

Climbing Mount Evidence

A Strategic Assessment of the Best Available Evidence for the
Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death



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Notes: In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the material discussed in this essay for the readership, I have made ample use of the excellent online *Psi Encyclopedia* of the *Society for Psychical Research* in addition to citing printed scholarly sources. References to online sources are given as underlined numbers.

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1 Introduction

The question of whether human consciousness can survive permanent bodily death is one of the most tantalizing enigmas of our existence. Unfortunately, most scientists shy away from addressing this enigma. Many seem to think that there is not much to investigate because it has already been shown that consciousness is produced by brain chemistry, and will dissolve as soon as neuronal activity ceases. However, I am convinced that this notion is inappropriate for two reasons.

First, from a theoretical perspective, nothing in physics and chemistry predicts that protons, electrons, atoms, or molecules will produce something like consciousness. Therefore, trying to explain consciousness in physicochemical terms amounts to backward reasoning from the start. In fact, William James, the founder of American psychology, argued more than 100 years ago that it is principally impossible to prove that brain chemistry produces consciousness—all we can observe are “concomitant variations” of brain states and states of consciousness.[2] Accordingly, many modern neuroscientists speak of “neuronal correlates” to states of consciousness in order to avoid fostering the unwarranted notion that consciousness is produced by neuronal activity. Indeed, there is not even a strict parallelism between brain states and states of consciousness.[3,4]

Second, from a practical perspective, many scientists have already investigated phenomena at the frontiers of knowledge that question the physicochemical “production hypothesis” of consciousness. These phenomena have chiefly been studied in research disciplines known as *psychical research* or *parapsychology*. The phenomena themselves are usually referred to as *telepathy* (conveying knowledge or feelings from one individual to another without using the usual sensory channels), *clairvoyance* (perceiving information or events without using the usual sensory channels), *precognition* and *retrocognition* (perceiving future or past events), and *psychokinesis* (psychically affecting matter). These *psi phenomena* occur comparably rarely, but they do occur and they are perfectly natural. Millions of people have experienced them in everyday life.

Likewise, phenomena suggestive of survival have been reported since time immemorial. Hence, these experiences can be studied using standard methods of science. More than that: Given that survival is one of the most fundamental questions facing mankind, it is the *duty* of scientists to study survival-related phenomena, and to do so with an impartial spirit. Among those who have often insisted that studying such psi phenomena including survival should constitute the most important function of science was the renowned biologist, philosopher and parapsychologist Hans Driesch (1867–1941).[5] He furthermore advocated for

“the joy in tracing specifically those prospects the facticity of which has hardly yet been explored, perhaps only foreboded. Only new discoveries take us further, and the ‘newer’ they are, the more do they take us further. *Hence my interest in parapsychology.*”[6,p.300]

In many of his writings, Driesch emphasized that, in natural science, empirical data and arguments are of foremost significance. He stressed that when we discover evidence for phenomena that don’t fit into the currently prevailing world model, we must stay open to revising this model rather than disregarding inconvenient data. Driesch proposed three guiding principles for the study of psi phenomena that are as topical today as they were almost 100 years ago:[7]

- Do not regard any fact “impossible” in an aprioristic way.
- Do not believe that new facts must necessarily be explained by means of explanations already established.
- Try to construct bridges to established scientific disciplines.

However, it seems that only a few scientists shared such a rationale. One of them was psychiatrist Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, who considered the study of spontaneous psychical phenomena occurring in everyday life exceptionally important. He counted survival phenomena among these. In a Presidential Address at a convention of the *Parapsychological Association* in 1968, Stevenson presented three arguments for his desire to develop improved methods for the study of spontaneous cases in parapsychology in addition to performing quantitative laboratory experiments:[8]

- Spontaneous cases provide some of the best evidence we have for psi phenomena.
- They often provide much richer information than the outcomes of laboratory experiments.
- They pertain to everyday life and have a profound influence on the beliefs and actions of the people who come into contact with them.

Stevenson was convinced that the withdrawal of many parapsychologists from the study of spontaneous cases had resulted in a loss of public support and interest in parapsychology. Although he admitted that studying such cases could have methodological weaknesses, he insisted that the appropriate answer would involve improving investigation methods rather than abandoning their study.

I fully agree with Stevenson’s appraisal, while adding that the possibilities for studying and documenting spontaneous cases, including survival phenomena, have improved considerably since 1968. Of course, they will continue to improve. Therefore, the aims of the present BICS

contest to identify the best available evidence for human survival, to raise awareness among the public and within the scientific community, and to encourage future research, are of supreme topicality.

In my contribution, I argue that there is substantial evidence that establishes the survival of human consciousness. By “survival of human consciousness” or “human survival”, I mean a broad notion covering “any aspect of a personality that displays a seemingly self-aware identification and verifiable knowledge continuity with a deceased personality”.

My essay is structured as follows: In the succeeding Chapter 2, I identify the best available evidence for survival among the different kinds of survival phenomena. I demonstrate that this best evidence is constituted by cases of the reincarnation type (CORT). While doing so, I largely treat the discussed survival phenomena as reported and touch only lightly on their reliability and authenticity, or on how they might best be explained. In order to be truly convincing, the power of explanatory models for a range of given phenomena must be tested by applying them to the most compelling data or evidence. Hence, the best survival evidence among all considered phenomena should first be identified, and only *then* must the nature of this best evidence be questioned in more depth. Therefore, I only perform an in-depth discussion of different explanatory models for survival phenomena with regard to CORT.

But before that, Chapter 3 introduces several facets of CORT in more detail. Providing a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenology of CORT is important for determining the most appropriate explanatory model for them. This determination is crucial because it is not enough to merely identify the best available evidence for survival—one must also check whether this evidence is *good* evidence. As philosopher Michael Sudduth pointed out, the best available evidence for something can still be weak overall and lack persuasive power.[9]

The in-depth analysis of the strength of the evidence for survival provided by CORT is performed in Chapter 4, relating it to two alternative explanatory models:

1. *The physicalist model.* This model is based on the assumption that consciousness can be explained by physics and its derivate, chemistry; it is the above-mentioned physicochemical “production hypothesis” of consciousness. Here, psi phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance cannot occur. Likewise, the extra-corporeal existence of consciousness and memory, including survival, cannot occur. All witness testimonies in CORT that favor survival are therefore regarded as flawed in one way or another.
2. *The living-agent psi model.* This model is based on the assumptions that eyewitness testimonies about survival phenomena are largely authentic and that psi phenomena such

as telepathy and clairvoyance can occur. However, it is argued that survival phenomena are not generated by the deceased, but by those still alive. Driven by specific individual motives, living people activate hidden psi faculties and psychically obtain the information required to simulate survival phenomena including CORT. Thereby, usually without even consciously knowing it, they fulfill their own hopes and needs—for example, by creating an apparition or, in CORT, a “reincarnated” loved one. This model might sound unreasonable for those not familiar with parapsychology, but many parapsychologists acquainted with the huge variety of psi phenomena take it very seriously and it is prominently discussed in the literature concerning the survival question.

In Chapter 5, I put the outcome of the discussions about CORT back into the larger perspective of other survival phenomena and human life, and frame it in the context of “proof beyond a reasonable doubt” as requested in this context.

In Chapter 6, I provide an outlook concerning future perspectives.

2 Determining the Best Evidence for Survival

In order to determine the best available evidence for human survival from a contemporary perspective, I have considered 10 survival phenomena. These are listed below, roughly following the occurrence of significant cases over the course of history.

1. After-death contacts including near-death visions
2. Hauntings
3. Poltergeist phenomena
4. Physical mediumship
5. Mental mediumship
6. Near-death experiences
7. Hypnotic past-life regression
8. Cases of the reincarnation type²
9. Instrumental transcommunication
10. Terminal lucidity

I used five criteria to determine the evidential strength of these survival phenomena.

1. *Investigability*: Possibilities for investigating a single case; duration of the phenomena; accessibility for researchers; potential numbers of independent eyewitnesses.
2. *Repeatability*: Multiple occurrences of similar cases at different times and locations; possibilities for involving different researchers.
3. *Quantitative strength*: Complexity or richness in details of the provided survival evidence in single cases and case collections.
4. *Qualitative strength*: Clarity of observational conditions and reliability of eyewitness testimonies; degree of objectivity vs. subjectivity; (un-)ambiguity of the phenomena with regard to being interpreted in terms of survival but not by alternative models.
5. *Relevance*: Degree of the phenomena's relatedness in meaning to human survival after permanent bodily death.

² For readers already familiar with survival literature: I have subsumed cases of the possession type within cases of the reincarnation type. There are fascinating reports according to which a living person was *temporarily* possessed by an ostensibly deceased personality who provided correct information about their past life, e.g., the case of Lurancy Vennum.[10] However, they are extremely rare and it is currently as good as impossible to find and investigate them. Furthermore, the somewhat more abundant cases of the possession type involving people whose personality seems to have become replaced *permanently* by a deceased entity display a striking similarity to cases of the reincarnation type; e.g., the cases of Sumitra Singh[11] and Jasbir Jat[12]. Therefore, I regard them as a subcategory of the latter in this essay. This idea was also proposed by reincarnation researcher James Matlock, who called cases suggestive of permanent possession cases of “replacement reincarnation”. [13,14]

For all survival phenomena, I assigned each criterion a score of appropriateness on a simple scale running from “low” (1), “relatively low” (2), “relatively high” (3), to “high” (4). The best evidence for survival from today’s perspective was determined by comparing the sums of these scores for every survival phenomenon, their “survival scores”.

