

Supplemental web material for
“Empirical Challenges to Theory Construction,”
Edward F. Kelly, Chapter 1, *Beyond Physicalism*,
Edward F. Kelly, Adam Crabtree, and Paul Marshall (Eds.).
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

From Chapter 9,
Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century,
Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, et al.
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

All rights reserved.

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442202061>

[amazon.com](https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442202061)

certainly it falls far short of the form proposed by Gauld (1968) as necessary for a “conclusive” demonstration—specifically, “the bringing to light in a large number of people of a hidden stream of consciousness which could give a coherent and testable account of its own past history and actions” (p. 299). Nevertheless, it seems to me definitely possible and perhaps even probable, especially in light of the evidence flowing from mystical experiences, that Myers and James really have identified a more or less correct account of the overall structure and dynamics of the human psyche—one, furthermore, that is capable of accommodating in a natural way a far wider array of empirical observations than any of its rivals. In sum, although Myers’s theory of the Subliminal Self is by no means proven, it constitutes at minimum, in my estimation, a viable and useful working model capable of guiding further research.

Post-Mortem Survival

And now what about Myers’s most central concern—whether there is or is not personal survival of bodily death? Survival is not ruled out *a priori* and in general by filter or transmission models of mind and personality, as it is by all conventional production models. On the other hand, animistic or filter models themselves do not as a class necessarily entail survival, although they do render it in varying degrees less improbable.

Myers clearly regarded survival as an almost inevitable corollary of the specific type of personality theory that he elaborates in *HP*, and indeed to demonstrate this forms the central strategy and goal of his exposition (his “broad-canvas” approach; see our Chapters 2 and 4). At the same time, it should be recognized that the empirical case for survival does not depend on the correctness of this particular theory. I wish next to summarize the collective sense of our group as to the empirical status of this problem.

The basic issues have already been framed in Chapters 4 and 5. Briefly, detailed and specific information has sometimes come forward—under conditions which rule out “normal” explanations involving conscious or unconscious cheating, cryptomnesia, defects of memory or reporting, cold reading, and the like—which suggests the possible continued existence in some form of previously living persons. In the best such cases the potentially viable explanations appear reduced to two principal candidates, either survival itself or some sort of extreme supernormal (psi) process involving only living persons.

Myers was convinced by the evidence available to him—while acknowledging that it might not be as convincing to others (*HP*, vol. 2, p. 79)—that survival is a fact of nature: “It seems to me now that the evidence for communication with the spirits of identified deceased persons through the trance-

of personality,” some subset of which can be told off into the supraliminal self or personality and shared by both (see also Braude, 1979).

utterances and writings of sensitives apparently controlled by those spirits is established beyond serious attack” (*HP*, vol. 1, p. 29). Myers’s acceptance of personal survival seemed to many of his colleagues at the time, and still seems to us, premature. This impression, however, may in part reflect the fact that much of what Myers himself regarded as his best evidence was either never published at all or could not be published in a manner that adequately conveys the impact of evidential details and their verisimilitude available privately to him. His well-known emotional interest in survival, in any event, seems unlikely to have biased his judgment, as he himself pointed out (*HP*, vol. 2, p. 294; see also our Chapter 2).

A considerable amount of additional evidence suggestive of survival has accumulated in the subsequent century, some of it of very high quality. Most of this evidence is of types already known to Myers, although acquired in larger amounts and with various methodological refinements, while some—such as cases of the reincarnation type, including those involving birthmarks and birth defects (Chapter 3)—is almost entirely new. The net result of this accumulation of evidence has been to bring the conflict between survival and “super-psi” interpretations into ever-sharper relief, as pro-survival researchers have sought to identify phenomena and testing procedures that increasingly strain the relative credibility of super-psi interpretations.

