

ESSAY

Perspectival Awareness and Postmortem Survival

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Abstract—Critics of survival research often claim that the survival hypothesis is conceptually problematic at best, and literally incoherent at worst. The guiding intuition behind their skepticism is that there’s an essential link between the concept of a person (or personality or experience) and physical embodiment. Thus (they argue), since *by hypothesis* postmortem individuals such as ostensible mediumistic communicators have no physical body, there’s something wrong with the very idea of a postmortem person, personality or experience. However, critics can’t simply beg the question and assert that physical embodiment is essential to personhood, personality, or experience, because the evidence suggesting survival is a *prima facie* challenge to the contrary. On the other hand, defenders of ostensible mediumistic communication need to explain how postmortem awareness and knowledge of the current physical world can occur without a physical body that experiences the world and represents it accurately enough to ground veridical postmortem reports. This paper will first consider why survivalists face potentially serious problems in trying to make sense of apparent postmortem perception. Then it will consider a plausible—and arguably the only—way to deal with the issues. However, that solution turns out to be a double-edged sword. Ironically, the best way to deal with the problem of perspectival postmortem awareness may render the survival hypothesis gratuitous.

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1. Introduction

Critics of survival research often claim that the survival hypothesis is conceptually problematic at best, and literally incoherent at worst. The guiding intuition behind their skepticism is that there’s an essential link between the concept of a person (or personality or experience) and physical embodiment. Thus (they argue), since *by hypothesis* postmortem individuals such as ostensible mediumistic communicators have no physical body, there’s something wrong with the very idea of a postmortem person, personality or experience. Consider, for example, the following representative passage from A. R. Miller.

I find the very notion of *disembodied personality* logically inconceivable. A “person” is, essentially, a being which, among other things, perceives, acts, and thinks. Normally,

perception requires sense organs, action requires limbs, and thinking (in the broadest, Cartesian sense) requires a brain; I cannot *see* and read the billboard unless my eyes are open, I cannot *kick* the football without a leg, I cannot *imagine* Santa Claus without a cerebral cortex, and so on. In the total absence of such physical accoutrements, I cannot see how any of the sorts of activities constitutive of personhood are or could be possible. (Miller, 1998)

Although this line of thought is hardly outlandish, some versions of it are admittedly disappointingly glib. For example, Antony Flew's variant turns on the methodologically naive assumption that something is logically impossible if we can't form a mental image of it (see Flew, 1976, 1987, and the discussion in Braude, 1993, 2003; also, see Almeder, 1992). However, other accounts are more serious and raise genuine puzzles about postmortem existence—specifically, concerning the possibility and apparently *perspectival* nature of postmortem awareness of the physical world. In fact (and to his credit), Miller is one of those who recognizes that both advocates and critics of survival must address some interesting and complex issues here. Critics can't simply beg the question and assert that physical embodiment is essential to personhood, personality, or experience, because the evidence suggesting survival is a *prima facie* challenge to the contrary. On the other hand, proponents of survival (hereafter, *survivalists*) need to grapple with puzzles arising especially from cases of apparent mediumship. That's because mediumistic communicators often respond appropriately to and describe correctly—and, in fact, claim to experience—what's currently going on in the physical world. Of course, survivalists must endorse at least some of these occurrences in order to legitimate mediumistic communication as a source of evidence for their position. So they need to explain how postmortem awareness and knowledge of the current physical world can occur without a physical body that experiences the world and represents it accurately enough to ground veridical postmortem reports.

It may be surprising, then, that proponents of survival often have little to say about the relevance of physical embodiment to the manifestations of personhood and experience, apart from their efforts to deflect the more superficial and question-begging versions of the anti-survivalist critique. For example, readers will look in vain for a discussion or even acknowledgment of the issues in Fontana's recent book, widely (but incorrectly) regarded as a respectable defense of the survival hypothesis (Fontana, 2005; see Kelly, 2005, for a critical review). And in another—and much more conceptually sophisticated—work (Almeder, 1992), the instructive problems about perspective discussed below are missed entirely, although Almeder correctly targets some related issues (including the superficiality of Flew's position).

In this paper, I want first to consider carefully why survivalists face potentially serious, vexing, and largely unheralded problems in trying to make sense of apparent postmortem perception. Next, I want to consider a plausible—and, arguably, the only—way to deal with the issues. And finally, I want to show why that explanatory strategy is a double-edged sword. Ironically, the best way to deal

with the problem of perspectival postmortem awareness may render the survival hypothesis gratuitous.

