

Survival: What Makes An Ideal Case?

Much of the literature of psychical research describes episodes that suggest that the mind survives the death of the body. Philosopher Stephen Braude points out that many such cases are marred by flaws, and considers what would make an ideal case. (Note: examples in this article that involve named individuals are purely hypothetical, intended for illustration purposes, and did not actually occur.)

Introduction

Even the best cases that appear to constitute evidence survival of death have shortcomings. Good mediumistic communications can be diluted by twaddle or outright ‘misses’, or by ‘hits’ that suggest psychic interaction not with the dead but with the living, or by trance impersonations that too dimly resemble the individuals they purport to be. Reincarnation cases often lack *early-bird* testimony – that is, testimony collected before the previous personality was identified^[1] – or from a shortage of idiosyncratically specific ‘hits’ or demonstrated skills uniquely linked to the previous personality. In fact, it seems clear that no actual survival case is as coercive as the ideal cases one can easily imagine.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that we *can* imagine cases so impressive that, if such a case would actually occur, we would have to regard it as indicating survival, even if we have no idea how to integrate that revelation into a coherent worldview. And that fact suggests that we should be cautious about giving great weight, as many do, to prior anti-survivalist metaphysical presuppositions.

What Makes a Case Ideal?

Obviously, by ‘ideal’ here we mean something like ‘really, really, good’. No survival case can be ideal in the sense in which the abstract concept of a triangle, say, can be ideal. Presumably, an ideal survival case would be one for which appeals to what Braude called the Usual and Unusual Suspects are clearly out of the question.^[2] It would also be one that, while perhaps not conclusively ruling out appeals to living-agent psychic functioning, nevertheless strains that hypothesis to breaking point, where even people sympathetic to such paranormal conjectures are inclined to throw in the towel.

It is unlikely that one could compile an exhaustive list of essential features of a postmortem survival case, but we can at least note some obviously desirable features. Some apply more clearly to reincarnation and possession cases than to instances of mediumship. And most help counter obvious counter-explanatory strategies, for instance those based on depth psychology. They are as follows:

- 1) Our case would not exhibit the etiological features found in cases of multiple personality/dissociative identity disorder (MPD/DID) or other psychological disorders. For example, mediums should not have a documented history of psychopathology. And in a reincarnation case the phenomena should not manifest after the subject experiences a traumatic childhood incident.

- 2) The manifestations of a previous personality (or discarnate communicator) should not, in the light of competent depth-psychological probing, serve any discernable psychological need of the living.
- 3) Those manifestations should make most sense – or better, should only make sense – in terms of agendas or interests reasonably attributable to the deceased.
- 4) The manifestations should begin, and should be documented, before the subject – or anyone in the subject’s circle of acquaintances – has identified or researched the life of the deceased.
- 5) The subject should supply verifiable, intimate facts about the deceased’s life.
- 6) The history and behavior of the previous personality – or entranced medium ostensibly channelling the deceased – should be recognizable, in intimate detail, to several individuals, preferably on separate occasions.
- 7) The subject should also be able to display some of the deceased’s skills or traits – the more idiosyncratic the better.
- 8) These skills or traits should be as foreign to the subject as possible – for example, from a significantly different culture to which the subject has had no exposure.
- 9) Skills associated with the deceased should be of a kind or of a degree that generally require practice, and that are seldom if ever found in prodigies or savants.
- 10) In order for investigators to verify information communicated about the deceased’s life, it should be necessary to access multiple, culturally and geographically remote, and obscure sources.
- 11) The manifestations of the deceased should continue to provide verifiable information and credible behavioral simulations for an extended period of time, adding to the crippling complexity of living-agent-psi explanations.

To see how an apparently ideal case might develop, let us now consider two hypothetical scenarios.

Case One

This hypothetical case would presumably be considered to be one of ostensible reincarnation or possession.^[3] Suppose someone discovered a society of native Amazonians who had previously eluded all contact with other peoples. And suppose that the discoverer was someone who himself had little knowledge of other cultures, and certainly no knowledge of US culture. Suppose, next, that one of the Amazonians spontaneously (and without preceding trauma) goes into trance and begins speaking in a language the explorer does not know. So the explorer records the utterances, has them translated, finds that they are in English, and discovers that the Amazonian was claiming to be Knute Rockne, the famous football coach of Notre Dame University. (And of course, let us assume that we can rule out fraud and the other Usual Suspects.) At this point, English-speaking investigators interrogate

the Amazonian, who answers them in English and responds in ways others recognize as idiosyncratically Rockne-esque.

Based on these later interviews as well as the original recordings, we discover that the Amazonian displays a level of US college football knowledge comparable to that of Knute Rockne, and also a set of extensive apparent memories that Knute Rockne would be expected to have. We also find that the Amazonian displays Rockne's distinctive mannerisms of speech, his customary posture, gait, gestures, facial expressions, and other physical characteristics, his apparently inspirational persona, and his peculiar attitudes on and emotions about various subjects. The Amazonian's statements will thereby demonstrate a great deal of knowledge which neither he nor the investigators possessed beforehand – not just knowledge about Rockne himself, but also about his time and culture.