The survival phenomena that attained the highest scores were cases of the reincarnation type, mental mediumship, after-death contacts including near-death visions, and near-death experiences. This is hardly surprising because these are precisely the survival phenomena that have been most frequently discussed in the more recent literature on survival. Hence, I will only consider these four survival phenomena in more detail below. Table 1 at the end of this chapter also provides the scores of the other survival phenomena.³ In the following sections, I describe how the survival scores of the most promising survival phenomena were determined.

After Death Contacts including Near-Death Visions

Typical cases of after-death contacts (ADCs) comprise the unexpected perception of an apparition of a deceased individual who appears briefly and then vanishes again. It may be perceived collectively by several percipients, including animals, thus displaying a degree of objectivity or at least of intersubjectivity. Frequently, the apparition may convey a message to the percipients, for instance providing comfort. Other examples concern *crisis apparitions*, in which people perceive apparitions of people who indicate that they have just died, or are on the verge of dying—but without the experiencer knowing this through any normal means. Here is an impressive example:

A dog, two adults, and five children were together in a room at 6 pm in May. Suddenly the dog began to bark loudly and jumped towards the corner with the stove. The seven people followed the dog’s movements with their eyes. In the corner, they saw an apparition of a child in a shirt that looked like a boy who was a friend of the family and often came to play. The apparition started to float above them, leaving the room through an open window. The dog followed the moving apparition through the room, continuously barking fervently. The episode lasted for about 15 seconds. Later in the evening, the family learned that this boy had died at about the time they saw his apparition.[15,16]

³ The detailed determination of the survival score of the six survival phenomena not examined in this essay is available from the author. This supplement contains c. 3,000 words excluding the references.

There is a huge body of literature on ADCs, but the best documented cases can still be found in monumental treatises published by founding members of the *Society of Psychical Research*.^[15,17] They comprise different subcategories of ADCs including collectively perceived apparitions. A later classical analysis of the phenomenology of apparitions has established that there are virtually no detectable differences between apparitions of the living and apparitions of the dead, which leads to the logical inference that the dead might be living as well.^[18] Many ADCs also occur in dreams, and in modern times, even malfunctions of electronic devices that appear meaningful are sometimes interpreted as ADCs. A recent study has confirmed that ADCs are widespread and cannot easily be regarded as hallucinations.^[19]

An intriguing subcategory of ADCs consists of near-death visions (NDVs). These ADCs are reported by the dying. Just as with ADCs perceived by healthy individuals, the dying may perceive a bright light that appears somehow related to a deceased spirit, hear inexplicably beautiful music of unearthly quality, and most importantly, see apparitions of deceased loved ones. But the dying typically perceive apparitions who come to prepare them for their death, often with the apparent purpose of guiding them into the afterlife realm. The experiencers are usually still conscious and may tell the bystanders of their visions in real time or later. Sometimes, the dying even report having met individuals in NDVs whose death was unknown to them at the time.

From the perspective of studying survival, NDVs are of specific significance because they don't only comprise apparitions of the deceased, but also concern the dying themselves. NDVs even occur in patients who have been nonresponsive for months or years because of neurological disorders such as Alzheimer's disease that appeared to have destroyed their brains. Still, such patients can sometimes display a sudden and unexpected reemergence of lucid mental clarity, recognize family members again, talk with them, report an NDV, and then die.^[20]⁴ These drastic experiences indicate that NDVs, which occur in an identical manner in patients dying with healthy brains, might be occurring in relative independence of the precise status of the prevailing brain chemistry.

⁴ In 2009, I coined the term "terminal lucidity" for this unexpected (re-)emergence of normal or unusually enhanced mental abilities in listless, unconscious, or mentally disabled patients shortly before death.^[21–23] Many cases of terminal lucidity do *not* contain NDVs, however. Still, this phenomenon has since been covered in several publications and survival-related treatises, and it has widely been recognized that incidents of such paradoxical episodes of lucidity occur more frequently than previously assumed. Because it might provide new insights into the neurobiology and future therapeutic possibilities for people with dementia, six pioneering studies funded by the National Institute on Aging are presently being launched in the USA to assess these enigmatic paradoxical lucid episodes.^[24]

This assumption is supported by large-scale studies performed on NDVs. In these investigations, Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson assessed the hypothesis that NDVs are hallucinations caused by disturbed brain functions and psychological needs shortly before dying.[25,26] In three surveys, they mailed a total of 15,000 questionnaires to physicians and nurses in the USA and addressed hundreds of Indian medical staff members in person. Hundreds of reports about NDVs were returned. Among visions concerning apparitional figures alone (excluding visions of otherworldly landscapes, etc.), Osis and Haraldsson followed up more than 600 cases with additional questionnaires and telephone interviews. They tested the following postulates:

- Patients taking medication prone to inducing hallucinations and/or suffering from high fever shortly before dying should report more NDVs than others.
- Patients dying in a state of stress and anxiety should report more NDVs than those dying calmly.
- Patients dying rather unexpectedly and in the expectation of recovery should report more visions related to this world whereas patients dying in the expectation of death should report more otherworldly elements including deceased individuals.
- NDVs should vary greatly from individual to individual, being shaped by personal memories, hopes, religious afterworld beliefs, etc.

Interestingly, none of these postulates was confirmed. Osis and Haraldsson concluded that the hallucination model is therefore not as likely as it might appear at first sight. Rather, NDVs display an autonomy of their own that seems largely independent from the mental dispositions of dying individuals and their brain chemistry. From the survival perspective, this is exactly what one would expect. This is also confirmed by the many collective and reciprocal NDVs on record in which concordant observations were reported by two or more witnesses.

Now to the survival score of ADCs including NDVs: The *investigability* of a single case of a typical ADC is “relatively low”, thus giving a score of (2). This is because most ADCs occur spontaneously and privately, and only occur for a very short time, perhaps for a few seconds, and all this perhaps only once in a lifetime for some people. Hence, it is extremely difficult to study and document ADCs in real time. They can usually be assessed only in retrospect. But as the above-mentioned classical treatises on ADCs and studies of NDVs demonstrate, retrospective assessments still allow substantial evidence for survival to be gathered, and therefore, one cannot consider the possibility of investigating a given ADC entirely “low”. It is “relatively low”.

The *repeatability* of ADCs including NDVs in the sense of their multiple occurrences over time and space that allow their investigation is, however, “relatively high” (3). These experiences occur

on a regular basis all over the globe, and because many people live and die on it, they occur frequently. However, because of their unpredictability and ephemeral nature, the repeatability of ADCs cannot be considered “very high”.

The *quantitative strength*, or complexity and detailedness, of ADCs including NDVs is “relatively low” (2). The observed details often suffice to identify a deceased individual and to understand the conveyed message; but on the whole, this is obviously not much.

The *qualitative strength* of ADCs including NDVs is likewise “relatively low” (2). Obviously, the conditions of observation as well as the witness testimonies of ADCs are often not satisfactory. ADCs frequently come as a complete surprise, even on the sickbed. Also, most are only reported by a sole witness, or at best by a few individuals. And even in these collective cases, the witnesses may report divergent observations: Tom may report having seen a bright light, but Jerry may in addition report having seen a human shape in this light. Hence, ADCs imply a degree of subjectivity even in collectively perceived cases, which impedes the formation of an objective judgment about the witness testimonies. These aspects of ADCs are also relevant for their interpretation in terms of survival. On theoretical grounds, it is often not easy to determine whether an apparition perceived only fleetingly was created by the deceased individual him- or herself or was a hallucination of the living percipient. All this contributes to rendering the qualitative strength of ADCs “relatively low”.

Nevertheless, the overall *relevance* of ADCs including NDVs for survival after permanent bodily death is obviously “high” (4).

Mental mediumship

All cultures had or still have their seers, healers, or shamans who communicate with the deceased. In Western cultures, mental mediums typically provide written or spoken information that is supposedly conveyed by deceased communicators. Frequently, such mediums sit around a table together with other sitters, and these communicators speak or write using the body of the mediums. Many mediums fall into trance, thus uncoupling the usual control over their body from their conscious awareness. The crucial question in mental mediumship is: Do the supposed communicators reveal veridical knowledge about the deceased, and can it be excluded that the medium learned such information via normal information channels? In this regard, the following three facets of mental mediumship are often regarded most compelling:

- Astonishing quality and quantity of accurate information conveyed by seemingly purposeful communicators via extraordinarily gifted mediums
- Drop-in-communicators
- Cross-correspondences

In the psychical research literature, several mental mediums have been regarded as extraordinarily gifted, especially Leonora Piper (1857–1950). She was investigated by numerous different researchers of high academic standing, and was even observed secretly by private detectives to ascertain that she didn't acquire her knowledge via mundane information channels. Nevertheless, the information she provided about deceased individuals who communicated through her still proved to be accurate, and she was never caught cheating.[27,28]

In cases of drop-in communicators, a purportedly deceased individual who is a complete stranger to everyone present at a mediumistic sitting begins to communicate through a medium. The communicator “drops in” unexpectedly. A renowned and apparently well-documented case of this sort took place in Iceland.