2. The Perplexing Problem of Perspectival Postmortem Perception¹

Generally speaking, the substantive problem at issue here is the following (see Penelhum, 1970, and Sorabji, 2006, for presentations of the relevant arguments). Our everyday visual and auditory sense perceptions are perspectival—that is, they present themselves to us relative to and from the specific perspective of our location in space. That’s why our experiences of seeing and hearing are always from a point of view. We see and hear things to the right, left, or straight ahead, and at a certain distance. Of course, we explain the perspectival nature of these experiences with reference to the fact that our sensory receptors occupy specific positions in space.

Now suppose it’s true, as survivalists maintain, that after death we may continue having such perspectival experiences in the absence of a body. And suppose further that some of those experiences are veridical—that is, that they provide accurate information about states of the physical world. How are survivalists supposed to make sense of that? Since in disembodied survival nothing is literally *at* (i.e., extended at) any relevant location in space, there is apparently no basis for the alleged reports (transmitted through mediums) of a postmortem individual’s perspectival awareness of what the living are doing or saying (i.e., things that normally can only be observed or experienced from certain points of view in space). Presumably, when a person’s body has decomposed (or at least ceased all organic functioning), nothing in space can anchor and provide the spatial orientation of a sensory experience.

Initially, it might seem as if survivalists have a way to avoid this apparent problem. Perhaps they need only say that postmortem individuals experience physical states of affairs *as if* they are perceived from a spatial position. After all, by hypothesis these individuals no longer have (functioning) sensory organs to mediate sensory experiences. So perhaps survivalists should say that perspectival postmortem experiences are at best only *ostensibly* sensory, not genuinely sensory. But what does that mean? Under one reasonable interpretation, it even seems to undercut the survivalist position. For without sensory information arriving at spatially oriented sensory organs, why should we say that with these experiences postmortem individuals are actually *gaining information* about a certain location? They seem, rather, merely to be *imagining* what’s going on at a location.

Some of the more astute writers on mediumship have, in fact, taken this position, or at least come very close to it. For instance, Una Lady Troubridge offered the following in connection with Mrs. Leonard’s mediumship.

... Feda employs a vocabulary of very limited extent wherein erudite psychological terms have no place. Beyond the occasional emergence of such non-committal spiritualistic terms as “I sense” or “I get an impression of,” Feda is content to tell the sitter that she “sees,” “hears,” “feels,” or “smells,” as the case may be, though the medium’s eyes are invariably closed and neither the sights, sounds, sensations nor smells described are perceptible to the sitter. (Troubridge, 1922: 369)

... there are certain aspects of the Fedra phenomena which leave me very doubtful as to whether these simple sensory terms convey any accurate analogy with the processes really involved. (*ibid*)

For example, Lady Troubridge reports that on one occasion Fedra described “to Miss Radclyffe-Hall with accuracy and in great detail a portrait of Miss Radclyffe-Hall herself.” Fedra correctly noted the coloring of the picture, the pose of the figure and hands, and the seriousness of the figure’s expression. According to Fedra’s own statements, she “*sees* this picture and is able to describe it at such length, [but] never apparently for a moment grasps the fact that the picture being described by her is a portrait, and a striking resemblance at that, of the very familiar sitter to whom she is speaking” (pp. 370–371).

Similarly, Lady Troubridge writes:

It is surely incredible that Fedra or anyone else should *see* a person minus their most striking peculiarity of features or colouring, and yet this must frequently be presumed to be the case if Fedra’s seeing is to be accepted at face value. I have myself known her purport to see clearly a communicator whose appearance she minutely described, giving a perfectly accurate account of his features, complexion, expression, including the fact that he was remarkably handsome and struck her as having what she most evidentially described as “a clear look,” but she remained to all appearance in ignorance that the most distinguishing features of his appearance were prematurely snow-white hair of remarkable abundance, and eyes of a peculiarly vivid blue. (pp. 371–372)

Parenthetically, I have to note that I’m unsure just how revealing this incident really is. Don’t many or most people attend selectively to those things that matter to them, and don’t the things that matter vary widely from one person to the next? I know many people, myself included, who routinely miss the color of someone’s eyes in favor of other traits that to them are more outstanding or meaningful.

At any rate, Lady Troubridge concludes that Fedra’s alleged “sensory impressions could only be hallucinatory . . .” (p. 369). Of course, there’s a venerable (if not exactly noble) tradition within psi research of speaking about veridical hallucinations—for example, in connection with apparitional experiences (see Braude, 1997, for a discussion of this). However, even if that locution is defensible and not an oxymoron—which is certainly debatable—Lady Troubridge seems to be using the term “hallucination” in its more customary sense, according to which any correspondence between the content of hallucinatory experiences and actual states of affairs is fortuitous.

But survivalists won’t want to treat all mediumistic perception reports as nonveridical in that sense. That is, they can’t treat communicators’ ostensible perceptions *generally* as corresponding only fortuitously to the states of affairs in question, because those experiences are supposed to undergird some of the true claims communicators make about the physical world. And those true claims comprise most if not all of the empirical support from mediumship for the survival hypothesis.

