchnoi – known for his interest in parapsychology - who agreed to the experiment. Korchnoi suggested three deceased grand masters he would like to play. The medium – a German man named Robert Rollans – soon claimed to have made contact with one of three, a Hungarian grand master called Geza Maroczy, who had died in 1950. Maroczy was a Hungarian who had once been ranked the third best player in the world. Through the automatic writing of the medium, Maroczy stated that he wanted to take up the challenge to make people aware that “death does not end everything, but instead the mind is separated from the physical body and comes up to us into a new world, where individual life continues to manifest itself in a new unknown dimension.”<sup>66</sup>

Robert Rollans didn't play chess himself, but Maroczy communicated the moves to him. The game continued for 48 moves, with Korchnoi winning. Analysis by chess experts verified that Maroczy's abilities were at a “low” grandmaster level. Through Rollans, Maroczy complained that he was rusty and not playing to the best of his abilities. However, one of the most famous chess players of all time, Bobby Fischer, analyzed the game and agreed that a player who could hold his own for so long against Viktor Korchnoi must be a grand master. Experts also attested that his style of play was rather old-fashioned, and consistent with Maroczy's actual style. In particular, Korchnoi took advantage of Maroczy old-fashioned opening, which had been superseded by new strategies since the 1950s.

In addition to the game, the discarnate (as in non-physical) Maroczy “wrote” a 38-page text containing many specific details about his life. The text alternated from Hungarian to German, and it was clear from his use of German that he wasn't a native speaker. Wolfgang Eisenbeiss followed this up with 91 detailed and specific questions about Maroczy's life and chess career. A Hungarian historian and chess expert was then employed to investigate the discarnate Maroczy's answers. After checking with sources such as Budapest Chess Club's library and the Hungarian Parliament's library, and also interviewing Maroczy's two surviving children, the investigator verified almost all of the discarnate Maroczy's answers. Of the 81 answers where information was available, 79 were found to be correct.

Some of Maroczy's responses were remarkably detailed and specific. For example, he wrote about a tournament in 1929 in Germany, at which the world champion, the Cuban Jose Raoul Capablanca, was thrown off his game by the sudden appearance of his wife in the audience. He was at the tournament with a mistress, and according to the discarnate Maroczy, “his face turned white and then red. I was there.”<sup>67</sup> This prompted a disastrous move which cost Capablanca a match against an inferior player. Maroczy's account was verified in an



obscure account by a chess writer of the time, who stated that he was the only person who knew the secret of Capablanca's catastrophic error. There was no other source of the story.

How is it possible to explain this strange case? A skeptic might suggest fraud. Although the medium claimed not to know the rules of chess, perhaps he was actually a highly proficient player. But given that he would have to play at (or at least close to) the level of a grand master, this seems unlikely. The game took place over a long period of time, mainly due to Korchnoi's schedule. The medium also sometimes had to wait for days for Maroczy to communicate his next move. So perhaps the medium (or Eisenbeiss) took the opportunity to telephone other living grand masters to ask their advice. This is just about feasible, although no grand masters have ever reported being contacted, and it doesn't chime with Maroczy's old-fashioned style. In relation to the information about Maroczy's life, it's theoretically possible that the medium could have obtained it by conventional means, perhaps through historians or Maroczy's children. However, many of the details of the discarnate Maroczy's account weren't known by his children.

Could the case be explained in terms of the living agent psi theory? This would mean that the medium was telepathically reading moves from Korchnoi, or perhaps from other grand masters somewhere on Earth. This seems incredibly unlikely, since telepathic abilities of this kind have never been reported. Surely anyone who did have such abilities would become the most successful chess player of all time! As with many superpsi explanations, it would entail an incredible level of detail and accuracy, way beyond telepathy as it normally manifests itself.

Another argument sometimes applied to mediumship is the "cosmic reservoir" theory (sometimes also referred to as the "psychic reservoir" theory). The term was coined by the American psychologist William James and has also been used to try to explain the apparent ability of some children to remember past lives. According to this theory, there is a hidden dimension or plane of existence where everything that has ever happened is recorded. All events, thoughts, words and emotions that have ever occurred are stored there. (The esoteric concept of the "Akashic records" expresses the same idea.) Mediums simply pick up information from these records, like archivists looking through digital records. Perhaps mediums (and young children in cases of the reincarnation type) have the ability to locate clusters of information about specific people, or to read over records of the events of their lives. (We will discuss the theory later in relation to reincarnation.)

However, in the above case, it wasn't simply a question of retrieving memories or recalling events. Although Maroczy's answers to the questions could have been due to

memories, this wouldn't explain the chess game. If only memory were involved, the medium would only be able to provide memories of Maroczy previous games, or of some of his previous moves, without being able to react appropriately to the game that was actually taking place.

So if we discard all of the above explanations, there is just one possibility remaining: that the medium *was* actually in contact with the spirit of Maroczy, who was communicating the moves to him. This would obviously mean that Maroczy was somehow still alive in some form, in a different realm or dimension, 35 years after his apparent death.

Is it really possible for mediums to contact the spirits of deceased people? If so, it would offer indisputable evidence of survival. We have already seen that in indigenous cultures, shamans have this role. They enter into altered states of consciousness and gain access to the spirit world, bringing back information from deceased relatives or asking for guidance. Many mediums work in altered states of consciousness too – they enter a state of deep trance, remembering little or nothing afterwards. So perhaps mediums are performing a similar role to a shaman in our culture. Or are they simply charlatans or self-deluded people?

### *Highly Proficient Mediums*

Imagine that you want to learn yoga and sign up for a one-day beginners' workshop. Within a few minutes you begin to feel puzzled and disappointed. The teacher doesn't seem particularly fit or flexible and seems to be making up the postures as she goes along. She talks too much to try to make up for her lack of expertise. You feel like you've been scammed. As a result, from that point on you believe that yoga is complete nonsense, and ridicule anybody who practices it.