The case concerned a personality called Runki. He provided sufficient information at the sittings to be identified as a person who had really lived. Runki described several details of his life and occurrences concerning his death that proved to be correct. The most bizarre detail concerned a thighbone of his: He stated it hadn't been buried along with the rest of his corpse after his death sixty years ago. Now, he wanted it back and gave indications where it was to be found. Indeed, the laborious attempts of the sitters to find a bone matching Runki's descriptions were finally successful, and he was satisfied.[29,30]⁵

Cross-correspondences concern a specific experimental design that involves more than one medium. They are supposed to demonstrate that the transmissions are carefully planned by self-aware entities in the afterlife realm, coordinating these experiments in a manner that would be hardly possible for the subconscious minds of the mediums and/or the sitters to achieve on their own. They are like a puzzle, as the following example shows. It involves three mediums who lived in Boston, New York, and Niagara Falls.

Around the same time in the evening of March 3, 1928, one medium wrote the letters “El.”, the second medium “C.A.”, and the third medium received the impression of “M”. When all notes were put together along with the additional information provided, it

⁵ For other intriguing cases of drop-in communicators, see the overview article by Wehrstein.[31]

became clear that the ostensible communicator from beyond intended to communicate the word “camel” via these three mediums.[32]

The most famous cross-correspondences were recorded on thousands of pages by members of the *Society for Psychical Research* from 1901 to 1932. They involved five primary mediums, among them Mrs. Piper, plus a few other mediums who played a minor role.⁶

The *investigability* of mental mediumship is theoretically “high”. The mediums usually work in light and can in theory be observed and documented by investigators at will. But for many decades, extraordinarily gifted mediums, drop-in communicators, and cross-correspondences haven’t been investigated, presumably because suitable mediums and researchers were simply not available. Hence, from a contemporary perspective, the investigability of the most compelling aspects of mental mediumship is only “relatively low” (2). The same goes for its current practical *repeatability*, which is also “relatively low” (2). Consequently, even recent treatises about the survival question routinely discuss the same paradigmatic historical cases such as those listed above (Mrs. Piper, Runki’s leg, cross-correspondences). Nevertheless, the *quantitative strength* of this historical material alone is already “high” (4). Psychical researchers of the past have provided sufficient documentation to show that, in some cases, substantial amounts of precise information can be conveyed via mediums for considerable time periods by a given communicator, and emotional and other behavioral idiosyncrasies of the supposedly deceased individual can contribute to generating a quite vivid and realistic impression of them. The *qualitative strength* of mental mediumship is, however, only “relatively high” (3). On the positive side, the possibilities of fraud and misinterpretation by eyewitnesses can be reduced to a reasonable minimum under appropriate investigative conditions. The documented transmissions may thus be difficult to explain in mundane terms. Moreover, the high-quality facets of mental mediumship such as drop-in-communicators and cross-correspondences also pose more challenges to models relying on living-agent psi than, for example, the brief perception of an apparition. However, because all communication with ostensible interlocutors from the beyond must be conducted via a medium serving as intermediary, and because these mediums are often in trance, even veridical information provided by these ostensibly deceased individuals is still prone to being attributed alternatively to 1) the retrieval of latent forgotten knowledge, or 2) a psi-conducive dissociated state of the medium that enables the retrieval of information clairvoyantly or telepathically, but without entailing a factual deceased communicator. Therefore, the qualitative strength of mental

⁶ The best in-depth analyses of these cross-correspondences still consist of Emil Mattiesen’s numerous articles plus a long analytical section in Vol. 2 of his major treatise on human survival.[33] For a short English introduction, see Hamilton.[34]

mediumship cannot be regarded as “high”. But its *relevance* for the question of survival after bodily death is self-evidently “high” (4).

Near-death experiences

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are extremely powerful experiences that people may live through during a severe health crisis, frequently at the brink of death. Although they are marked by cultural influence, NDEs share a common core structure featuring several elements. For instance, many NDEs begin with an out-of-body experience (OBE) during which individuals perceive themselves or the scenery surrounding them from an elevated vantage point a few meters above their body. Sometimes, they even describe verifiable details in other rooms or outside the hospital building. In numerous cases, experiencers reported OBEs after cardiac arrests or other severe traumas that rendered the brain essentially deprived of oxygen. Obviously, NDEs and OBEs occurring in such critical near-death states are most relevant for the survival question.[35] A very striking case was published by a Dutch team of physicians:

A man who had suffered a heart attack was found in a meadow and taken to hospital. He was “ice-cold” and already showed characteristic discolorations of his skin that occur at the earliest 20–30 minutes after circulatory arrest. He wasn’t breathing, and his pupils showed no reaction to light stimuli. He was considered dead. Nevertheless, resuscitation measures were performed, and after about 15 minutes, to the surprise of everyone involved, first signs of life appeared. Eventually, the patient’s condition stabilized. He later claimed having followed the entire treatment from outside his body, relating knowledge about details he could hardly have seen or guessed. For instance, in the course of the preparatory measures for the resuscitation, a nurse removed the man’s dentures from his mouth and put them onto a crash cart. But they somehow got lost afterwards. After more than a week, the nurse entered the room to administer medicine to the patient. The nurse had not seen him since the resuscitation measures during which he was deeply unconscious. Nevertheless, this patient now recognized the nurse as the one who had removed his dentures and put them onto the crash cart, and inquired about their whereabouts.⁷

Clearly, such reports challenge standard models of brain functioning. Even conceding that a residual oxygen supply might exist in the brain during such near-death states, it wouldn’t be sufficient to enable the accurate perception of events occurring in the surroundings, or to ensure

⁷ The original article was published in a major medical journal.[36] For a detailed exposition of the subsequent discussions of this case, see Rivas, Dirven & Smit.[37]

the proper and indelible storage of experiential details in the brain's long-term memory. But this is exactly what is reported again and again. Hence, such OBEs provide considerable evidence for the notion that in these situations, human consciousness operates independently of brain states. Therefore, NDEs indicate that at least during the initial stage of bodily breakdown, human consciousness might be able to continue.

But the typical NDEs of Western people contain a number of other interesting features. During an OBE, the scene may shift eventually towards more transcendental elements. Similar to a person experiencing an NDV, an NDEr might be drawn towards a bright and loving light, see otherworldly landscapes, hear ineffable music, and meet deceased loved ones, which suggests that they have survived physical death for prolonged periods of time. Upon awakening, the life of many experiencers is transformed forever.

A particularly astonishing facet of NDEs consists of inexplicable physical healings that take place during or immediately after the experience.⁸ A very remarkable case was recorded in a prospective study on NDEs performed by Penny Sartori in Ireland.

After a 60-year-old patient who experienced a profound NDE regained consciousness, he was able to move his right hand that had been paralyzed since his birth. It remains a mystery how the muscles and tendons in his hand, but also the neuronal wirings in his brain, were reorganized during his NDE to render this hand permanently mobile thereafter.[38,39]

Further evidence favoring the notion that brain chemistry cannot fully account for OBEs and NDEs comes from their occurrence in indistinguishable manners under conditions ranging from optimal oxygen supply in the brain to virtually no oxygen supply. From the neurophysiological perspective, one must assume that such drastic differences in brain chemistry will result in correspondingly drastic differences in experience. But obviously, just as in NDVs, this is not the case. Moreover, it is intriguing that blind people, even those blind from birth, report having NDEs that include visual imagery comparable to that in NDEs of those who can see. Such “mindsight” in the blind provides additional evidence suggesting these percepts were not obtained via physical senses.[40] A comparably recent field of study that holds potential to advance our understanding of NDEs lends even more weight to this notion: It concerns *shared* death experiences in which healthy bystanders at sickbeds seemingly share the NDE content of the patient, thus resulting in a collective or intersubjective experience.[41]

⁸ For a case collection, see Nahm.[23]

To conclude this inventory of remarkable NDE features, I'd like to add an astonishing but related episode reported from the mainstream setting.