Let’s look at this more closely. Mediumistic communicators’ claims are often regarded as evidence of survival precisely because they suggest the postmortem,

disembodied, existence of ante-mortem personality and *its continuing awareness of and interaction with the physical world*. So when communicators respond appropriately to spoken sentences, or correctly describe what's currently going on either with the medium, sitters, or with more remote states of affairs, survivalists interpret that as evidence that a deceased person somehow survives bodily death and continues to be in touch with what's happening in the world of the living. In fact, the deceased's awareness of and interaction with the living is a *necessary condition* for mediumistic communication, at least of the sort documented since the early days of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR).

But this means that survivalists must interpret *in causal terms* the ability of communicators to respond appropriately to interlocutors and to make true claims about the current physical world. For example, they would say that when deceased communicator "Uncle Harry" correctly describes the current location of an object in a sitter's house, what enables him to make that claim is his awareness of the actual state of the sitter's house. In that respect, at least, survivalists understand some ostensible postmortem cognitive states to be analogous to ante-mortem perception. Ordinarily we would say that I perceive—rather than merely imagine or hallucinate—the table before me because my experience results in part from my interaction with the object I perceive. And not only that. Ordinarily we suppose that my ability to *correctly describe* the objects I perceive is not random or accidental. In fact, we suppose it needs to be explained in terms of lawlike *causal regularities* having to do both with properties of the objects perceived and the physical properties of my sensory system. For example, it's in virtue of those regularities that I'm generally able to describe green objects as green or rectangular objects as rectangular. Granted, if I instead hallucinate or imagine the table, my inner episode might be qualitatively identical to a genuine perception of the table. But if the experience isn't caused by the table before me, it's not a postmortem analogue to perception. Indeed, in the absence of relevant causal regularities between the object's properties and my own, it would seem to be a matter of sheer serendipity that I manage to describe the object correctly. So if postmortem communicators merely imagine or hallucinate things in the world, their alleged experiences would—at best—correspond only fortuitously to the states of the world they ostensibly represent. But that undercuts the principal basis for taking mediumship seriously.

So if survivalists know what's good for them, they *must* claim that mediumistic communicators can interact causally with states of the physical world in a way that results in their having non-hallucinatory (or non-imaginary), nonbodily, and perhaps quasi-sensory awareness of those states. And then we're back where we started; the question remains: In the absence of physical sensory receptors, how would a disembodied individual be able to correctly describe current physical states of affairs? What enables that individual to detect the causally relevant features of the object(s) correctly described? And what supplies the perspective from which the information is apparently received and from which veridical mediumistic claims seem to be made?

Several potential survivalist maneuvers clearly won't work here. For example, survivalists can't claim that the medium's body temporarily supplies the physical basis for a communicator's sensory perspective, and that this enables communicators to perceive what's happening in the physical world. For one thing, communicators report that they're still aware of events in the physical world even when they aren't interacting with a medium. And for another, communicators often report physical states of affairs at locations perceptually remote from the medium. Moreover, survivalists can't maintain that a secondary or astral body supplies the needed perspective, because in some survival cases information is provided about matters that can't be perceived from *any* position in space—for example, the contents of a page in a closed book. Must we conclude, then, that survivalists are committed to a process (postmortem awareness, with perspectival features analogous to those in ordinary sight and hearing) that, given the hypothesis of disembodied survival, seems to be incomprehensible or impossible?

One proposed strategy for preserving both logical coherence and veridicality is to posit telepathic causal chains between sitters (or remote others) and mediumistic communicators. For example, Lady Troubridge says she suspects

that in many instances where Feda describes persons and objects, she uses the term "seeing" merely as a habit of speech, and that the process involved may be more likely a series of impressions received by her telepathically one at a time, or collected by her telepathically one by one from some mind incarnate or discarnate, as the case may be. (p. 371) (see also Salter, 1921: 87ff)

Although this strategy seems intelligible, it, too, can't be generalized to cover all communicators' reports of apparent sensory experiences. That's because communicators sometimes accurately report physical states of affairs unknown at the time to any living person and which are subsequently verified. Mrs. Leonard's book tests offer prime examples.

3. Philosophers Weigh In

Because only a handful of philosophers have taken both a serious and well-informed interest in the conceptual problems of survival research,² it would be odd to speak of a philosophical consensus about the issues. Nevertheless, it's interesting that two sophisticated philosophers have tried to make sense of ostensible perspectival postmortem experiences in purely subjective terms.

In his well-known essay, "Survival and the Idea of 'Another World,'" H. H. Price argued—contrary to the usual skeptical dismissals of survivalist claims—that the concept of a disembodied life subjectively similar to our own is at least intelligible (Price, 1953). He described how a dreamlike world of images could provide a postmortem individual with a first-person analogue to our subjective ante-mortem existence. And he suggested, further, that telepathic interactions between the deceased (including the telepathic production of apparitions) might furnish an analogue to objective relations and interactions between individuals in this world.