Some people respond to mediumship in a similar way. There's no doubt that some mediums are fraudulent or self-deluded. Using well-honed techniques – picking up information from body language, appearance and speech – they convince people that they are in contact with their deceased loved ones. They ask generic questions and make high probability guesses until it seems as though they are providing specific details. In some cases, they may not even bother to provide specific details, as they know that bereaved people are often ready to pounce on even the vaguest information about their loved ones. In addition, some alleged mediums may simply obtain information in advance about the people who visit them. Others may genuinely believe that they are able to contact deceased spirits, but

unconsciously use the same “cold reading” techniques described above, or simply provide general information that could apply to anyone. The activities of these fraudulent mediums can be replicated quite easily by magicians and illusionists.

However, this doesn't invalidate the whole field of mediumship, just as the fact that some yoga instructors are charlatans with no training doesn't invalidate the whole discipline of yoga. In fact, there are – and have always been - highly proficient mediums who can communicate highly accurate and detailed information about deceased people. Beyond information, they are also able to convey the skills, abilities and personality traits of deceased people. In some cases, mediums may appear to be taken over by discarnates in such a way that they actually *become* them. In addition, some “physical mediums” – as opposed to “mental mediums” who work through speech or writing – appear to manifest physical changes, such as unexplained noises or the sudden appearance or movement of objects

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many high-level mediums have been rigorously and repeatedly tested by scientists and other observers – in some cases for decades – without evidence of fraud. One of the most famous was the American trance medium Leonora Piper, who was born in 1850. Piper was probably tested more extensively than any medium in history. While in trance, she would be taken over by a “control,” a discarnate who would serve as a point of contact between her and the “spirit world,” making contact with other spirits and relaying information from them. William James himself conducted extensive tests with Piper and sent 25 of his colleagues and acquaintances to see her under pseudonyms. Piper startled James's sitters (the term used for people who visit mediums) with accurate descriptions of deceased people's appearances and activities. She relayed communications from a wide range of the deceased relatives and friends of the sitters, including many small and highly specific details that seemed impossible to attain by guesswork. She frequently passed on relevant messages from discarnates, often using appropriate body language. As a result of these tests, James wrote, “I now believe her to be in possession of a power as yet unexplained.”<sup>68</sup>

After James's report, a man named Richard Hodgson - an acknowledged expert on unmasking fraud in mediums - took charge of the investigations. Hodgson took a wide range of precautions, randomly choosing sitters from a wide range of people and employing people to follow Piper around, in case she tried to find out information about possible sitters or had agents to do the work for her. Initially highly skeptical, Hodgson was soon convinced that Piper's powers were genuine.

Hodgson took Mrs. Piper to England, for further investigations by the British Society for Psychical Research. They also took extreme measures to ward against fraud, some of

them highly unethical. For example, they opened all her mail to check she wasn't receiving information about sitters and never allowed her to leave the house alone. Mrs. Piper continued to get startlingly successful results, and no evidence of fraud was ever detected.

In 1892, Piper began to work with a control who called himself George Pellew, a cultured New Yorker who had died a few weeks previously. The discarnate Pellew was tested on his knowledge of the physical Pellew's life and displayed a high level of accuracy. Thirty of Pellew's friends visited Piper, and she (or rather the discarnate Pellew) recognized 29 of them. (The other was a childhood friend whose appearance had changed significantly over the years). The discarnate Pellew conversed appropriately and knowledgeably with all of them, showing great familiarity with their past lives.

Some modern skeptics have continued to claim that Mrs. Piper's successes were due to fraud. However, if this were the case, it would mean that she employed teams of detectives and agents to find out information about her possible sitters in advance. In order to recognize George Pellew's friends, she would have to somehow trace all of his friends, find photographs of them (which would be very scarce in the 1890s) and collect information about all of their lives. This would obviously have been impossible, especially in view of the precautions that were taken.

It's true that Mrs. Piper wasn't always successful. Some of the material that came through her seemed confused and nonsensical. (William James called this her "bosh" material.) However, there's no reason why mediums shouldn't be subject to the same ebbs and flows of ability that affect all creative people. Athletes don't always perform at their peak of their abilities, and musicians don't always create great music. It seems unrealistic to expect mediums to hit the mark all the time. Like athletes, mediums may not be in good physical or mental condition. They might be affected by an uncongenial environment or the negative attitude of observers. It's also important to remember that mediums are relaying information from different sources, and sometimes the information may be unclear or partial. As with journalism, sources may sometimes be unreliable. According to the testimonies of discarnates, they don't always find it easy to communicate with living human beings either.

But as long as mediums do hit the mark sometimes, these concerns aren't so important. As William James said in relation to Mrs. Piper, "To upset the conclusion that all crows are black, there is no need to seek demonstration that no crows are black; it is sufficient to produce one white crow; a single one is sufficient."<sup>69</sup>

One contemporary medium with a similar level of success to Piper is an Irish woman named Sandra O'Hara. In her book *Surviving Death*, Leslie Kean describes a remarkable

sitting with O'Hara. Kean took several precautions to ensure the medium didn't know her real identity and so couldn't obtain information about her in advance. She gave a false name and e-mail address, started a new paypal account under her assumed name (to pay for the session) and didn't pass on her skype address. Kean was startled when O'Hara relayed accurate information about two deceased people close to her, her friend Budd Hopkins and her brother Garry Kean. O'Hara accurately reported that Budd had died of cancer, that he was a painter and sculptor, that they were connected by their research, that he was a New Yorker, that he had one child, plus many other specific details. Kean was amazed by this flow of accurate and detailed information from a person who didn't even know her name. She was even more startled when the medium told her that Budd was saying, "You are right, you are right!" This related to Budd's doubt about the possibility of survival. When Kean had told him about her research, he had been adamant that there was no life after death

After identifying another spirit entity as her brother, O'Hara provided a stream of similarly accurate information. She reported accurately that he had died quickly and unexpectedly, that he had two burials or services, that he was cut off from the rest of his family, and so on. She also mentioned that she smelled alcohol, and that he or someone close to him was an alcoholic, and then referred to his "secret." All of this was true – Garry had died of alcoholism, and there was a secret that he had shared with Leslie that she had kept from the rest of the family. In total, O'Hara provided over 30 accurate statements in the short session.