In a book introducing his work with developing modes of communication with nonresponsive patients in vegetative states, neuropsychologist Adrian Owen described what happened to one of his patients, Juan. In order to gain detailed insights into the activity of the brain in nonresponsive patients, including its deeper layers, Owen used fMRI scanners. These highly sophisticated apparatuses enable physicians to evaluate whether there might be a conscious individual inside a nonresponsive body. In Juan's case, repeated scans showed practically no sign of conscious awareness. The characteristic patterns of activity in brain regions signaling awareness in response to applied stimuli were almost completely absent although his eyes were open. Consequently, he was regarded entirely unconscious. Weeks later, however, Juan awoke from his coma. To the amazement of Owen, Juan had a full recall of his two visits to Owen's laboratory. He was able to describe everything that happened correctly and remembered the physicians involved.[42]

Juan's case is exceptional in that it is the only case of which I am aware in which a person's brain was monitored deep down into its depths and showed no sign of awareness—but the patient nonetheless remembered everything. Owen had no explanation for these occurrences. Such cases highlight that, at present, neurophysiological models cannot account for conscious awareness during apparent states of unconsciousness such as in critical NDEs or Juan's evident coma.⁹

The *investigability* of NDEs is “relatively high” (3) because they often occur in a well-controlled hospital setting accessible to different members of the medical staff. The *repeatability* of studies of NDEs is “relatively high” (3) as well, because these experiences occur on a regular basis all around the globe in quite comparable manners. The *quantitative strength* of NDEs with regard to the survival question is “relatively low” (2), however. Although NDEs comprise a whole set of features that pose severe challenges to the physicalist model of consciousness, even veridical OBEs are not directly related to survival after *permanent* bodily death. Similarly, the *qualitative strength* of NDEs is “relatively low” (2) because most are subjective experiences that take place during times of unconsciousness, and they are clearly culturally influenced. Even in the comparably few cases that combine veridical OBEs and critical brain conditions, there are usually only a few eyewitnesses who can support the statements of the experiencer in an unambiguous

⁹ Of course, several neurophysiological hypotheses have been advanced to account for NDEs. But as stated in the Introduction, I will only discuss alternative models to survival phenomena in a later section of this essay with regard to the *best* evidence for survival, cases of the reincarnation type. Nevertheless, I will take the opportunity here to draw attention to a must-read specifically addressing explanatory models for NDEs under extremely impaired health conditions,[37] and to one of my own publications on this matter.[4]

manner. Finally, because only a few features of NDEs are directly related to prolonged survival (e.g., the optional element of meeting deceased loved ones) and the experiencers always return to life after their experience, the *relevance* of NDEs for survival after permanent bodily death is only “relatively high” (3).

Cases of the reincarnation type

Although Westerners may be more familiar with NDEs than with cases of the reincarnation type (CORT), people who claim to remember previous lives are not at all uncommon even in the West. In general, cases involving young children who speak spontaneously about past lives are most compelling because they are less prone to being created artificially than cases involving adults, be it purposefully or involuntarily.

A famous CORT unfolded in the early 1930s when a little Indian girl named Shanti Devi claimed to remember the life of a Lugdi Devi who had lived in Mathura, 90 miles from Shanti’s present home in Delhi. Shanti provided numerous details about the life of Lugdi. After some of her statements had been verified, the case stirred such attention that Mahatma Gandhi established an official government committee to probe her claims. Shanti had never been to Mathura at that time, so the committee took her there and observed her reactions closely. In Mathura, Shanti recognized several people known to Lugdi, knew the way to Lugdi’s home, and showed impressive knowledge about the interior of the building, especially of its state several years ago. Shanti even disclosed where Lugdi had hidden money—something only known by Lugdi and Lugdi’s widowed husband who accompanied the committee. He was just as surprised as the others by Shanti’s behavior and knowledge.[43]

Systematic field investigations of CORT were begun in the 1960s by Ian Stevenson.[44] He travelled the entire planet for four decades looking for children who claimed to remember a past life. As a result, he published dozens of scientific articles as well as eight comprehensive books in which he reported his most remarkable findings from India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Lebanon, Turkey, Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Researchers have now documented more than 2,500 CORT. In typical cases, young children begin to talk about a past life between the age of two and five. In CORT studies, the child is usually referred to as the “subject”, and the person whose life they claim to remember is the “previous personality”. If a deceased person who matches the child’s statements can be identified, a case is considered “solved”. If a satisfactory identification is not possible, the case remains “unsolved”. In later years, often between the ages

of five and eight, the subject's memories of a past life start to fade. Still, numerous CORT subjects have retained some memories into early adulthood and even well into later adulthood. These basic patterns apply to CORT all around the globe in different cultures, whether they have a belief in reincarnation or not.[45]

One of the most intriguing traits of CORT is their richness in survival-related phenomena. In fact, they *contain* numerous incidences of the other survival phenomena already introduced. For example, many CORT begin with an “announcing dream”, often dreamed by a future parent, in which the deceased person announces that they will be born into a specific family. Sometimes, the deceased also appear in a “departure dream” in which they tell a member of their previous family that they will be reborn in another family. There are even a few cases on record in which the deceased spirit was seen as an apparition that indicated its interest in becoming reborn to the percipient. Obviously, all these experiences represent varieties of typical after-death contacts (ADCs). CORT share another commonality with ADCs: In both cases, a disproportionate number of the personalities manifesting again had died a sudden and violent death, indicating they had been torn away from “unfinished business”.

Moreover, about 20% of CORT subjects report having memories of events that occurred during the intermission between their death in the previous life and their birth into the current life.[46,47] In many of these cases, the children claim that they continued to observe what happened to the dead body of the previous personality from an OBE-perspective, just as is reported from NDEs. The subjects may even provide verifiable information about these occurrences.¹⁰ But while reports of veridical perceptions reported from OBEs during NDEs are often accepted as being authentic by physicalists and are attributed to residual brain functions, this cannot work for CORT subjects who give veridical accounts of events that occurred in this intermission. Here, the only option left for physicalists is postulating that these cases are not authentic.

There are also accounts in which CORT subjects have described how they found and entered their new bodies, sometimes providing verified details regarding specific circumstances. Similarly, some NDErs have described trying to enter the body of a newborn baby or a child, but giving up on it and returning to their own body.[48] Reports like these indicate that the line separating NDEs on the one hand (returning to one's own body) and CORT on the other hand (returning

¹⁰ To explore an unusual view, which should be taken with a grain of salt, the present life of a CORT subject might be regarded as a prolonged and extremely rich OBE from the perspective of the previous personality—and from the perspective of the previous family, meeting with the CORT subject may be regarded as a collective, reciprocal, and continuous ADC, coming close to a solid, objective, and perfect apparitional experience.

to another body) might be very thin. In addition, CORT are not only associated with ADCs and NDEs, but sometimes also with mental mediumship. This is the case when deceased communicators at mediumistic sittings announce that they will be born into a specific family, and a child being born later in this family reports memories that pertain to the past life of this communicator.[49]

Additionally, CORT can include an objective dimension in that they may include physical features such as birthmarks or birth defects that can contribute to the identification of a matching previous personality or to the confirmation of an identification. About one third of CORT subjects have such somatic features.[50,51]

The complexity of CORT is reflected in the assessment of their survival score. Their *investigability* is “high” (4) because cases can be documented “in the making” and then followed-up for years, even by different researchers. Many CORT involve numerous eyewitnesses who can be interviewed repeatedly under optimal conditions of observation. In some cases, Stevenson and his colleagues interviewed more than 30 informants, in one particularly important case, 53.[11,52,53] Generally, they agreed on the crucial details of a case. Modern CORT, in particular, also allow the verification of claims about previous lives through written documents and other objective sources. Stevenson knew that this approach would essentially equal the approach pursued in courts, as exemplified in his explanation of the term “authentic” in the context of his studies:

“By authentic, I mean that the reports given to investigators by informants and then set out by myself describe events with satisfactory closeness to the events as they really happened. [...] It is, in principle, no different from the striving of lawyers to reconstruct the events of a crime [...] to understand what really happened in the past.”[51,p.109]

In court, a striking agreement of more than 30 eyewitnesses would carry enormous weight. The *repeatability* of CORT is likewise “high” (4) because they are not at all uncommon, especially among cultures holding a belief in reincarnation. But new CORT are continually found and investigated even in the West.[54] Given that they are numerous, frequently rich in detail and possess a multifaceted phenomenology, which may even include a tangible physical dimension involving birthmarks and birth defects, the *quantitative* and *qualitative strength* of CORT are also both “high” (4). Obviously, the *relevance* of (solved) CORT for human survival is also “high” (4), especially if they contain verifiable elements from the intermission.

Summary: The best available evidence for survival

Following my introduction of the four survival phenomena providing the strongest evidential strength and my demonstration of how their survival scores were determined, Table 1 presents an overview of the different scores obtained for all 10 survival phenomena considered.

Criteria	ITC	PG	H	PM	TL	PLR	ADCs	NDEs	MM	CORT
Investigability	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	3	2	4
Repeatability	1	1	1	1	2	3	3	3	2	4
Quantitative strength	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	4	4
Qualitative strength	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	4
Relevance	2	2	3	3	2	2	4	3	4	4
Sum / survival score	6	7	8	8	8	10	13	13	15	20

Table 1: Survival scores of 10 survival phenomena. These scores are determined by assigning each survival phenomenon scores for five criteria listed on the left, ranging from “low” (=1), “relatively low” (=2), “relatively high” (=3), to “high” (=4). The phenomena considered are: Instrumental transcommunication (ITC), poltergeist phenomena (PG), hauntings (H), physical mediumship (PM), terminal lucidity (TL), past life regression (PLR), after-death contacts (ADCs) including near-death visions, near-death experiences (NDEs), mental mediumship (MM), and cases of the reincarnation type (CORT) including cases of the possession type. The four survival phenomena attaining a score above 10, listed in bold on the right, are discussed in detail in the present essay. A comparable discussion explaining the assignment of the scores of the other six phenomena is available (see footnote 3 on page 8).

Of all survival phenomena, CORT attained the highest survival score. Hence, they constitute the best available evidence for survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death. Furthermore, they offer better research prospects than ADCs, NDEs, mental mediumship or other survival phenomena.