For example, it might initially seem plausible that a medium could acquire information sufficient to impersonate some deceased individual through telepathic interactions with sitters, especially if a single sitter is present who has exactly the relevant information. That plausibility may seem to diminish, however, when no such person is present, as in a “proxy” sitting; or in sittings when a “drop-in” communicator appears, unknown to anyone present but subsequently identified as a formerly living person; or when the necessary information is distributed across multiple individuals, some of whom are not present; or when some of that information is also contained in obscure documents not even known at that moment to exist. Conversely, survival seems to become more plausible to the degree that many sources of relevant information are potentially available, with some conflicting, yet the ostensible communicator delivers information circumscribed precisely to that which the deceased person himself would have known, in a manner demonstrably in accord with his intentions, and with his characteristic mannerisms, diction, humor, and the like.¹¹

11. See the Appendix. Another interesting kind of survival evidence involves the display not only of appropriate information but of high-level *skills* such as the linguistic skills involved in “responsive xenoglossy,” the capacity to speak fluently a foreign language not learned by normal means. Stevenson, for example, has documented extensively the case of Sharada, in which a secondary personality in a young Hindu woman spoke and wrote an archaic form of Bengali appropriate to the life she claimed to have led some 150 years earlier. She also provided factual details about that life that Stevenson was able to verify, but only by means of an extremely laborious investigation of obscure historical records (Stevenson, 1984; Stevenson & Pasricha, 1979; see also Braude, 2003, chap. 4).

This brief and abstract description will serve, I hope, to illustrate the general flavor of these debates, which seem to many well-informed observers to have arrived at a logical impasse. The core problem hinges on the fact that information provided by an ostensibly surviving communicator can only be verified by reference to information which is known to some living person or persons, or objectively documented in some other fashion, and hence which is also in principle potentially accessible to some sort of psi process. It is therefore always possible to invent scenarios according to which apparent evidence of survival can be “explained” alternatively in terms of psi processes involving only living persons. Such scenarios may need to be fantastically complex, but psi has been shown in various experimental contexts to operate in a “goal-oriented” manner unaffected by the apparent “complexity” of its tasks (H. Schmidt, 1987), and consequently they cannot be decisively refuted. But note the real logical peculiarity here: It is not that we have positive knowledge that psi processes *can* accomplish the extraordinary things required by such explanations, but rather that we are presently unable to prove they *cannot*.¹²

Let me conclude this section with a few general observations on the net status of this debate. First, it involves a large body of relevant empirical evidence which at present is virtually unknown to the great majority of laypersons and scientists alike. Our Appendix provides many pointers into this literature, emphasizing sources which illustrate in cogent form properties of the sorts characterized above as particularly suggestive of survival. We insist that anyone who wishes to participate meaningfully in discussions of the survival question must study this literature, thoughtfully and with an open mind.

Second, the core issue of super-psi versus survival cannot be decisively resolved at the present time. Persons sufficiently determined to deny survival while accepting the reality of psi can continue to do so rationally, but provisional acceptance of the survival hypothesis is also rationally warranted by the evidence available. One might also choose, of course, to defer commitment either way, pending further information.

As a matter of historical fact, able and informed students such as Braude (2003), Broad (1962), Dodds (1934), Ducasse (1961, 1969), Gauld (1982), G. Murphy (1945), Price (1966), and Stevenson (e.g., 1977; 1997, chap. 26), among numerous others, have divided more or less equally, and for the most part narrowly, along the two sides of this divide. Some have remained undecided, and Stephen Braude, for many years a particularly determined defender of super-psi interpretations, has recently moved tentatively to a mildly pro-survival position much like our own.

Our general attitude toward super-psi explanations, in the first place, is essentially that of Ducasse (1969):

12. The survival hypothesis itself, of course, must also invoke psi processes of some sort to account for information flows between mediums and communicators.

When Occam's razor is alleged to shave off survival as a superfluous hypothesis, and to leave ESP as sufficient to account for all the facts in evidence, it turns out that ESP cannot do it without being arbitrarily endowed with an *ad hoc* "beard" consisting not of capacity for more far-reaching *perception*, but of capacity for reasoning, inventing, constructing, understanding, judging; i.e. for *active thinking*; and more specifically for the particular modes of such thinking which *only* the particular mind whose survival is in question is *known* to have been equipped with. (p. 41)