Kean makes it clear that all of this was more than just a matter of the medium relaying information. The personalities of the people seemed present too. O'Hara described how Budd had a powerful and domineering personality, while Garry was introverted and diffident. They seemed to speak and react in the same way that they had while they were alive. This makes it seem unlikely that O'Hara was simply picking up the information through telepathy, or from a "cosmic reservoir" of memories.<sup>70</sup>

### *Empirical Research*

A scientist might argue that, no matter how remarkable Leslie Kean's sessions with the medium were, they just constitute anecdotal evidence that can't be verified. Stories do not constitute proof. What we need is hard scientific evidence from carefully controlled laboratory studies, with results that can be statistically analyzed.

Fortunately, this kind of evidence is readily available too. Over the last 20 years or so, many highly rigorous scientific studies of high-level mediums have been undertaken. In order to make sure of sound results, researchers have taken stringent measures to exclude any possibility of cold reading, fraud or “sensory leakage” (when information is unconsciously transferred between the medium and sitter). In the language of scientific experiments, these have been double, triple and even quintuple-blind studies. (A blind study simply means that the different participants of the research are separated from each other and unaware of each other’s roles or actions.)

In such studies, it’s normal to use a “proxy sitter” so that the medium has no direct contact with the actual sitter (that is, the person associated with the discarnate). This removes the possibility of cold reading and reduces the likelihood of psi, since the medium wouldn’t know who to establish telepathic contact with. The medium is simply given the name of the deceased person and asked to contact them. The medium doesn’t know the name in advance, which removes the possibility of fraud. The medium then provides a reading, providing as much detail as they can about the discarnate’s appearance, personalities, hobbies and interests, cause of death and so on. The sitter is given the transcript, together with a transcript of a reading from the same medium with a different sitter. The sitter has to pick the transcript that is relevant to them and then to rate the accuracy of the information. The procedure is repeated many times over different sittings with the same medium.<sup>71</sup>

Many strictly controlled studies with this type of protocol have shown a consistent - and highly significant – “strike rate” of around 75 per cent.<sup>72</sup> As a group of researchers wrote recently, the findings of such studies strongly suggest that “certain mediums can report accurate and specific information about the deceased loved ones (termed discarnates) of living people...without any prior knowledge about the sitters or the discarnates, in the complete absence of any sensory feedback, and without using fraud or deception.”<sup>73</sup>

I’ve heard some people suggest that 75 per cent isn’t a particularly high success rate. As an acquaintance of mine said, “If someone was really in contact with my dead grandmother, I would expect them to give 100 per cent correct information!” But even in everyday life, there is always some inaccuracy when information is relayed from one source to another (as in the game of “telephone.”) Furthermore, mediums are involved in a highly unusual form of communication, interpreting and translating information that may not always be clear and consistent. Some of the information may also be mixed up with material from their own subconscious minds. As mentioned above, mediums may not always work at the

peak of their abilities, while discarnates themselves may not find it easy to communicate to living humans. Under these circumstances, I think a 75 per cent hit rate is remarkable.

In 2020, a meta-analysis of all the significant medium studies from 2001 to 2019 was published. (A meta-analysis is simply an overall study of a large number of individual studies, combining their results and analyzing their validity.) The researchers only included papers with the kind of stringent controls described above. Analysis of the statistics showed that the mediums were scoring significantly higher than chance. As the researchers commented, “The results of this meta-analysis support the hypothesis that some mediums can retrieve information about deceased persons through unknown means.”<sup>74</sup>

The implications of these results are impossible to ignore. The mediums’ positive results can’t be explained in terms of fraud, coincidence, unconscious cold reading or even the living agent psi or “psychic reservoir” theories. This leaves the only one other reasonable hypothesis: that certain highly proficient mediums actually *are* able to make contact with the personalities of deceased human beings. I would challenge any other open-minded academic to analyze the studies and their results and form any other conclusion.

### **Part Five: Evidence from Reincarnation**

At first sight, one might think that reincarnation contradicts other evidence for life after death, such as near-death experiences and after-death communications. After all, if deceased people are reincarnated, how can they still be available for after-death communications? That would be like expecting to speak to a person on their hotel telephone when they have already checked out.

However, many religious and spiritual traditions speak of an intermediate period between death and rebirth. Some schools of Buddhism refer to this as *Bardo*. In Hinduism, after death a person may journey to *Chandraloka* or *Yamaloka* (the heavenly or hellish realms) for a certain amount of time before being reborn. Some children who claim to have memories of previous lives also speak of a period prior to birth. Research suggests that between a fifth and a quarter of such children have memories of this “intermission” period.<sup>75</sup> So it’s perfectly feasible that ADCs could take place during this intermediate period, with reincarnation occurring later.

In fact, reincarnation is one of the strongest strands of evidence for the survival of human consciousness beyond the physical death of the body. This comes from many well-documented cases of young children who have reported very specific details of a past life,

which were later verified by investigators. (These are often referred to as “cases of the reincarnation type.”) Research in this area was pioneered by Dr. Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, who spent much of his career collecting and examining such cases. Typically, between the age of two and four (with a mean age of 35 months) such children start talking about their previous life, speaking about the places they lived, their relatives, and the events that led up to their death. They often speak in the present tense, as if their previous life were still continuing. In many cases, Stevenson was able to confirm the identity the child’s previous personality, verifying the information by speaking to relatives of the deceased and consulting public records.