Now whether or not Price successfully demonstrates the intelligibility of a disembodied life in a next world, his conjectures are of no help to the survivalist in the present context. That's because Price doesn't explain how postmortem individuals manage to acquire veridical and apparently perspectival awareness of *this* world. In fact, Price makes no effort to explain how the deceased, locked into their own exclusively postmortem nexus of paranormal causality, interact with the living to produce *evidence* of their survival. Evidence of survival within a Pricean next world requires empirically discernable manifestations of postmortem existence—in particular, the deceased's continuing psychology (intentions, concerns, etc.). But that, in turn, requires some chain of causality *running in both directions* between the living and the deceased, allowing for mutual awareness and communication. But that's precisely what Price fails to posit, and without it, anti-survivalist interpretations of survival cases (including those positing nothing but living-agent or so-called "super" psi) seem to have a clear explanatory edge.³

Price even appears to grant as much in another paper, "The Problem of Life After Death" (Price, 1968). In this paper he suggests that mediums might engage in a kind of "dreaming aloud," in which (as in normal dreaming) they imaginatively supply their own apparently perceptual perspective, and in which they occasionally acquire veridical information about this world by ESP. Of course, that's simply an appeal to the sort of refined living-agent ESP that many survivalists mistakenly argue is antecedently implausible. Later we'll consider more closely why that survivalist position is mistaken.

But let's return now to the issue of apparently perspectival postmortem experience, and in particular to a proposal advanced by Terence Penelhum (Penelhum, 1970). At first, Penelhum seems to agree with H. H. Price that disembodied communicators enjoy an inner life of dreamlike images. But then he suggests, further, that we can construe these merely *seeing as if* (i.e., only apparently sensory) experiences as cases of *genuine* seeing. Unfortunately, however, that approach seems to suffer from problems analogous to those afflicting the claim (provisionally attributed to Lady Troubridge) that all communicators' apparently sensory experiences are hallucinatory.

Penelhum writes:

... there seems no difficulty in saying of a disembodied person that it might look to him as though there were objects before him which looked to him as they would to a normal observer under optimal circumstances from a certain position in space. I feel obliged to start from some such account as this because I can attach no sense to the notion of seeing from no point of view, or seeing non-perspectively. Given the intelligibility of this story, and given that there *are* objects in space arranged as stated, it seems quite pedantic to deny ... that our disembodied person *sees* them[.] So let us say he does. (p. 25)

There are several issues here. First, Penelhum may be right that the notion of *seeing* from no point of view is unintelligible or empty. However, he may also have overlooked a viable option. The evidence from relatively humdrum clairvoyance indicates that subjects can be *aware* in some sense of physical states of affairs (e.g., targets sealed in envelopes) whose sensory perception ordinarily

requires being suitably situated in space, but which at the time could not be perceived from any position in space. Thus, the evidence from clairvoyance can be taken to show that veridical awareness of physical states of affairs is possible even when there is no actual point of view from which the states of affairs can be accessed by sensory means. So even if non-perspectival *perception* is unintelligible, non-perspectival *awareness* seems to be a genuine option in both logical and empirical space. I'll return to this point later.

Moreover, it seems easy to demonstrate the implausibility of Penelhum's suggestion that a disembodied person really sees objects under the conditions he describes—i.e., conditions we might have described instead as being merely of the *seeing as if* variety. Consider the following situation. Suppose an embodied person *S* hallucinates an object *X* as being before him. Furthermore, since every hallucination (even the most fantastic or seemingly arbitrary) has some cause or other, let's suppose that *S*'s experience occurs as the result of a hallucinogen mischievously added to his breakfast cereal. But suppose further that *X* is really before *S*, so that *S* would have had a qualitatively identical visual experience had he *seen* rather than hallucinated *X*. Now, because *S*'s experience of *X* is caused by his spiked cereal rather than by *X*, its phenomenal content corresponds only fortuitously to what is actually in *S*'s perceptual field. That's why we wouldn't say that *S* saw or perceived *X* in this case. But then why attribute genuine seeing to a disembodied person *S_d* whose visual experience merely happens to be that which an embodied person would have from a certain position in space? It *doesn't* seem at all pedantic to say that *S_d* fails to really see the object.