Secondly, the totality of the evidence now available seems to us to have tilted the balance somewhat further in favor of the survival hypothesis. Of particular significance in this regard, in our opinion, are mediumistic cases involving proxy sitters (E. W. Kelly, in press) and drop-in communicators (for references to this research, see Braude, 2003, chap. 2; and Gauld, 1982, chap. 5), cases of the reincarnation type (e.g., Stevenson, 1997, 2001), and NDEs occurring under extreme physiological conditions (our Chapter 6). The last may in the long run prove especially critical, for they arise from the very heart of mainstream biomedical science, and seem likely to become more numerous and compelling as our capacity to rescue physiologically monitored human beings from the borderland of death increases.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the broader theoretical setting that frames this debate is itself shifting, and in a manner that makes survival appear to us more likely. In Chapter 3 we highlighted the dynamic interplay between fact and theory in the specific context of phenomena of extreme psychophysical influence, showing how previously suspect empirical phenomena suddenly become acceptable once scientists find a theory that appears to permit them. We think a process of this sort is already underway in regard to the entire range of interrelated empirical phenomena discussed in this book and that this will ultimately vindicate Myers's "broad-canvas" approach to the survival question itself.

More specifically, we think that if other things were anywhere near equal, most rational persons would conclude, on the basis of the available evidence, that survival in some form is at least possible, and perhaps even a demonstrated empirical reality. The problem, of course, is that "other things" seem to most scientists nowhere near equal, because of the seemingly overwhelming antecedent improbability of survival in the context of present-day mainstream science and philosophy. As G. Murphy and Dale (1961) had already remarked, "it is the biological and the philosophical difficulty with survival that holds us back, not really the unacceptability of the evidence as such" (p. 213). We believe, however, that these theoretical difficulties can be greatly attenuated or even removed, and in a way that potentially accommodates most or all of the rogue phenomena we have discussed, survival included.

We will attempt shortly to demonstrate this in some detail. Meanwhile, although we ourselves are collectively disposed to regard survival in some form as at minimum an empirical possibility, and perhaps even a probability, I hasten to add that we expressly disavow any more specific claims, at

present, as to its incidence and nature. A wide range of possible forms can be discriminated (Broad, 1962, Epilogue), and there exists at least some evidence consistent with each of them. These range from mere transient persistence of at least a few memories, to persistence of something much like the earthly personality with evidence of thought, planning, conscious will, and so on (Ducasse, 1961, 1969), to merging into some sort of transpersonal field (G. Murphy, 1945). It may seem plausible to suppose like Myers that if anyone survives in personal form we all do, but in making this particular leap Myers was certainly too hasty, for survival could perfectly well occur in widely differing forms and durations for different persons, or not at all, depending on a host of factors we currently know nothing about.¹³

I will leave the matter there for present purposes. Whether or not readers are swayed by our assessment of the survival issue, we will be satisfied if we have convinced them of the difficulty and importance of the problem, and of the fact that it is amenable to empirical investigation. We also wish to emphasize in concluding this section that a choice must ultimately be made between super-psi and survival interpretations of the survival evidence. *Both* horns of this dilemma are in our view fatal to the current mainstream materialist synthesis, but the occurrence of survival in particular—of any form—would decisively resolve the conflict between production and transmission models of mind-brain relations in favor of some sort of transmission model.

Myers's Generalized Concept of Evolution

As Chapters 2 and 7 have already indicated, the concept of evolution is central to Myers's theory of personality (*HP*, vol. 1, p. 19). He accepted Darwin's doctrine of natural selection as the basis of organic evolution, but sought to integrate it with his own conception of human personality as rooted in a hidden, wider environment that underlies and interpenetrates the world of ordinary experience, at bottom a spiritual or "metetherial" realm lying beyond the material as classically conceived.

The main novelty of this broadened conception of evolution is set forth in his chapter on genius (*HP*, vol. 1, pp. 93–98, 111–120). Like conventional evolutionary theorists, Myers recognizes that new capacities emerge in conjunction with the sorts of "protoplasmic" changes played upon by natural selection. Unlike such theorists, however, he thinks of these capacities as being not so much *generated* by the organic changes as *released* by them from the subliminal or metetherial realm, in which in some sense they already existed, latent but unrealized. Thus,

I hold, of course, that sports or variations occur, which are at present unpredictable, and which reveal in occasional offspring faculties which

13. The same comment applies, of course, in relation to the evidence for reincarnation.