Since Stevenson’s death, other researchers have followed his lead, most notably Jim Tucker, professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Science at the University of Virginia. Presently, around 2500 reports of children’s past life memories have been studied. Research has shown that normally the children’s reported previous lives ended prematurely and unnaturally, often involving violence, suicide or an accident. In almost three-quarters of cases, the previous personality died relatively young. A quarter died before the age of 15. On average, the previous personalities died four and a half years before the birth of the children they were associated with. (In other words, in these cases at least, the average length of the intermediate period between death and rebirth – when after-death communications might take place - was four and a half years.)

Modern researchers meticulously check the accuracy of children’s accounts, analyzing the possibilities that they have attained information through more mundane ways, that they might be fantasizing, or that their parents may be embellishing their stories. In many cases, the children are given recognition tests. For example, they might be shown a number of pictures of houses and asked to pick the one their previous personality lived in, or they might be shown pictures of women and men and asked to pick their previous personality’s spouse.

Here, I will provide a brief summary of two notable cases, which are compelling testimonies of the survival of human consciousness beyond death.

### **The Case of Ryan Hammons**

Around the age of four, Ryan Hammons told his mother Cyndi, “I think I used to be somebody else.” Whenever they saw the Hollywood sign on TV, Ryan would get excited, saying that was his home and he wanted to return there. He said that he had been an agent in Hollywood and that the agency had changed people’s names. He talked about dancing on



Broadway and about living in a house with a large swimming pool. Sometimes when songs came on the radio, he would stand up and start tap dancing. He told Cyndi that “he couldn’t wait until he was big again and got to go on dates on the big boats and dance with the pretty ladies.”<sup>76</sup> He talked about going to fancy parties with a “cowboy man” who had a horse that performed tricks and also did cigarette commercials. At school, when asked to draw pictures of his home, he would always draw four people – himself, his parents and “the old me.”

Cyndi began to write down everything that Ryan told her about his past life. She borrowed books about Hollywood from the local library, hoping they would help Ryan to process his memories. In one book, they found a still from an old movie called *Night after Night*. Ryan became very animated and shouted, “Mummy, that’s George – we did a picture together!” Then he pointed to a man to the side of the photo and said, “And that’s me.” Ryan had always said that he didn’t know his name of his previous personality, and at first Cyndi was unable to identify the man he pointed at. However, she found out that the other man was an actor called George Raft.

When Ryan was five, his mother made contact with Jim Tucker, who agreed to investigate his claims. A film archivist (employed by a TV production company who made a documentary about Ryan) identified the man Ryan said was “me” as Marty Martyn, a dancer, actor and agent who died in 1964. When Tucker visited Ryan and his parents, Ryan was asked to pick out photos of people and places that related to Marty Martyn, which he did successfully.

Most of Ryan’s statements about his previous life had been recorded by his mother before Tucker got involved, and before Marty Martyn was identified. Some statements had already been verified by his mother. For example, she had confirmed that the cowboy friend he often spoke about was a man called Wild Bill Elliot. With Tucker’s help, other statements were verified from sources such as public records at national archives, newspapers, obituaries, travel documents and census reports. (Since Martyn was quite an obscure figure, there was no information about him on the Internet, at least at that time.) Martyn’s daughter was contacted and verified other statements.

In total, 55 of Ryan’s statements about his previous life were verified. For example, it was confirmed that Marty Martyn was once a tap dancer, that he ran a talent agency that changed people’s names, that he had several wives, that his favorite restaurant was in Chinatown, that he knew Rita Hayworth, that he spent a lot of time in Paris, that he had a large collection of sunglasses, that he bought his daughter a dog when she was 6, and so on. When Cyndi took him to the beautiful old building where the Marty Martyn Talent Agency

had once been, he acted “as if he were truly returning home after a long journey...His whole face lit up with joy.”<sup>77</sup>

Now a teenager, Ryan no longer has memories of his previous personality, but still seems to carry some behavioral traits from his last life. For example, he loves to watch old movies, and to listen to big band music from the 40s and 50s.

### **The Case of James Leininger**

Around the time of his second birthday, James Leininger started to have nightmares, thrashing around in his bed and shouting, “Airplane crash on fire! Little man can’t get out!” After a few months, his parents started to discuss the nightmares with him at bedtime. He told them that he was the “little man,” whose name was also James, and that his plane had been shot down by the Japanese. He provided some very specific details – for example, that he had flown the plane from a boat called “Natoma,” and that it had been shot in the engine, at the front near the propellor. He stated that his best friend on the boat was a man called Jack Larsen, who was also a pilot. He began to draw battle scenes, showing a plane going down in flames with bombs falling around it. Some of his drawings showed a Japanese flag. He signed the drawings “James 3,” stating that he was the “third James.”

When James’s claims were investigated, they were found to be startlingly accurate. There was a US ship called Natoma Bay stationed in the Pacific during World War II. The ship took part in the battle of Iwo Jima, during which it lost one pilot, whose name was James Huston. Records showed that Huston’s plane did crash into the water after being hit in the engine during the battle of Iwo Jima. Another pilot who took part in the strike on the island was named Jack Larsen. James Huston’s father was called James, which fitted with young James’s description of himself as the “third James.” Significantly, there was documentation – such as his father’s emails and an earlier TV interview – to show that many statements dated from the period before his previous personality was identified. (As with Ryan’s case, this is important because it shows that his parents couldn’t have gathered the information and fed it to him.)

Fortuitously, Jack Larsen was still alive, and met up with James at a *Natoma Bay* reunion. James felt completely comfortable at the reunion, listening to war stories and startling the old men with his knowledge of the ship. There he met with James Huston’s sister, Anne, who was stunned by his knowledge and familiarity with her brother’s life and their family. He addressed her as “Annie,” which only her brother had ever called her. As

Anne put it, “The child was so convincing, coming up with all these things that there’s no way in the world he could know, unless there is a spiritual thing.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Other Possible Explanations**

Are there any alternative ways of explaining these strange cases besides as – in James Huston’s sister’s words – a “spiritual thing”?