In the next chapter, I will introduce the fascinating phenomenology of CORT in more detail, highlighting numerous important facets. In doing so, I will treat reports of CORT as *authentic* in Ian Stevenson’s sense described above. Accepting CORT reports as authentic in the present context is useful because the eyewitness reports might simply *be* authentic and correspond to what really happened—and explanatory models for a given phenomenon must be able to provide a theoretical explanation covering the *full* phenomenology described, or to provide good reasons for rejecting the assumed notion of authenticity.

3 Further Introduction to CORT

Old Souls

As mentioned in the previous chapter, studies of CORT have chiefly been conducted by Stevenson. His books are packed with technical details about how the interviews with the children and their families were performed, but also with tables and considerations about the strengths and the weaknesses of each studied case, and hundreds of exotic names of people, towns, and villages that are difficult to memorize for readers who are used to Western names. As a result, most of his books share the reputation of being a rather dry read.

For readers not yet familiar with the literature on CORT, I consider the book *Old Souls* written by award-winning journalist Tom Shroder to be the most captivating introduction to Stevenson's work.¹¹ In 1997 and 1998, Shroder accompanied Stevenson on research trips to Lebanon and India—and then skillfully composed a lively account of these travels.[48] Another advantage of his account is that the reader learns about Stevenson's work from an impartial observer's perspective, provided by somebody with no specific agenda to promote parapsychology and/or reincarnation. Nevertheless, Shroder fleshed out the names of the children and their kin with substance and emotion, and evoked visual imagery of settlements so remote that it is impossible to imagine how difficult it was to reach them when just reading Stevenson's matter-of-fact texts. As it would hardly have been possible to arrange appointments with potential interviewees in these locations, Stevenson simply drove to his points of interest, hoping for the best. In Lebanon, he passed bombed villages and ruins inhabited by his informants, and climbed narrow, vertiginous mountain roads leading to hamlets rarely visited by strangers of whatever kind. In India, he spent hours and hours amidst the packed bedlam of Indian roads, traffic jams, dirt, and poverty, crouching patiently in the car's backseat. Travelling 75 miles to a village by car might take six hours. The reception from the families they visited was sometimes undisguisedly hostile and aggressive. Threatening eyes would stare at Stevenson, Shroder, and their companions: *Why would rich Westerners visit such poor places, asking uncomfortable questions that evoke unwanted emotions without even offering adequate presents or money? Have they come to take our child away?* In contrast to what is sometimes purported by critics of Stevenson's work—more on that later—the interviewees frequently encountered reluctance, downplaying of children's memories, sad emotions about bygone times, sobbing children and parents, already-strained family ties under pressure, and all

¹¹ Another excellent introduction into CORT was published recently by Tucker;[55] for more detailed and scholarly introductions see Stevenson[56] and Matlock.[13] Matlock also offered an informative online overview on CORT.[57]

this intertwined with one prominent topic: death. One might also wonder: Was Stevenson, a trained psychiatrist who had even published a book on psychiatric examination in 1969,[58] really so naïve that he exposed himself to all this stress and danger for four decades without ever realizing that *every case* he investigated rested on misinterpretation and fraud, as some of his critics presume?

Finally, Shroder’s book serves as a brilliant introduction to CORT for one more reason: In the course of his travels with Stevenson, he encountered practically all aspects of CORT that are important for identifying the best explanatory model for them, the crucial issue to be discussed in Chapter 4 of this essay. Therefore, let me now take you on a short trip through Lebanon and India with Stevenson and Shroder, stopping every once in a while to introduce important aspects of CORT.

The significance of emotions and identification

Following Stevenson’s footsteps through the mountains surrounding Beirut, you’ll meet Suzanne Ghanem. Here is a short summary of her case:

As soon as she could speak at the age of 16 months, she’d pull the phone off the hook as if trying to talk into it. Again and again, she said “Hello, Leila?” Later, Suzanne told her parents she was actually called Hanan and provided ample further information about her supposed previous life. She even scribbled a six-digit telephone number of her family before she had learned to read or write. But the number didn’t work. Nevertheless, when an acquaintance of Suzanne’s family made inquiries in the town she claimed to belong to, a Hanan matching Suzanne’s numerous statements was identified. Even the phone number was almost right: Suzanne had only transposed the last two digits. However, the two families were entirely unknown to each other. The day before Hanan died after a critical operation, she tried to reach her daughter Leila on the phone—in vain. When little Suzanne met Hanan’s former husband for the first time at the age of five, he being a complete stranger to her in conventional terms, she immediately recognized him as “her” husband and forged a strong relationship with him. When she visited him, the little girl sat on his lap and rested her head against his chest. From her home, she’d call him three times a day. Obviously, this caused a bit of a strain in this man’s new family life because his second wife wasn’t too pleased with the constant phone calls from a five-year-old who insisted on being her husband’s first wife. Twenty years later, Suzanne was still unmarried and called Hanan’s former husband “maybe more than once a week”.

But this is only one example. Shroder was particularly impressed by the abundance of CORT in Lebanon, where new cases worthy of investigation seemed to pop up at every turn. They were just normal. Visiting India, you'll meet seven-year-old Preeti in a difficult to reach end-of-the-road village.

As soon as she could speak, Preeti explained to her siblings that “this is your house, not my house. These are your parents, not mine.” She provided further information about the life of a girl named Sheila who died in a car accident. Ultimately, when Preeti was four, a matching family was identified in the village she claimed to belong to. When Sheila's father paid Preeti his first visit to her home—unannounced and again, as a complete stranger to this girl in conventional terms—she recognized him, clung to him, and insisted so stubbornly on going with this stranger to their alleged former home that her parents eventually agreed.

Strong emotions and a stubborn identification with the previous personality are not unusual in CORT. In one particularly moving case, the CORT subject married the widow of the man whose life he remembered as soon as he was grown up; he even had children with his previous wife again.[50,p.212] But also when the children talk about the death of the person whose life they claim to remember, they may exhibit strong emotions and identifications. Indian psychologist Satwant Pasricha, who studied dozens of CORT and joined Stevenson and Shroder on their travels through India, arranging most of their trips, commented about a little girl who remembered the life of another girl who fell into a well and drowned:

“When she talked about her memories of dying [...] I could see she was really reliving the terror of it. You can't quantify that, but that was the sort of thing that persuaded me these stories might be real.”[48,p.153]

Pasricha was not the only scientist who accompanied Stevenson during his decades of research, or who performed similar research without his help. In India, for example, Professor P. Pal investigated the case of a girl named Sukla Gupta before Stevenson was able to investigate the case himself.

Sukla remembered the life of a mother who died leaving a small baby behind her, Minu. Her last thoughts were concerned with who would be taking care of Minu. Even before Sukla spoke about her previous life, she would cradle a pillow or a piece of wood in her arms, calling it “Minu”. When Sukla later provided sufficient information to allow identification of Minu's family, and was eventually reunited with all of them including Minu, she was overwhelmed with emotion.

Pal concluded the article about his investigation with these thoughts about Sukla's behavior, sympathizing with the reincarnation model:

“How else one can explain [her] emotions in the presence of Minu, who is eight years her senior, or wifely feelings for a man of 42 years in a girl under six [...] A girl of five cannot be tutored to simulate these feelings and that too not for an hour or two but for days and months.”[59,p.21]

Before-cases

Nevertheless, from a scientific perspective, numerous CORT have a vulnerable point: They had already been solved by members of the involved families or other local people before the researchers who investigated and published the case reports appeared on the scene. Hence, when the two families had already met and talked to each other, it is possible that the information obtained in the later interviews had been retrofitted, embellished, or otherwise contorted to present a respectable case. Seeking to avoid these problems, CORT researchers are especially intrigued when they learn about cases in which a child's statements about the remembered life were *documented before the case was solved*. Retrospective tampering is much more difficult and unlikely in these cases, thereby rendering their essential features much more authentic. These important cases are called *before-cases*.

To date, I am aware of 31 published reports of before-cases. On their travels through India, Stevenson, Shroder, and Pasricha followed up such a case, visiting 24-year-old Sunita Chandak and her family. The case was originally solved by Indian journalist Padmakar Joshi when Sunita was five years old, and Stevenson independently investigated it later.

Sunita was born in a town named Verni Kotha. At the age of four, she explained she came from a village called Belgaon and insisted on being taken there. Her father, however, had never heard of such a village. After she provided further information about it, her father contacted Joshi and asked him for help in finding a matching location. The latter identified 28 villages named Belgaon in the region, nine of which appeared to fit the rough description given by Sunita. Her parents took her to three of these Belgaons in the course of several months, but each time, Sunita claimed these weren't the correct one. Thereafter, Joshi published a public note on Sunita's case along with some of her statements. And indeed, a reader from one of the remaining Belgaons recognized several items that matched a fitting family: A girl named Shanta Kalmegh had died 24 years before Sunita's birth at the

age of six. When Sunita's family took her to this Belgaon in 1979, a town 90 miles away and requiring multiple bus changes to be reached, she immediately identified it as the correct one. She recognized the Kalmegh house and family members. Moreover, because Shanta had died about 30 years previously, Sunita correctly described numerous details of this house and the neighborhood that had been present at the time but no longer existed. The Kalmegh family eventually became convinced that Sunita was Shanta reborn, and a lifelong friendship commenced. When Stevenson and his team visited Sunita in 1998, Joshi also joined them. Sunita was now married and lived with her husband, having children of her own. But she still maintained close relationships with both parents whom she called her "Verni Kotha parents" and her "Belgaon parents."