Indeed, as I noted earlier, whether or not *S* sees *X* is something that needs to be cashed out in terms of an appropriate causal story. In particular, the existence, veridicality, and perhaps also the phenomenal (perspectival) quality of *S*'s experience must be explainable, in part at least, as the *result* of lawlike causal relations obtaining between *X* and *S*. But on Penelhum's proposal, a sufficient condition for *S*'s (say) genuinely seeing a person wearing a pink shirt is the mere fact that the person is wearing a pink shirt. Incredibly, it wouldn't matter whether the content of *S*'s experience is causally related to the state of the world it ostensibly represents. Hence, for Penelhum, genuine seeing (or sensing) gets robbed of its essential nomological character. Interestingly, Penelhum seems to recognize this. At one point he considers whether to assign the disembodied observer a location in space—that is, a position from which *X* would look to a normal observer the way it does to the disembodied *S*. And he writes: “we have to say that the disembodied person is at the place from which, when a normal observer sees the objects which our survivor now sees, they look to that observer the way they look to our survivor. Roughly, he has to be at the centre of his visual field” (p. 25).

But then Penelhum notes, “the first thing that seems to follow is that his seeing things the way he does cannot be construed as a [causal] *consequence* of his being where he is, for his being where he is *consists in* his seeing things the way he does” (pp. 25–26). And once again, the example above about hallucinating *X* shows why this won't work. We must still be able to differentiate hallucinating or imagining *X* from seeing (or otherwise being genuinely aware of) *X*, whether

or not *S* is embodied. But we can't do that unless we can tell some causal story about how the existence and nature of *S*'s experience results (in part at least) from the presence of *X* in the world and also lawlike regularities obtaining between *S* and *X*.

Now there's a notorious philosophical position, *phenomenalism*, according to which physical objects—although real—are nothing more than logical constructs out of more primitive sense-data (i.e., raw ingredients of perception, such as patches of color, shapes, textures, odors, etc.). So, for example, phenomenologists would say that the table before me is not really a lump of mind-independent matter affecting my equally material, mind-independent, and lumpy sense organs. Rather, the table is nothing more than a construct out of the sense-data I do in fact currently experience and also the sense-data I and others *would* experience under an indefinitely large array of possible (i.e., counterfactual) circumstances. And those possible circumstances would likewise be analyzed in purely subjective sensory terms—for example, having the experience of seeing the table through tinted glasses, or having the experience of lying beneath the table, or of seeing the table from a great distance.

So in the spirit of phenomenalism, some might think we can salvage the hallucination/perception distinction by claiming that only in the case of perception can we tell an appropriately robust counterfactual story. What we'd need to say would be something like the following: When a person genuinely perceives an object *X*, others, also having the experience of being suitably situated with respect to *X*, would also have experiences of *X* from corresponding points of view. However, if *S* merely hallucinated *X*, there would be no such correlations between what *S* experiences and what others do or *would* experience. For example, if I hallucinate (rather than perceive) a hippo in the corner, we wouldn't expect others having the experience of looking in that direction also to have visual hippo-in-the-corner inner episodes.

Of course, ordinary folk would explain this difference between hallucination and perception with respect to actual or possible relationships between observers and mind-independent physical objects. They'd say that in the case of genuine perception there really *is* some lump of matter that affects *S*'s sense organs in accordance with various causal laws, and which does or would likewise affect the sense organs of suitably situated others. But that avenue is not open to someone who construes physical objects as *constructs* out of actual and possible sense experiences, or as J. S. Mill put it, "permanent possibilities of sensation." So, unfortunately for the phenomenologist, there seems to be no comparable causal story, since on that view there are no mind-independent lumps of matter to interact causally with a perceiver's sense organs. And that renders the difference between hallucination and perception completely mysterious. Unless one is prepared to abandon strict phenomenalism and posit a deity behind the scenes either arranging things in advance (à la Leibniz) or holding models (archetypes) of objects in mind (à la Berkeley), phenomenologists have no explanation of why suitably situated possible observers *would* have the experience of perceiving a physical object. Of course, if survivalists were to adopt this phenomenologist strategy,

that might be the least of their problems. They would also inherit *all* the famous problems afflicting the phenomenalist program, including having to defend themselves against the charge of solipsism and having to explain how—on their idiosyncratically empiricist grounds—they can justify reference to other minds. But that’s another story (see Aune, 1985, for a nice summary).

4. A Philosophical Digression

At this point, it might be useful to take a slight detour from the topic of postmortem survival. That’s because key features of the debate we’re considering about perspectival experiences may have a counterpart in traditional epistemology. If so, there’s reason to think that errors in that arena may prove instructive for the topic at hand.

A well-known position in the philosophy of perception is *causal realism*. Roughly, the causal realist maintains that what we perceive directly are private internal states or mental images (e.g., Humean impressions and ideas), and that in at least many cases these subjective inner episodes are caused in us by mind-independent external objects and events. (A subset of causal realists maintain—arguably incoherently or at least gratuitously—that these inner states tend to resemble or represent their external causes. That view is usually called *representational realism*.) Following Hume, some have argued for causal realism (CR) along the following lines.