Young children often have very vivid imaginations, so perhaps they are simply fantasizing. However, there are hundreds of cases where the details of the children’s stories have been verified, which wouldn’t be the case if they were just making up random stories of a previous life. Is it possible that the children have overheard their parents talking about certain people and used the information to create stories of previous lives? However, in the vast majority of cases, the previous personalities are completely unknown to the family.

More mundanely, is it possible that parents simply feed the information to their children? Perhaps parents simply choose a deceased person, find out about their life through the Internet, and coach their children to pretend to be that person. However, there are many cases such as Ryan’s and James’s, when the parents clearly did not do this, as documents show that the children provided many specific details before their previous personalities had been identified. Another point is that, since children start speaking about their previous personalities at a very young age – in most cases, before the age of three – it’s highly unlikely that they would have the mental capacity to absorb detailed information and relay this accurately to investigators. In any case, many cases date from the pre-Internet era, when information about deceased people was hard to obtain. Even in the post-Internet era, most cases relate to obscure ordinary people, whose lives are not recorded in any detail. In most cases, it is difficult to find any information about the previous personalities online, so that researchers are obliged to search through specific databases or population records.

I think you would agree that the above explanations are untenable. But what about the more esoteric explanations of living agent psi and the cosmic reservoir? The LAP explanation would be that children make telepathic contact with acquaintances (or perhaps one particular acquaintance) of a deceased person and pick up memories about them. But one issue here is that surely, if the children had psi abilities, they would manifest themselves in a more general way. They would surely show the ability to make telepathic contact with other people too, on a day-to-day basis. But this isn’t the case. I’m not aware of any cases where children who describe previous lives display strong psi abilities. It’s true that psi abilities are sometimes

linked to particular people, but this is almost always close relatives, loved ones or friends. Why would children have a strong telepathic link to the friends or relatives of a deceased person who has no connection with them?

Alternatively, could it be that the children read the records of the events of a particular person's life from a "psychic reservoir" where everything that has ever happened is recorded? We examined this theory in the last chapter in relation to mediumship, and the same counter argument I used then applies here. The theory might be plausible if it were just a question of children relaying information about deceased people. However, as with mediumship, in most cases children take on the attitudes, emotions and intentions of the previously personality. Often these express themselves through play or drawings, as when James Leininger would endlessly play with toy airplanes and make drawings of airplane crashes. Sometimes the children show a strong attachment to people and places from their previous life, begging to be taken to them. Sometimes they carry over trauma from their previous lives, manifesting as nightmares (as in James's case). Sometimes they develop phobias and fears connected to their previous personality's death. According to Jim Tucker's research, in cases where previous personalities died unnaturally, 35 per cent of children have phobias related to the mode of death. He gives the example of a Sri Lankan girl who had such a strong aversion to water that it would take three adults to hold her down in the bath. When she was old enough to talk, the girl described a previous life as a girl from a nearby village who had died by drowning.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, children don't simply describe *memories* of a person's life, they actually *are* that person. One example from Ian Stevenson's cases is a Thai boy called Channai who talked about a past life from the age of three. He said he was a teacher named Bua Kai who had died five years before his birth, when he was shot while cycling to school. Channai named members of Bua Kai's family and described the house where he had lived, which was in a village 25 miles away. When he was taken to meet Bau Kai's family, he instructed the daughters to address him as father, refusing to speak to them otherwise. He also showed familiarity with Bau Kai's possessions, and a sense of ownership towards them.<sup>80</sup>

In some cases, children may even assume *physical* characteristics of their previous personality. For example, sometimes children are born with birthmarks corresponding to injuries sustained by the previously personality. For example, Channai (described above) was born with two birth marks, a small one on the back of his head and a larger one above his left eye. Bau Kai's widow was told her husband must have been shot from behind, as there was a small entrance wound in the back of his head and a larger exit wound at the front. This matched Chanai's birthmarks.

In other words, the correspondences between children and their previous personalities go way beyond the simple transference of information, which argues against the cosmic reservoir theory. Another problem with this theory is that it isn't clear why children would have the ability to absorb information in such a specific way, purely in relation to one person. Surely there would be some crossover from information about other people. If this hypothetical cosmic reservoir really exists (and there is no evidence that it does) then surely the information it contains would not be neatly differentiated. It would probably be more like a cosmic soup of intermingled information rather than a kind of library where everyone has their own separate file.

I think we can therefore safely disregard the LAP and cosmic reservoir theories. Another possibility is that the cases are caused by a kind of "spirit possession," similar to when discarnates take over mediums. Perhaps discarnates take over the child's personality while they are babies, or even while they are in the womb. Then, as the child reaches the age of 6 or so, and begins to develop a stronger sense of their own identity, the influence of the discarnate recedes. Perhaps when the discarnate takes over a child's personality, they somehow "stamp" the child with some of their physical characteristics too, resulting in birthmarks and other physical features.

Of course, this theory would still support the notion of an afterlife, but not necessarily of reincarnation. However, in most of the cases investigated by Stevenson and Tucker, children don't feel a distinction between their own personality and the discarnate. Unlike mediums, children don't seem to feel that they are *inhabited* by discarnates. They feel that they are the one and the same person, living a continuation of a previous existence.

All in all, these remarkable cases strongly suggest the reality of reincarnation, and therefore the survival of human consciousness beyond the death of the physical body. As Jim Tucker has put it, "survival after body death fits the evidence better than the alternative explanations."<sup>81</sup>

Earlier I quoted Hamlet's description of death as the "Undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns."<sup>82</sup> But it appears that Shakespeare was wrong. It seems that it is possible to return from death, although in a different physical form. And on a person's return, it's possible that they will carry over traits, memories, and even physical traces of their previous existence. The memories may recede after a few years, in the same way that the details of dreams fade a short time after waking up. But the essence of the personality appears to remain, from one lifetime to the next.