Below, I briefly summarize two other CORT that are among the most compelling and best documented before-cases. One of them is the American case of Ryan Hammons of Oklahoma.

When Ryan began to speak in 2009, he talked about a previous life and a family he had in Hollywood. He explained that when he died he saw an awesome bright light that one should go to, a feature familiar from Western NDEs. Ryan would often cry and beg to be taken to Hollywood to see the people he loved and missed. When his mother Cyndi bought books about Hollywood, he stated he knew some of the people displayed in them. In a picture of a movie showing many people, he pointed to one of the actors, saying "Mama, that guy's me." At that stage, Cyndi contacted Jim Tucker, Stevenson's successor at the University of Virginia, because she was looking for help in identifying the apparently quite unknown actor for whom no name was given. From then on, the case developed intriguingly. Cyndi Hammons and Tucker were in constant contact, documenting many more statements made by Ryan. They were furthermore in contact with film producers who hired an archival footage consultant who finally succeeded in identifying the actor in question. His name was Morris Kolinsky, but he later called himself Marty Martyn. This man tried his luck as a dancer and actor, but finally ended up running a successful talent agency in Hollywood. He died 40 years before Ryan was born. In photographs, the boy recognized several people known to Martyn, and the documented descriptions of the buildings that had been "his" home and office proved to be correct. Even before Marty Martyn was identified, Cyndi Hammons had recorded no less than 55 statements that perfectly matched his life.[55,60,61]

Further well-documented American before-cases are those of James Leininger and Rylann O'Bannion.¹²

The second case to be summarized concerns a young Sri Lankan girl named Gnanatilleka Baddewithana. It was investigated and solved by Dr. H.H.S. Nissanka, who always ensured that he was accompanied by academics and other esteemed personalities from the area. Nissanka vividly described the course of his investigations in a book. He tape-recorded his most important interviews and hired a photographer to take pictures of the most significant events, such as Gnanatilleka's first meeting with members of the family she claimed to have been part of.

Gnanatilleka was born in 1956 in a remote settlement in the Central Sri Lankan highlands located about 15 miles from the town she remembered having lived in. She made dozens of statements about this past life that could be verified after the matching previous personality, a boy who died at the age of 13, was discovered by Nissanka in 1960. The two families hadn't known each other before and were initially quite disinclined to participate in the investigation. When finally introduced to several members of her previous family one by one in a separate room of a guesthouse, Gnanatilleka identified all of them correctly without being asked leading questions. She also showed affectionate behavior towards them—with one exception: She became angry and fearful when the brother of the previous personality entered the room. This fitted: These brothers had a hostile relationship with each other. The photographs included in Nissanka's book impressively document the behavior of four-year-old Gnanatilleka when she met all these people for the first time; the entire episode was also tape-recorded.[67,68]

Ian Stevenson later investigated her case as well, but completely independently of Nissanka. Nevertheless, Stevenson's report matches Nissanka's report, and he added further pieces of information.[69] The case can therefore be regarded as quite authentic.

¹² The case of James Leininger is quite remarkable and has received much attention already.[62–64] Of course, it has also been criticized, e.g. by physicalist Michael Shermer.[65] However, this critique misses crucial points, contains considerable misinformation, and is therefore easy to refute.[63,64] The case of Rylann O'Bannion was described by James Matlock.[13] For an overview of American CORT including her case, see Matlock.[66]



Figure 1: Gnanatilleka Baddewithana remembered the life of a boy, Tillekeratne (background).[67]



Figure 2: The quality of these images is unfortunately poor. However, I include them because they are rare treasures documenting the emotional reactions when four-year-old Gnanatilleka first met Tillekeratne's family. Left: Gnanatilleka mingles happily with Tillekeratne's sisters. Right: Gnanatilleka clings to Tillekeratne's mother and stares with aversion at Tillekeratne's brother who had just entered the room. The brothers had had a hostile relationship.[67]

Table 2 on the next page contains a list of 15 important before-cases.

No.	Subject's name	Country	Distance between families [miles]	Comments	Sources
1	Ryan Hammonds	USA	ca. 1,400	Exceptionally well-documented case; intermission: 40 years	[55,60,61]
2	James Leininger	USA	ca. 2,500	Impressive case involving a fighter pilot who died in WW II; intermission: 53 years	[62–64]
3	Rylann O'Bannion	USA	ca. 700	Case involving a girl who died in a plane crash; intermission: 26 years	[13,66]
4	Kemal Atasoy	Turkey	ca. 530	No contact between the two families after solving the case; intermission: 50 years	[70,71]
5	Gnanatilleka Baddewithana	Sri Lanka	16	Exceptionally well-documented case, including tape recordings and photographs	[67–69]
6	Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne	Sri Lanka	7.5	Case with remarkable behavioral features; 37 interviewed informants	[72,73]
7	Iranga Jayakody	Sri Lanka	9	Case involving a girl who died presumably because of a brain tumor	[74]
8	Subashini Gunasekera	Sri Lanka	60	Case involving a girl who died in a landslide	[74]
9	Dilukshi Nissanka	Sri Lanka	8	Case involving a girl who drowned in a canal	[75,76]
10	Thusita Silva	Sri Lanka	30	Woman who fell from a bridge and drowned; subject had water and bridge phobia	[77,78]
11	Swarnlata Mishra	India	> 100	Subject remembered two past lives and sang songs in a language she had never learned	[69,79]
12	Ajendra Singh Chauhan	India	46	Case only solved when subject was 13; only minimal contact between families thereafter	[80]
13	Bishen Chand Kapoor	India	31	Early 20th-century case; rich in interesting details; re-investigated by Ian Stevenson	[81,82]
14	Kumkum Verma	India	25	Hindu case involving a past life as a Muslim; almost no contact between the families	[81,83]
15	Sunita Chandak	India	90	Twin CORT in which only one twin spoke of a past life; intermission: 24 years	[48]

Table 2: Fifteen important CORT in which statements leading to the identification of the previous personality were documented before the case was solved (“before-cases”). In each case, the two families were initially unknown to each other.

Anybody who wishes to obtain a deeper understanding of CORT should read the full publications about the listed cases in detail, and this is especially relevant for people who are skeptical of CORT investigations. Just as in court trials and other scientific fields of research in which thousands of pages have been published by numerous different authors, anybody who wishes to offer an informed opinion about CORT must possess a firm knowledge of the most important material, its context, and its details.

Prelingual cases

In India, Stevenson, Shroder, and Pasricha also followed the case of a boy who persistently ran away from his home as soon as he could walk, and before he could even speak. He was born into a Moslem family, but refused to join their prayers, denying that he was Moslem and insisting on returning to his Hindu family. Shroder noted that it appeared quite unlikely that his parents were fond of this behavior or that they contrived and embellished their son's claims. This case is remarkable because the boy already showed clear signs of an awareness that he didn't belong to his parents before he could speak.

I call such cases *prelingual cases*. By “prelingual”, I mean that these children already displayed signs of remembering a previous life before they were able to talk in full sentences consisting of several words. Little Sukla, who cradled blocks of wood and addressed them as “Minu” when her first words left her lips, belongs to this group as well. There are many more cases on record.

One of the first words of an Indian girl Stevenson, Shroder, and Pasricha studied was the Hindi expression for kerosene-powered candles. She always spoke it fearfully and had a corresponding phobia of fire. The girl appeared to remember the life of her cousin, who burned to death at the age of fourteen after such a candle fell over and set the surroundings on fire. In a solved case the trio re-investigated in Lebanon, one of the earliest words of a little boy was “Ibrahim”. When he learned to speak more articulately, it turned out that “he” had died in an accident in the car of Ibrahim, who was speeding and wouldn't listen to his friend's warnings.

Other children who related their earliest words to a previous life include Bishen Chand Kapoor, who repeated the word “pilvit” until it gradually developed into “Pilibhit”, the name of a town where he said he belonged to. This was correct for the person whose life he claimed to remember.^[81,82] The first words of Lebanese Salem Andary were

“Bedouins”, “stones”, and “hit”, and he later stated he was stoned to death by a group of Bedouins. This was likewise correct for the person whose life he claimed to remember.[84]

Prelingual aspects of CORT can also present in other forms. They may manifest in phobias, as with the above-mentioned Indian girl who remembered being burned and had a fire phobia, but also in nightmares, play, or habits.