For example, suppose that the Amazonian Knute Rockne persona expresses political opinions about the current US political scene and which are consistent with what is known about Rockne's earlier political views. And suppose the Amazonian displays a great and seasoned coach's grasp of the subtleties of college football, not simply outside the scope of those investigating the case, but also beyond that of even ardent fans of the game. Moreover, suppose the Amazonian seems to know matters which only Rockne should have known, or which only he and close associates might have known – and which certainly no investigator of the case knew prior to lengthy follow-up investigation.

For example, Knute Rockne would have known about scandals on his team that were concealed from the press. He would have had memories of games that he coached, and specific memories of his players and their histories and skills. He would have had a vast reservoir of stories about specific plays in specific games, as well as stories about specific players. These would not simply be stories that could be substantiated; and indeed, the Amazonian offers an impressive quantity of stories, both substantiated and unsubstantiated. For example, Rockne was reportedly the only person who knew what 'The Gipper' said upon his deathbed. Rockne told his team that the Gipper's last words were 'Win one for the Gipper'. But some think Rockne concocted the story to motivate his team after the Gipper's death. If the Amazonian native is really a reincarnation of – or medium for – Knute Rockne, then ideally he would be able to resolve the debate over this incident in a credible way.

Clearly, this case presents a number of features we would look for in an ideal case. Many of them result from the geographic and cultural distance between the subject and the deceased, something that distinguishes this case from the vast majority of survival cases. Here we find responsive xenoglossy in a language quite different from that of the previous personality. We also find extensive and refined propositional knowledge (knowledge-*that*) appropriate to the previous personality but far outside the scope of the Amazonian's culture.

Similarly, the case concerns a skill (coaching college football) that is culturally specific to the USA and which seems to require an extensive period of practice to be expressed at the advanced level of proficiency manifested by the Amazonian. The native also displays an extensive array of behavioral and physical traits of the

previous personality, as well as various motives, interests, and other attitudes idiosyncratically appropriate to that individual, but irrelevant to and far outside the culture of the Amazonian. And many of these features of the case were exhibited *before* the appearance of investigators who spoke English and who knew something about the previous personality's culture and history. So at least obvious forms of sitter-telepathy seem ruled out.

Case Two

Our next case illustrates a kind of classic mediumistic ideal. Mrs B is a gifted medium. Her formal education did not extend beyond primary school, and her exposure to the world has been confined exclusively to her immediate small-town environment in the American Midwest. She never travelled beyond her hometown or expressed any interest in books, magazines, or TV shows about other locales. Similarly, she has had no exposure to the world of ideas, to literature, even in cinematic form, or to the arts. In fact, when she is not channelling communications or caring for her home and family, she devotes her time to prayer and developing her psychic sensitivity.

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

When Mrs B handles the watch, she goes into trance and, speaking English as if it were not her native tongue and with a clear Scandinavian accent, purports to be the surviving personality of the Finnish composer Joonas Kokkonen. She also speaks a language unknown to anyone at the séance, which the sitters record and which experts later identify as fluent Finnish. At subsequent sittings, native speakers of Finnish attend, along with the proxy, and converse with Mrs B in their language. All the while, Mrs B continues to speak Finnish fluently, demonstrating an ability not only to utter, but also to understand, sentences in Finnish. In both Finnish and in accented English, Mrs B provides detailed information about Kokkonen's life and his music, demonstrating in the process an intimate acquaintance with Finnish culture, a professional command of music generally, and a knowledge of Kokkonen's music in particular. For example, on one occasion she writes out the final bars to an uncompleted piano quintet and requests that they be given to Kokkonen's former colleague, Aulis Sallinen, who she claims correctly has possession of the original score, so that the quintet can be assembled into a performing edition. Investigation then reveals that Sallinen does in fact have the original score, in the condition described by the Kokkonen communicator.

These sittings cause a minor sensation in Finland and elsewhere, and before long many of Kokkonen's friends travel to have anonymous sittings with Mrs B. Because Kokkonen was a major international musical figure and had friends and colleagues throughout the world, many of those friends are not Scandinavian. So at least those sitters provide no immediate linguistic clue as to whom they wish to contact. But in every case, Mrs B's Kokkonen-persona recognizes the sitter and demonstrates an intimate knowledge of details specific to Kokkonen's friendship with the sitter. When speaking to Kokkonen's musician friends, the Kokkonen-persona discusses particular compositions, performances, or matters of professional musical gossip. For example, with one sitter, the Kokkonen-persona discusses the relative merits of the Finlandia and BIS recordings of his cello concerto, neither of which the sitter had heard, and then complains about the recording quality of the old Fuga recording of his third string quartet. With another sitter, the Kokkonen-persona gossips enthusiastically and knowledgeably about a famous conductor's body odour.

Moreover, when speaking to nonmusician friends, the trance-persona speaks in similar detail about matters of personal interest to the sitter. Some of these later sittings are themselves proxy sittings. For example, the composer Pehr Nordgren arranges, anonymously, to be represented by a Midwestern wheat farmer. Mrs B goes into trance immediately, mentions a term of endearment by which Kokkonen used to address Nordgren, and begins relating a discussion the two composers once had about Nordgren's violin concerto. Communications of this quality continue, consistently, for more than a year.