## Part Six: Intuitions of an Afterlife

Karlfried Graf Von Durckheim was a German aristocrat who was brought up to be proud and patriotic. When he was 18, the First World War broke out, and he felt it was his duty to volunteer as a soldier. After his privileged upbringing, the horrors of the battlefield were a massive shock. Over the four years of the war, Durckheim lost count of the number of deaths he witnessed, or the number of times he came close to death himself. However, his encounters with death brought about a spiritual awakening. He became aware of a part of his being which could not die, since it wasn't physical. As he stated, ““When death was near and you had accepted death ... then you realized something which has nothing to do whatsoever with death. ... So this marked me very much. It was the very beginning of my inner way.”<sup>83</sup>

This was the beginning of a lifelong spiritual journey for Durckheim. After the war, he renounced his family property and inheritance, and began to study Eastern spiritual texts. He spent several years in Japan, studying Zen Buddhism, before returning to Europe after the Second World War. Then he discovered that his revelation during the First World War was by no means uncommon. He came across many examples of people who had lived through the horrors of the new war and undergone a spiritual awakening. He found cases of soldiers who were convinced they were going to die when a bullet was headed straight for them, concentration camp inmates who had given up hope of surviving, or refugees who had given up hope of ever returning home. In the midst of their hopelessness, they had accepted their predicament, and gained a sudden sense of liberation and a glimpse of their “eternal nature.” As Durckheim told his friend the Zen teacher Alan Watts, the main purpose of his life was to help such people understand their experiences, showing them that in these moments “for once in their lives, they were truly sane.”<sup>84</sup>

Such revelations suggest another argument in favour of survival. Put simply, when people undergo spiritual awakening, they almost always become convinced of life after death. They become aware of a spiritual essence of their being that will survive the death of the body. They usually don't have a clear notion of what *kind* of afterlife there will be, but they have a strong certainty that *something* will survive.

I admit that this doesn't constitute evidence in the sense of the previous four topics we have covered. It doesn't involve any connection with discarnates or previous personalities, and doesn't contain any information that can be verified by researchers. However, for me

these findings are significant because they have been such a consistent theme of my research over the years.

### *Spiritual Awakening and Loss of Fear of Death*

As I use the term, spiritual awakening is a shift into a more intense and expansive state of awareness, as if filters or boundaries that limit normal human awareness fall away. Our awareness expands in terms of perception. The world around us becomes more vivid and alive, and we become a lot more sensitive to the beauty and wonder of life. Our awareness also intensifies inwardly, in that we become aware of an increased depth and richness within our own being. In addition, our awareness intensifies in terms of connection to others and connection to the world in general. We become more empathic and compassionate toward other people, other living beings, and the whole of the natural world. And finally, our awareness expands and intensifies in a *conceptual* sense, giving us a wider and more global vision of the world, and a revelatory awareness of aspects of the world that were hidden before.

For me, the last type of awareness is especially significant in relation to life after death. This is because what spiritually awakened people tell us, with their wider and more intense vision of reality, is that there is no such thing as extinction.

Over the last ten years, I have led several research projects on spiritual awakening.<sup>85</sup> In most cases, awakening occurs gradually, over many years or decades of following spiritual practices and paths. However, it can also occur suddenly, particularly in the midst of intense periods of psychological turmoil, such as bereavement, serious illness, addiction or intense stress or depression.

In my research, I have found that awakened people share a number of characteristics. They are compassionate and altruistic. They enjoy solitude and doing nothing. They feel a strong sense of gratitude and appreciation, and so on. And one further characteristic they almost always mention is that they have lost any fear of death. For example, a man who underwent transformation after a long period of stress and depression told me that he feels “very calm about [death]... I would be quite willing to accept it if I was told my death was to come.”<sup>86</sup> Another man told me that “I’m not in a rush to die but I’m not attached to the body and the life and the possessions. Life is a miracle and a mystery, and I’m happy with that.”<sup>87</sup>

The main reason why awakened people lose their fear of death is because they sense that there *is no death*. A woman told me that she senses that “death is a part of life. It’s just a

transition to a different state” while another person described death as “just a passing to another state where the soul separates from the body.”<sup>88</sup> More poetically, a woman who underwent an awakening after a bereavement told me, “We’re like little fireflies, bursting forth from this main energy. We’re just sparks, and we go back to that source, and we spark some more.”<sup>89</sup>

Many people also have a sense that death – and the process of dying itself – may be a joyful and liberating experience. A woman who had a sudden awakening during the turmoil and exhaustion of new motherhood described dying in terms of going “back home again,” and being “outside of time, outside of space...like stepping outside of prison walls.”<sup>90</sup> Another woman stated that she was “not afraid of death at all — in fact in some ways I think it’s a something to look forward to, a kind of liberation.”<sup>91</sup>

### *Mystics and Poets*

These views of death are echoed by many of the world’s greatest mystics and spiritual teachers. One of the most remarkable – although little known - spiritual teachers of recent times was the American wanderer and social activist Mildred Norman, who called herself “Peace Pilgrim.” After a spiritual awakening at the age of 30, Mildred began a life of a constant service, working with old people, people with mental health problems, and then as a volunteer with peace organizations. This led to what she called her “pilgrimages” – a series of walks across the whole of the United States. Peace Pilgrim walked an average of 25 miles a day, often stopping for speaking engagements or interviews along the way, particularly as she became more well known. She described her inner state as “always being surrounded by all the good things, like love and peace and joy. It seems like a protective surrounding, and there is an unshakeableness within, which takes you through any situations you need to face.”<sup>92</sup>

Peace Pilgrim died at the age of 72, in 1981, in a car accident while being driven to a talk. This might seem tragic, but it would not have appeared that way to Peace Pilgrim herself. She saw death as a “glorious transition to freer living,” and “life’s last great adventure.”<sup>93</sup>

The great American poet and mystic Walt Whitman held a similar view of death. To Whitman, the world seemed a beautiful and fascinating place. The whole of reality – including his own being and body - seemed suffused with spiritual radiance. As he wrote in his poem “Song of Myself”, “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch...In the faces of the men and women I see God, and I my own face in the glass.”<sup>94</sup>