Indian Veer Singh stubbornly refused food cooked by his parents even before he could speak. Later, he explained that he would not eat food prepared by members of a lower caste because he was a reborn Brahmin.[81] Cases involving prelingual phobias include Burmese Maung Myo Min Thein who had a strong aversion to approaching the location where the person whose life he remembered was murdered,[50] Turkish Cevriye Bayri who had a severe phobia of darkness and, as soon as she learned to speak, tried to pronounce the name of the man who had killed the person whose life she remembered in the dark,[84] and Sri Lankan Shamlinie Prema who had a prelingual phobia of water as well as of buses. She remembered the life of a girl from a village called Galtudawa who was pushed into a flooded paddy field by a bus and drowned. Among her earliest words were “Galtudawa mother”. [72]

A very peculiar prelingual case concerns Süleyman Zeytun from Turkey: He was born deaf-mute. Nevertheless, by using only nonverbal communication and gestures, the little boy convinced his parents that he was the reincarnated personality of a man who drowned in a swollen river while trying to wash his horse in it. He also convinced the family of the man whose life and death he seemed to remember of his identity. Süleyman had a water phobia from early on.[84,85]

Twin cases

The before-case of Sunita Chandak mentioned above is doubly intriguing because of a specific feature it comprised: Sunita has a twin sister, Anita. However, Anita never talked about a previous life, even though her father frequently encouraged her to follow Sunita’s example.

Stevenson was particularly interested in CORT involving twins because he thought they may offer new insights into the development of human personality. For instance, identical twins with identical genomes can sometimes still differ considerably in bodily and psychological traits. Stevenson considered it difficult to explain such differences solely in genetic terms and/or in terms of potentially different environmental conditions around the fetuses in their mother’s

womb. Rather, he speculated that traits conveyed from a previous life might additionally come into play, for example in the case of Indika and Kakshappa Ishwara. These boys were identical twins but looked and behaved differently.[50,86] Both spoke about memories of a former life.

In 13 of the 37 twin CORT analyzed by Stevenson, one of the two twins remained silent about a previous life. In 22 cases, both twins spoke of a previous life. In the remaining two cases, both twins said nothing about a previous life; the identification with previous personalities was derived from announcing dreams, birthmarks and/or similar behaviors. It is intriguing that in most of the cases for which the information is available, the twins were apparently acquainted with each other in their previous lives. Usually, they were spouses, siblings, family members, or friends. Among the solved cases, Stevenson was able to collect information about the dominance and submissiveness of the twin subjects as well as of their previous personalities for 11 twin pairs. In every pair, their current relationship was identical to their former one—a probability of 1 in 2^{11} , i.e. 1 in 2048. Although this finding is based on a small sample, it supports the notion that this repeated relationship didn't follow patterns of mere chance.[50]

Unsolved cases

Unsolved twin CORT also possess intriguing facets. Take, for example, the case of Ma Khin San Tin and Ma Khin San Yin in Burma, now Myanmar. These twin sisters were born in 1959 and remembered the lives of two Japanese brothers who fought together as soldiers in the Second World War. They said they had also died together during an air raid of Allied airplanes that bombed Minlan, the village in which they now lived.[50,86] Indeed, such a bombing had taken place 14 years before the sisters were born. Among the CORT in Stevenson's Myanmar files, there are 25 children who claim to remember a previous life as a Japanese soldier killed in combat. Shroder commented about these cases:

“Most had been found in an area along the line of the British advance of 1945, as the Japanese army was about to collapse. These cases were interesting for many reasons, but they certainly provided some insight into the skeptical argument that families and children manufactured such cases to support a belief in reincarnation: The Japanese were hated in Burma, where occupying troops had committed many atrocities. The last thing any Burmese parents would want to suggest was that they were harboring the reincarnation of an Imperial soldier.

‘One rather pathetic child was caught by the villagers and burned alive,’ Stevenson said. ‘And not only are these children born into Burmese families who want nothing to do with a Japanese child, they frequently long to ‘go back to Tokyo,’ think the Burmese food is too spicy, the climate too hot. They complain all the time: ‘I want raw fish and sweets and want to dress like a Japanese.’ ‘ “[48,p.120]

Ma Khin San Tin and Ma Khin San Yin behaved similarly. They displayed masculine traits, wished to wear trousers and boy’s shirts, complained about the heat and the spiciness of the food, showed an animosity toward the British, and begged to be taken to Japan. On the other hand, the sisters were strongly attached to each other and positively secretive about their memories as soldiers. They barely informed others about them, not even their parents.

At the age of about three, they started to speak coherently—and they also talked with each other in an odd language that other family members could not understand. Around this time, they made some statements indicating they were Japanese brothers killed at a location very close to their present home. Hence, it was assumed that they spoke Japanese with each other, but nobody attempted to verify this. But apart from providing scarce basic information, the twins were reluctant to talk about events from their past life and their case received no publicity outside their immediate surroundings. It only came to the attention of Stevenson because U Nu, one of Stevenson’s research assistants in Burma, had a house not far from where they lived. It was U Nu as well who conducted the first interview with the twins in 1976 when they were already 16 years old. During this interview, he apparently learned more of their memories as the soldiers than anybody before, including their parents. It seemed that the twins’ reluctance to talk about their memories was due to the enormously unpleasant emotions that they evoked. According to Stevenson, U Nu was the first to take a serious interest in the sisters’ story, and they burst into tears during his interview. What troubled them most was the thought of their previous mother back in Japan. In their past life, the brothers were extremely fond of her, their father having died already. But against their mother’s protest, the two sons enlisted in the army. When they were hit by an explosion during the fatal air raid in Minlan, they thought of her intensely as they were dying. They immediately found themselves in Japan, seeing their mother. But the brothers’ attempt to communicate with her failed, as she didn’t notice them. Feeling sad and frustrated, the brothers didn’t remember anything thereafter—until the memories of their previous lives returned to them “as if they were awakened from a dream” in the bodies of the twin sisters.

However, one might wonder whether such unsolved and unverifiable cases deserve any consideration. In my opinion, they definitively do for a variety of reasons. Take, for example, a pioneering pilot study performed by Japanese CORT researcher Masayuki Ohkado that highlights the potential importance of international unsolved cases. Because researchers sometimes had the impression that Burmese/Myanmar children who claimed to remember a life as a Japanese soldier looked “more Japanese” than children who didn’t make such claims, Ohkado took photographs of the children from Stevenson’s work and assigned corresponding photographs showing Burmese CORT subjects who didn’t claim a past life as a Japanese soldier. Then, without informing them about the background of the study, he let Japanese people rate which of the two faces from a photograph pair looked “more Japanese”. It turned out that the children who claimed to remember a life as a Japanese soldier were indeed rated to look “more Japanese” to a statistically significant degree.[87] Such creative use of metadata opens fascinating future research opportunities and supports the notion that there “really might be something there”, even in these peculiar unsolved cases from Myanmar.

Somatic cases

When I briefly introduced CORT in the previous chapter, I mentioned that the bodies of subjects can apparently be affected by the remembered previous life in different ways, for example by bearing birthmarks or birth defects. Such potential carry-over effects from one life to the next do not appear to be restricted to facial features as in the Myanmar subjects discussed above. Stevenson documented hundreds of cases that included birthmarks and birth defects, but also unusual pigmentation, internal diseases, and other health issues. About one third of CORT include physical features seemingly related to a past life. I call them *somatic cases*.¹³ On his trips with Shroder through Lebanon and India, Stevenson also studied potentially interesting somatic cases. In 1997, he published a monumental two-volume monograph of more than 2,200 pages in which he presented and illustrated with numerous photographs more than 250 somatic cases.[50,91,92]

¹³ Given that there is frequently no genetic connection between the individuals involved in somatic cases, it remains quite unclear how these symptoms are generated in conventional terms. It is, however, known that bodily states can be affected by mental impulses that can even be subconscious. These symptoms can encompass both placebo effects and more drastic examples ranging from hypnotically induced blisters and allergies, up to false pregnancies and stigmata.[23,50,88] There is even substantial evidence that the sudden whitening of hair after emotional trauma really does occur, although there is no conventional explanation for this rapid bleaching of hairs which are essentially dead matter.[50,89,90] It is likely that physical symptoms in somatic CORT are generated in a similar way, i.e. they might be induced in a non-material way via a mental or psychical impulse that doesn’t even have to be conscious.

These cases are of particular importance because they add to the evidence of CORT on a plainly objective level: If a birthmark on the body of a young child matches the location of the stab wound that killed the person whose life the child remembers, and if this can be verified in an autopsy report, the case gains considerable strength. It must be considered extremely unlikely that a child who talks of memories matching the life of a murdered person shows a birthmark corresponding to the fatal wound purely by chance. The odds become much greater if there is more than one matching birthmark. And, in fact, Stevenson and others have studied numerous cases that involved two or more birthmarks.

Turkish Necip Ünlütaskiran, for example, had six birthmarks that corresponded to stab wounds on the body of the man whose life he claimed to remember. The two families lived in cities 50 miles apart and stated they had not known each other before the case developed. When the boy started to speak about his former life, he strongly refused to be called by his given name, Necati. Instead, he insisted on being called Necip, the name of his previous personality. Later, a personality matching this name as well as the boy's statements and birthmarks was identified. His parents eventually agreed to use the name Necip, and everybody stuck with it thereafter.[50]

The previously mentioned twin CORT of Indika and Kakshappa Ishwara is likewise a somatic case.

Its significance in the context of somatic cases rests on the physical differences displayed by these identical twins and in that one of the twins, Indika, had a nasal polyp that obstructed parts of the airway. Whilst nasal polyps are fairly common in later childhood and adolescence, they are considered extremely rare in children younger than five years. Stevenson speculated that this polyp might correspond to irritations of the mucous membrane the previous personality, Dharshana, suffered from during his terminal disease. For the last three days of his life, Dharshana received oxygen through a nasal tube and was also fed via a nasal tube.[50]

The case of Indika Ishwara now leads me to introduce the final subcategory of CORT presented here: secret cases.