CR:

- (1) When we look at a table and then back away from it, what we perceive gets smaller.
- (2) But the table presumably does not change size.
- (3) *Ergo*, what we perceive is not the table, but a private mental image caused in us by the table.

So causal realists maintain that we’re not in direct perceptual contact with the physical world. Rather, a veil of ideas (or mental images) stands between us and the external things that produce many of those inner states. In effect, these mental images are *intermediate objects of perception*. Moreover, since we don’t directly perceive tables and other external objects, the best we can do epistemologically is to infer that these things exist. Thus, the causal realist position very quickly raises the spectre of solipsism. If what we know immediately are only private, inner episodes, and if we have to infer the existence of their causes in an external physical world, how do we know there’s anything out there at all?

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, many philosophers launched what they considered to be a kind of common-sense reaction against causal realism and (they hoped) its egocentric descent into the black hole of solipsism. Common sense seems to tell us that we are, in fact, directly in touch with the things around us—a view often disparagingly called *naïve realism*. But the twentieth-century resurgence of that position (which I like to call *born-again naïve realism*) offered an interesting argument strategy in its defense.

Born-again naive realists argued that traditional causal realism was misled (or seduced) by a too-easy adoption of perception language when describing the relation we have to our impressions and ideas. They claimed that by carefully re-describing situations like backing away from a perceived table, we can undermine the temptation to posit intermediate objects of perception and thereby restore to respectability the view that we're in direct contact with the world around us.

The proposed re-description would go something like this. When we back away from the table, we continue to perceive the table all the while, but the table merely *seems* or *looks* smaller. In this way, we avoid positing an epistemological gap between the table and ourselves; the only object of perception is the table. The point of this re-description is not to deny the existence of inner experiences (sense impressions) such as mental images. It's merely to deny that perception of external things is *mediated* by a more basic perception of internal things, so that we're inevitably separated from a world of things-in-themselves by a veil of ideas or sensuous curtain.⁴

A related strategy works even for hallucinations and dreams. For example, when I hallucinate a hippo in the corner, typical causal realists might say I perceive the hallucinated hippo (a collection of sense data), and that this intermediate and inner object of perception has no external counterpart as its cause. The born-again naive realist would counter that even here there's no need to say that I'm seeing a special, private mental object. Rather, in this case I perceive nothing at all. I merely *seem* to perceive a hippo. Again, no need to posit a perceptual relationship between me and a mental image.

Now, we needn't worry about whether or not this strategy succeeds in undermining Humean skepticism about the physical world. In fact, some would argue that so long as perceptual error is possible, skepticism can successfully drive a wedge between us and knowledge of the external world. Although I would dispute that dialectical strategy, we can nevertheless treat the debate between causal and born-again naive realists as a kind of philosophical cautionary tale. Even if skepticism about the physical world is a legitimate philosophical problem, it's far from obvious that Hume (or causal realists generally) have set up the problem correctly. At least one form of that problem may result from an inappropriate adoption of perception language and an unjustified positing of special, private objects of perception. Similarly, in the debate about perspectival postmortem awareness, both survivalists and anti-survivalists may have hastily adopted perception talk when describing how discarnate communicators respond to physical states of affairs.

5. The Solution That Isn't

With the foregoing in mind, we're now in a position to consider how survivalists might best respond to the puzzles about perspectival postmortem awareness. In my view, a promising strategy—arguably the only one—is to focus on the point noted earlier about humdrum clairvoyance—namely, that the evidence demonstrates how living persons can have a kind of non-perceptual awareness of remote

physical states (e.g., targets in sealed envelopes, pages of a closed book) whose perception ordinarily requires being suitably situated at a location, but which at the time could not be perceived from any position in space. Since that form of awareness apparently doesn't rely on ordinary (or, quite possibly, any) spatial cues, survivalists might therefore argue that postmortem awareness of the physical world is "merely" clairvoyance, and that the only difference between ante-mortem and postmortem clairvoyance is the ontological status of the subject. Survivalists can thereby deflect concerns about perspectival perception; they would be positing no form of perception at all. On this view, mediumistic communicators (like successful clairvoyant subjects) can enjoy either perspectival or non-perspectival awareness (not perception) of physical states in the absence of suitably positioned sensory organs.