However, Whitman's joyous celebration of life by no means meant ignoring death. On the contrary, the subject of death crops up again and again throughout his poems, right from the first pages of "Song of Myself." There he asks "Has anybody supposed it lucky to be born? I tell them that it is just as lucky to die."<sup>95</sup>

Like Peace Pilgrim, Whitman sensed very strongly that death means liberation, a transition to a fuller and more blissful state. In one of his poems, he describes hearing "Whispers of heavenly death" everywhere around him. In a moving short poem entitled 'To One Shortly to Die,' he describes visiting a friend on his deathbed. The bed is surrounded by weeping relatives, but as Whitman gently touches his friend and whispers, "I do not commiserate, I congratulate you."<sup>96</sup>

Let me end by mentioning another mystic-poet, the English author D.H. Lawrence. Like Whitman, Lawrence lived in a heightened state of awareness, in which the world seemed beautiful and radiant. To him, there was no such thing as inanimate matter. All things — even rocks, clouds or stars — were gloriously alive and sentient. He didn't experience any sense of separateness, so that he had the ability to "enter into" the being of other creatures and human beings. As his friend Aldous Huxley wrote, "He seemed to know, by personal experience, what it was like to be a tree or a daisy or a breaking wave or even the mysterious moon itself."<sup>97</sup>

Lawrence's wakefulness became especially intense towards the end of his short life, when he knew that he was dying of tuberculosis. This led to some of his most beautiful poems, in which he described a serene acceptance of death. He was not afraid of death because, like Whitman, he intuited that death is a transition rather than an end point, the beginning of a new journey. In his poem "Gladness of Death" he describes death as a "great adventure" which is full of 'an after-gladness, a strange joy.' In the same poem, he describes how "the winds of the afterwards kiss us into the blossom of manhood," bringing a fulfilment that may have eluded us in our present life.<sup>98</sup>

But why should we pay any special attention to the views of people like Whitman or Lawrence, or the participants of my research? I mentioned earlier that spiritual awakening is essentially a shift into a more intense and expansive awareness. If we think of awareness of reality as a spotlight, awakened people become more intensely aware of what is already within their range of awareness, and the range of awareness itself broadens.

It is therefore possible that spiritually awakened people see a fuller and truer view of reality, in the same way that people who look at a landscape in bright morning light have a clearer and wider vision than people who see the same scene at dusk. They can sense phenomena that are beyond most people's awareness. They can describe aspects of reality that most of us don't have access to. They can give us a fuller and truer account of the reality of life and death and the universe.

In other words, I believe we should *trust* the experiences and insights of spiritually awakened people. When people like Walt Whitman and Peace Pilgrim (together with my research participants) tell us that human consciousness survives the death of the body, I believe we should take them seriously.

### **Conclusion**

After considering the evidence documented above, including many eyewitness testimonies, I believe that any open-minded person would conclude that it is extremely likely that human consciousness survives permanent bodily death. In legal terms, I think the above evidence establishes this beyond any reasonable doubt.

The evidence is strikingly consistent and fits together very elegantly. I have been using the term "strands," and in this sense the term is very apt: all of the different areas we have covered are like the strands of web, which can be traced back to the same center, which supports them and connects them all. It's important to emphasize that there is *no other satisfactory explanation* for all these phenomena. The only possible way of making sense of phenomena such as NDEs, ADCs, children's past life connections and the results of experiments with high level mediums is through the notion of an afterlife. In my view, when one notion has such power, consistency and elegance as an explanation, then it has to be taken seriously.

Let's briefly review the evidence we have covered. Firstly – after unpicking the assumption that human consciousness must end with permanent physical death – we examined the evidence from near-death experiences. NDEs contain two aspects which argue in favor of survival: they indicate that consciousness can continue without brain activity, and they often feature encounters with deceased relatives and friends. (Additionally, almost everyone who has an NDE becomes convinced of survival.) We saw that NDEs are especially significant when they are "evidential" – for example, when people accurately report events that take place while they are "dead."

Second, we looked at a variety of after-death communications, including deathbed visions, crisis apparitions and other spontaneous, unexpected encounters with deceased people. We saw that these encounters are frequently evidential too – for example, when deceased people pass on information which is later found to be correct, or messages that are relevant. Crisis apparitions also hold significance because they often occur before the experiencer knows about the person's death.

The third strand of evidence is especially significant, since it includes a series of carefully controlled scientific studies: mediums who can make contact with deceased people and connect them with their living relatives and friends. Some high-level mediums show the consistently ability to share very specific and accurate details in situations where fraud would be impossible.

Fourthly, we looked at evidence from cases of the reincarnation type, many of which have also been rigorously investigated, and are impossible to explain except in terms of survival. Finally – and less evidentially – we examined the insights of mystics and other spiritually awakened individuals, who unanimously sense that there is some form of life after death.

As I have suggested throughout this essay, materialist explanations of fraud, coincidence or self-deception can't account for these phenomena. Although some researchers have suggested that the phenomena can be explained in terms of other anomalous factors – namely, the LAP (or superpsi) or psychic reservoir theories – I hope I have made it clear that these theories are inadequate too. I have no doubt that psi abilities exist but there is no previous evidence to suggest they function in the way that would be required to explain the accuracy of mediums' communications, or children's memories of their previous personalities, especially when the mediums and children do not demonstrate psi abilities in any other context.

This also applies to the psychic reservoir hypothesis, which in my view is even weaker the LAP theory. At least there is significant evidence that psi abilities exist. As yet, the psychic reservoir is a completely hypothetical concept, with no empirical support whatsoever. Even as a concept, it is difficult to make sense of. Why should all the events that have taken place since the beginning of time be stored somewhere? One could possibly imagine – in relation to some concepts and findings of modern physics, which treat time as spatial rather than linear – that all past and future events are somehow in existence now, taking place alongside present events. In this case, mediumship and reincarnation-type cases might be explained as a kind of retrocognition (that is, a re-experiencing of past events).