As in case one, the subject of this case displays an enormous wealth of knowledge about a culture quite foreign to her own, as well as vast knowledge-that and knowledge-how of musical matters well beyond her education and exposure. Moreover, the quality and quantity of 'hits' continues unimpeded for a considerable period of time.

Evaluation

One would think that if we actually encountered cases of this quality, we would have to agree with Robert Almeder^[4] that it would be irrational in some sense not to regard them as compelling evidence of survival, even if we did not know how to make sense of them theoretically, and, in the most extreme scenario, even if our prior underlying metaphysics was clearly uncongenial to the idea of postmortem existence. Moreover, if several cases of (or near) that quality appeared, they would have a cumulative force. They would obviously comprise precisely the kind of evidence that could lead us to revise, abandon, or at least seriously reconsider a conventionally materialist worldview. Contrary to what many anti-survivalists seem to believe, philosophical intransigence in the face of such cases would not demonstrate admirable tough-mindedness. Instead, it would betray indefensible intellectual rigidity.

Unfortunately, we simply do not encounter cases of this quality; even the best of them disappoint in some respects. Nevertheless, the very best cases are rich enough to give us pause – at least if we do not have a metaphysical axe to grind. At any

rate, one virtue of looking at hypothetically ideal cases is that they remind us that it is not an idle enterprise to consider less than-ideal cases, even if the evidence is consistently frustrating in one way or another. The quest is not futile; the evidence *can* point persuasively, if mysteriously, to postmortem survival, at least in principle.

One of the most commonly expressed concerns about cases suggesting survival is that we cannot make sense of the persistence of identity in the absence of bodily continuity. A standard response to that concern is that psychological criteria of identity, for example, persistence of memories or personality traits, are often as satisfactory as physical or physiological criteria.

In fact, one would think that we should be able to apply to postmortem cases the same psychological criteria of identity that we apply, usually unproblematically, in everyday cases. Granted, we might still feel puzzled by the postmortem cases, and we might be unable to explain – or say anything interesting about – how survival could occur following bodily death. We may simply be at a loss philosophically and scientifically. But that is hardly unique to postmortem cases. Besides, it is pretty much irrelevant – although it may still be annoying – that hypothetically ideal postmortem cases challenge us conceptually and even violate some people's physicalist assumptions.

Although philosophers and others are often reluctant to admit this, practical considerations trump abstract philosophy every time, and if we really encountered a case as good as the ideal cases we can construct, and especially if the case mattered to us personally, our reflective metaphysical scruples would count for nothing. For example, we would not hedge our bets and say (as some philosophers have proposed) that it is not really survival, but only the persistence of what matters to us in survival.^[5] Rather, we would say that the deceased individual had actually, if mysteriously, survived bodily death.

Interestingly, as philosopher [CJ Ducasse](#) noted,^[6] the hypothetical cases we have considered resemble in critical respects a more familiar situation, one in which identity judgments are – and more importantly – *need to be* made without relying on evidence of bodily continuity. Suppose I received a phone call over a noisy connection from an individual purporting to be my friend George, whom I thought had died in a plane crash. Although I cannot establish the speaker's identity by confirming his bodily continuity to the George I knew, and although the noisy phone line sometimes makes it difficult to hear what the speaker is saying, nevertheless my conversation can provide a defensible *practical* basis for concluding that George is really speaking to me. The speaker could demonstrate that he had certain memories that no one but George should have, and he could exhibit characteristically George-esque personality traits, verbal mannerisms, as well as idiosyncratic motives and interests. Whether or not the persistence of these traits satisfies a metaphysician's criteria of identity, they will often suffice for real-life cases.

Similarly, if my phone conversation was with a person who claimed to be speaking to George and relaying his words to me, and vice versa, this situation would be analogous to cases where a medium conveys messages from communicator to

sitters. Obviously, it is more difficult to discern the communicator's personality traits under these conditions, and that clearly deprives us of one type of evidence of survival. Nevertheless, if the content of the conveyed information is highly specific and intimate, it might justify concluding that George lives and is communicating directly to the person on the phone.

Conclusion

It seems clear, then, that we can have at least *prima facie* evidence for postmortem survival, however mysterious that evidence may be to us, both scientifically and philosophically. Hypothetically ideal cases illustrate how compelling the evidence *could* be, and the best actual cases illustrate further that thinking about postmortem survival is not just idle speculation. Moreover, it is clear that, if the evidence is compelling enough, and especially as it more closely approaches our theoretical ideal, our ignorance about how survival could occur is simply an annoyance we would have to accept but which we can always hope to dispel.

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Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ See Braude (2003).
2. ^ The Usual Suspects (not surprisingly) would be fraud, malobservation, misreporting, and cryptomnesia. And the Unusual Suspects would be dissociation, extraordinary memory, or latent and prodigious talents.
3. ^ The basic material of this excellent example originated with a former student, Amy Lynn Payne.
4. ^ Almeder (1992).
5. ^ See, for example, Martin (1998); Parfit (1984).
6. ^ Ducasse (1961).