This strategy has several virtues. First, it connects the survival hypothesis to a large body of both experimental and anecdotal evidence for clairvoyance. So even though some aspects of the survival hypothesis strike many as wildly conjectural, this way of interpreting the hypothesis at least gives it a kind of empirical footing, albeit partial and still somewhat controversial. Second, it preserves the pre-theoretically useful distinction between (on the one hand) hallucinating, imagining, or dreaming of an object and (on the other hand) having a veridical and non-fortuitous awareness of it causally mediated by that object. After all, however unusual it may be in other respects, clairvoyance is still a fundamentally causal concept. To posit clairvoyant awareness is to posit a causal link between the subject and the remote state of affairs of which the subject is aware. Granted, the mechanisms of clairvoyance, if there are any,⁵ may be mysterious. But if clairvoyance really occurs (as various converging strands of evidence indicate strongly), and especially if it ranges over objects not currently perceivable from any position in space, then we may need to regard it as a form of veridical awareness that differs profoundly from paradigmatically emanative or transmissive forms of perception such as seeing and hearing (see also Broad, 1953).

And if we're willing to take that step, we might find it tempting to make a further bold move. We could entertain seriously the exciting possibility that ordinary sensory (i.e., embodied) perception is merely a special, biologically-mediated case of a more primitive form of clairvoyant awareness operating outside a strictly biological domain.⁶ And for those not yet willing to drive a survival-sympathetic wedge between empirical awareness and biological functioning, we could retreat a step and substitute "organismically-mediated" for "biologically-mediated." That is, we could regard ESP (both telepathy and clairvoyance) as basic—and a typically unconscious or subconscious—way by which at least some complex organisms acquire information about mental and physical states of the world, and then we could take ordinary conscious and discursive forms of awareness to be considerably less frequent subsets of those interactions not only mediated by, but also constrained by, the organism's needs and limitations.

This would not be a new point. In fact, H. H. Price once cautiously advanced a similar suggestion and linked it to Leibniz's monadic theory (Price, 1940). For

Leibniz, each monad (mental unit) represents or expresses the entire universe from a point of view, and that process of representing or expressing the universe is what Leibniz termed “perception.” Price controversially interprets that claim as meaning that perception for Leibniz is always both telepathic and clairvoyant. I doubt whether that reading of Leibniz is justified, but in any case there are more serious obstacles to resolving the present problems in terms of Leibniz’s monadology. For one thing, I’m not sure it’s a good idea to dissolve the distinction between perceptual and non-perceptual awareness. As I hope the preceding discussion has illustrated, that distinction has considerable utility. Second, Leibniz’s metaphysics works only through the grace of a benevolent deity arranging all perception according to a principle of pre-established harmony. And third, even if we manage to purge this view of its theological trappings, we would still need to explain “why there *seems* to be so little clairvoyance, and why the vast bulk of our perceptions or representations remain unconscious” (Price, 1940: 57). At any rate, important as this thread may be, it’s an avenue of speculation that must be reserved for another time. For now, we must return to the matter at hand.⁷

A third virtue of the approach I’ve been suggesting concerns the fact that much of the evidence for clairvoyance points to a form of awareness not necessarily accompanied by rich mental imagery, or in fact any imagery at all. For example, in classic card-guessing experiments, many anecdotal reports, and even some successful remote-viewing trials, subjects may report nothing outstanding in the way of internal imagery, although they often have hunches and impulses to act. In that respect, clairvoyance would resemble subliminal perception, which also occurs in the absence of reportable phenomenal correlates. However, it differs from subliminal perception in that the latter relies on familiar causal links to objects in one’s vicinity, the same kind that account also for the perspectival nature of ordinary, non-subliminal perception. By contrast, in clairvoyance the spatial location of a person’s sensory receptors presumably plays no causal role. The reason all this is important is that it offers a precedent for those survivalists willing to claim that postmortem communicators can have veridical awareness of physical states in the absence of mental imagery caused by those states. Granted, communicators often use perception terms to describe their states of awareness, but as Una Lady Troubridge suggested, that may indicate nothing more than our limited linguistic options for reporting those states. We needn’t suppose that the awareness is actually accompanied by vivid, ordinary, or any mental imagery—the kind that has traditionally generated the puzzles we’ve been considering. So by modeling postmortem awareness after “ordinary” clairvoyance, survivalists can posit a process distinguished from both hallucination and subliminal perception by either the existence or nature of their causal links to the physical world, but which (like subliminal perception) lacks the familiar phenomenal features associated with ordinary sensory perception.

So I think it would be prudent for survivalists to adopt a threefold strategy: first, to claim that postmortem communicators can be clairvoyantly (not perceptually) aware of physical states; second, to claim that this type of awareness may or may not be accompanied by internal imagery; and third, to claim that when there

is imagery it's explainable either in terms of causal properties of the objects of which the subject is aware or else by the subject's own creative and idiosyncratic tendencies to generate internal imagery—just as seems to be the case with living subjects in successful clairvoyance experiments.⁸

Of course, many survivalists will probably be reluctant to pursue this strategy, because then they would clearly need to abandon an argument they unwisely use against the rival “super-psi” hypothesis—namely, that the nagging alternative of living-agent psi posits a kind and degree of psychic functioning that is antecedently implausible, or at least far in excess of any that has been demonstrated experimentally. Whether they like it or not, nonbodily postmortem awareness of the physical world would be a paradigm instance of clairvoyance. It would be an awareness of physical states unmediated by the physical and sensory mechanisms leading to ordinary perception. Moreover, in scope, consistency, or refinement it wouldn't differ significantly from the clairvoyance super-psi proponents attribute to mediums or sitters instead. On the contrary, every exchange of information between a communicator and the mind of a living person, and every apprehension by a communicator of a physical state of affairs, would be an instance of ESP. And of course, the mediumistic evidence for survival consists of a great many of these purported events, many of them quite startling in the specificity and obscurity of the information they provide.