Perhaps mediums and children are simply reading past events, which are actually still taking place now. However, retrocognition (like precognition) always means reliving isolated events from the past, not the whole life of particular person. Surely, as I argued earlier, it would be impossible to isolate the events of a particular person's life from other people's. This also wouldn't explain the extent to which children and mediums take on the personality traits of deceased people.

In my view, both the LAP and psychic reservoir theories are simplistic and convenient explanations resorted to by people who – although they are open-minded enough to accept psi – are ideologically opposed to the possibility of survival. They are like 'Get out of jail free' cards that are produced whenever evidence points towards survival.

### *Beyond Understanding*

I suspect one reason why many people reject the idea of life after death is because they find it impossible to conceive of another dimension or realm of reality beyond the everyday world. This is one of the more subtle assumptions associated with materialism: that normal reality is *all there is*. If there is an afterlife, where could it take place? How could there possibly be some hidden dimension of reality where deceased people somehow live on? Surely, we know that there is nothing more than the physical world of particles and atoms, mathematical laws and physical forces?

From this point of view, the idea of an afterlife defies common sense. And that, in fact, is the essence of the problem. Materialism assumes that the commonsense view of reality is the truth. It tells us that we are aware of the world as it is, that there is nothing beyond our present awareness of reality. It tells us that our present understanding is reliable and fairly complete and will become more complete as time goes by – perhaps even leading to a point of complete understanding.

However, it's highly irrational to believe that we have a reliable or complete awareness of reality. Our awareness is clearly limited, like that of any animal. Compare our awareness of reality to a sheep's, for instance. We are aware of many phenomena and concepts which a sheep is probably unaware of – for instance, death, or the future and the past. But although we may have a more intense awareness of reality than most other animals, it is extremely unlikely that our awareness is complete. To believe otherwise is a form of anthropocentrism, tantamount to seeing human beings as the *end point* of the evolutionary process. It's probable that, at some point in the future other living beings will come into

existence who have a more intense awareness than us, just as we have a more intense awareness than sheep. These hypothetical beings may be more intensely aware of the phenomenal world around them than us, and aware of phenomena - forces, energies or laws - which are beyond the range of our awareness.

This relates the discussion in the previous section about spiritual awakening. There I compared awareness to a spotlight, which becomes wider and more intense in awakening. And this analogy can be used more generally. All living beings have their own spotlight of awareness. Even an amoeba has a certain degree of awareness, since it responds to changes in its environment and moves towards heat or light. But obviously its spotlight of awareness is very narrow. As living beings have evolved and become more physically complex - with increasing numbers of cells organized in ever-more intricate and complex ways – their awareness has become wider and more intense. Our normal spotlight of awareness is certainly wide and intense compared to most other animals (and becomes even wider and more intense in spiritual awakening), but it would be absurd to claim that it illuminates the whole of reality, or even a significant part of it.

So in my view, it is almost certain that there is, in Shakespeare’s phrase, “more in heaven and earth that is dreamt of in [our] philosophy.”<sup>99</sup> There are almost certainly forces, energies and phenomena in the universe beyond those which we can presently perceive and understand, or even detect. We may occasionally glimpse or experience some of these phenomena, in unusual states of consciousness when our awareness of reality becomes more subtle or more intense. A small proportion of people may be able to “tune in” to some of these wider ranges of awareness (at least the ones which are closest to us) regularly or may even have permanent access to them.

However, from the standpoint of our normal limited awareness of reality, we do not— and probably cannot — fully understand the phenomena of life, death, or consciousness. We cannot therefore dispute that human consciousness ends with the death of the body or dismiss the idea of an afterlife on the grounds that it defies common sense.

Another effect of our limited awareness may be that it is very difficult for us to understand the *nature* of an afterlife. To accept that human consciousness survives physical death seems like a striking conclusion, but in a sense it isn’t a conclusion at all. A conclusion suggests certainty, whereas the notion of survival opens up a giant realm of uncertainty, containing a vast array of questions. What is the nature of the afterlife? How long does it last for? Do we have bodies in the afterlife? If so, do our bodies age? Do we have to eat? Do we

have sex and have children? Does everyone get reincarnated? If so, does reincarnation involve a kind of progression from lifetime to lifetime, leading to a point where we no longer need to be reborn, as some traditions suggest?

Although the testaments of discarnates who speak through mediums suggest some inklings of answers, I suspect that we will never truly understand the nature of the afterlife until we experience it ourselves. Until then, we may just have to be patient.

Almost 20 years ago a close friend of mine called Eric died of an asthma attack at the age of just 34. It was a tragic unexpected death and naturally his funeral was a very somber occasion. I looked over at his parents and they seemed shell-shocked, completely broken down with grief.

But for some reason, during the funeral my own grief ebbed away, replaced by a strange sense of elation. I was filled with a buoyant positivity that I didn't understand, as if I had taken a powerful drug without realizing. It was a clear spring day, and when we walked outside the church I looked into the sunshine and felt overwhelmed by its radiance and clarity. I felt a sense of liberation which I was sure was connected to Eric, although I didn't know how.

At the time I didn't understand the experience. I felt slightly guilty about feeling so joyful on such a sad occasion. This was before I had examined the evidence for survival, when I was unthinkingly dismissive of the idea that a person's consciousness can continue after death.

But now that I am convinced that human consciousness survives the death of the body, I think I can recognize this experience for what it was. Deep down, I was sensing that Eric wasn't dead after all, that his consciousness was still extant, and was somewhere close by. I was sharing in his sense of liberation, now that he was no longer confined to his physical body. I was sharing in his elation at discovering that death doesn't mean extinction and oblivion but is the beginning of a new adventure. In some way, I was with my friend as he embarked on the next phase of his journey.

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