So, ironically, the best defense against the arguments noted earlier might be one that undercuts a standard attack survivalists use against their chief parapsychological rival. It would require an explicit and serious concession to psi-sympathetic anti-survivalists: an endorsement of the view that the survival hypothesis presupposes the operation of refined or frequent clairvoyance and telepathy between the deceased and the physical world.

It seems to me, then, that survivalists are faced with the following challenge. First, they must learn to embrace the possibility of refined psi if they plan to count mediumship as a source of evidence for survival and if they hope to counter the puzzles we've considered about perspectival postmortem experiences. That's the only way survivalists can satisfactorily explain postmortem awareness of both physical states of affairs and also thoughts of the living. So not only is the appeal to postmortem ESP mandated by the survival hypothesis, it also offers significant explanatory benefits. But in that case, if survivalists hope to argue effectively against living-agent psi as a general alternative to the survival hypothesis, they must rely on some strategy other than asserting the implausibility of so-called “super psi.” My suspicion is that survivalists can escape this dilemma only by claiming—without any clear justification—that the anti-survivalist appeal to living-agent psi posits not simply the unfortunately labeled super-psi, but something much grander and considerably more implausible. Let's call it (with tongue firmly and appropriately in cheek) *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious psi*.

I should emphasize that I'm not arguing against the survival hypothesis, even though I've appealed to clairvoyance to solve the more thoughtful puzzles raised about ostensible postmortem awareness. If my approach has any merit, it merely

demonstrates again, and from another angle, why survivalists should abandon their insistence on the implausibility of anti-survivalist appeals to psi among the living. Granted, it also reinforces a conclusion I've defended elsewhere at length: that it's exceedingly difficult (if not impossible) to defend the survival hypothesis against the hypothesis of living-agent psi (see Braude, 2003). Nevertheless, it demonstrates how survivalists can deflect the usual concerns about the intelligibility of the survival hypothesis without severing needed causal links between the worlds of the living and the deceased.

Notes

- ¹ Sorry, but the temptation for excessive alliteration was irresistible.
- ² On the other hand, philosophers have had plenty to say—both pro and con—about the intelligibility and possibility of disembodied existence. Typically, though, these works proceed without any consideration of the evidence suggesting survival, and sometimes they're adorned with the usual ignorant disparaging references to that material. For example, Blose (1981) says that the survival hypothesis "is supported by meager evidence and that from the most disreputable of sources," none of which he bothers to cite. At any rate, the philosophical literature on disembodied existence, while extensive, is singularly unhelpful in the present context. Nevertheless, intrepid readers might wish to investigate, e.g., Everitt, 2000; Gillett, 1986; Hocutt, 1974; Long, 1977; Smart, 1971; Steinberg and Steinberg, 2007; Taliaferro, 1997; and Tye, 1983.
- ³ "Super psi" is a very unfortunate term which by now is probably too well-entrenched to abandon routinely in favor of "psi among the living" or something equally cumbersome. For a discussion of the problems with that clearly loaded expression, see Braude (2003). I prefer to follow Michael Sudduth in replacing the term "super psi" with the less prejudicial and clearer "living-agent psi" (Sudduth, 2009: 167–193).
- ⁴ The debate here also concerns other related issues—for example, whether inner experiences can be known with certainty, or whether they can be described in a way not parasitic on a more fundamental level of description applicable to outer things. But those issues needn't concern us here.
- ⁵ For comments on the possibly irreducible nature of paranormal causal connections, see Braude (1997, 2003).
- ⁶ I'm grateful to Andreas Sommer for reminding me of this.
- ⁷ Ed Kelly has pointed out to me another intriguing possibility considered by some psychologists—namely, that "ordinary perception is oneiric activity constrained by sensory input" (personal communication, July 9, 2008). This, too, is a topic which, although clearly relevant—and perhaps also happily compatible with Price's suggestion (noted earlier) that mediums dream aloud—goes beyond the scope of the present paper.
- ⁸ For more on the idiosyncratic and highly variable experiences of clairvoyant subjects, see Braude (2003: chap. 8).

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