Secret cases

In what I call *secret cases*, the subject of a case seems to possess information about something relating to the past life that is considered unknown by anybody else currently alive, and this

information is afterwards found to be accurate. Indika Ishwara, for example, knew something about Dharshana's life that was apparently not known by anybody else.

When Indika was taken to the compound where Dharshana had lived, he showed a place in a concrete drain where Dharshana had scratched his name into the concrete when it was still soft. Purportedly, nobody knew about this engraving. There are several more secret cases, for example the important before-case of Bishen Chand Kapoor. When he was taken to the house of the deceased person whose life he appeared to remember, he led his previous mother into a room and claimed a treasure was hidden there. Indeed, buried gold coins were later found in this room.[81] Likewise, Disna Samarasinghe correctly explained that she had hidden a small amount of money in a cigarette box next to the fireplace in the home of her previous personality.[72] In the cases of Mahmut Ekici[50] and Kuldip Singh,[93] the subjects specified hiding places of weapons from their previous lives that were apparently not known to others.

The case of Maung Zaw Thein Win in Myanmar is particularly intriguing. The person whose life the boy appeared to remember died from a fall that caused a severe injury on the rear right side of his head. Maung Zaw Thein Win was born with a large corresponding birthmark in this area. Moreover, like many other CORT subjects, Maung Zaw Thein Win stated he also remembered aspects of the intermission he spent between the death of the previous personality and his birth as the new subject. For example, he claimed that during this intermission, he appeared in a dream of his former wife and informed her about a location where he had hidden money (a theme reported in the context of “ordinary” ADCs as well). When questioned, his widowed wife confirmed that she had had such a dream in which her deceased husband appeared, and that she was indeed able to retrieve the hidden money from the location he specified in this dream.[50] Assuming as usual that this case is authentic, it adds a striking reciprocal psi-experience to the disclosed secret.

But now, I close this introduction to the phenomenology of CORT by highlighting several CORT that contain noteworthy and significant features in Table 3. Readers inclined to form an informed opinion about CORT might like to study these cases.

No.	Subject's name	Country	Distance between families [miles]	Family relation	Comments	Sources
1	Sumitra Singh	India	62	Strangers	“Replacement reincarnation” (see p. 7); 53 interviewed informants	[11,52,53]
2	Jasbir Jat	India	19	Strangers	“Replacement reincarnation”; subject beaten to stop past-life (PL) talk	[12,69]
3	Veer Singh	India	5	Strangers	Intermission: 11 years; intermission memories; subject beaten to stop PL talk	[81]
4	Sharma twins	India	10	Strangers	Twin CORT; families hardly met; subjects beaten to stop PL talk	[50,81,94]
5	Ishwara twins	India	37	Strangers	Twin CORT; identical twins but differences; remembered unrelated lives	[51,86]
6	Sunita Khandelwal	India	220	Strangers	Somatic case; subject refused to eat until hospitalized; probably a before-case	[50,95]
7	Hettiaratchi twins	Sri Lanka	7	Friendly	Twin CORT; remembered lives of homosexual couple of insurgents	[50,86]
8	Lalitha Abeyawardena	Sri Lanka	30	Strangers	32 interviewed informants; no interest to the families; only few visits	[72]
9	Purnima Ekanayake	Sri Lanka	105	Strangers	Somatic case; birthmark matching wounds of deadly accident	[96,97]
10	Ma Khin San twins	Myanmar	?	Strangers	Twin CORT; remembered lives of Japanese soldiers; unsolved	[51,86]
11	Ratana Wongsombat	Thailand	75	Strangers	Previous personality (PP) = religious woman; intermission memories	[98,99]
12	Bongkuch Promsin	Thailand	6	Strangers	PP = murdered Laotian; subject used Laotian words; intermission memories	[98,100]
13	Necip Ünlütaskiran	Turkey	50	Strangers	Somatic case; six birthmarks corresponding to wounds of the PP	[50]
14	Semih Tutusmus	Turkey	1.2	Casual	Somatic case; defect of right ear matching fatal injury of the PP	[50]
15	Nazih Al-Danaf	Lebanon	11	Strangers	Strong Lebanese case with several specific statements matching the PP	[101,102]

Table 3: Important CORT containing noteworthy features.

4 Assessing the Quality of the Best Evidence for Survival

After describing facets of the best available evidence for survival in some detail, I must finally address the crucial and ominous question: Is this best evidence also *good* evidence? Because the survival model fits the survival evidence provided by CORT quite naturally, I will evaluate its strength by assessing two rivaling models that must be able to fit CORT at least equally well to undermine the fit of the survival model. I mentioned these rivaling models in the Introduction:

1. *The physicalist model.* This model is based on the assumption that consciousness can be explained by physics and chemistry. Authors promoting it habitually doubt the occurrence of psi phenomena as well as the survival of consciousness.
2. *The living-agent psi model.* Like many who accept the survival model, authors promoting the living-agent psi model accept the occurrence of psi phenomena and the authenticity of the available case reports. But in contrast to survivalists, who usually acknowledge psi faculties of the living *and* of the deceased, advocates of the living-agent psi model maintain that survival phenomena including CORT can be explained by psi faculties exerted by the living alone, i.e. *without* deceased agents of whatever kind—and thus, without survival.

Compared to these two alternative models, the survival model has an explanatory advantage from the start. Should survival occur, it must entail a complex background reality of the world which we know almost nothing about. The factors and conditions that enable the deceased to return to us as apparitions, mediumistic communicators, or as CORT subjects might well be incomprehensible for us. By contrast, authors who restrict themselves to the physicalist and living-agent psi models, denying the contribution of the deceased to the generation of survival phenomena, must be able to detect and explicate credible motives of mortal humans to simulate these survival phenomena. Such motives must be much more comprehensible because all living humans act on the same level of existence, sharing the same potential motives and thoughts.

4.1 Refuting Physicalist Explanations for CORT

It is not surprising that CORT have been criticized by physicalist authors. However, in comparison to studies into NDEs or classical parapsychological themes such telepathy, clairvoyance, or precognition, CORT have received comparably little attention and criticism from the physicalist camp. And although academic researchers such as Erlendur Haraldsson, Jürgen Keil, James Matlock, Antonia Mills, and Jim Tucker have also published CORT of considerable

evidential strength, this critique has concerned—apart from a few side blows on Indian investigators to be mentioned later—almost exclusively Ian Stevenson’s publications.

Furthermore, just like much of the critique launched against parapsychology and survival research as a whole, this critique is often characterized by pejorative vocabulary. A virtually classical critique of this kind was offered by Paul Edwards, who assembled practically all relevant criticism of CORT offered up until 1996 in a book on reincarnation.[103] Curiously, because of the lack of critique from the physicalist camp, most the arguments he summarized were originally advanced by parapsychologists and concerned Stevenson’s writings up until the early 1970s. Such a sympathetic endorsement of parapsychological literature by their usual opponents seems quite unique in the field of controversies surrounding psi. But anybody looking for an impartial assessment of CORT in Edwards’ book might nevertheless be disappointed. Edwards makes it clear on the first page of his Introduction that it is his goal to show that the claimed evidence for reincarnation is “worthless”. Indeed, Edwards labeled several psi-related aspects of reincarnation concepts, including Stevenson’s reasoning, as “fatuous nonsense”, “absurd nonsense”, an “intrinsic absurdity”, “preposterous”, and so on. Eyewitness testimonies in CORT, even when documented in the context of before-cases, are principally “worth nothing”, and consequently, the entire research output on CORT is “worth nothing”. The reader also learns that Stevenson lived “in a cloud-cuckoo-land” and that accepting the possibility of reincarnation and some of its implications would “amount to the ‘crucifixion’ of our intellect”.

Edwards’ “favourite argument” against reincarnation is what he called the “population problem”. He believed that reincarnation *must* entail an unchanging population, and because the population on earth has increased, reincarnation is already disproven. However, there are many possibilities that could easily account for the population growth in the reincarnation model. To name just a few: New individuals could be generated anew. *We* are here already, so why shouldn’t others come and join us? In fact, reincarnation might be only optional, anyway. Also, the speed of “reincarnation cycles”, which is already known to vary in different cultures, may presently be increasing. Then, because the number of people who have ever lived on earth still outnumbers that of the people living today, there would likewise be no population problem.[104]¹⁴

¹⁴ Many Westerners including Edwards are also critical of reincarnation because they associate it with the concept of Karma. However, Karma is exclusively linked with reincarnation beliefs originating in and around India, but not in numerous other cultures with reincarnation beliefs, such as the reincarnationist Native American tribes, the Druze and the Alevi in Western Asia, or the Igbo in Africa. In addition, empirical research into CORT has so far yielded no convincing evidence for karmic influences from one life to the next. Consequently, one can dismiss Karma when considering reincarnation from an empirical perspective.[105] Some may also wonder why most but not all people forget about their past life if reincarnation is real. Possible answers have been discussed by Wehrstein.[106]

Still, Edwards has several followers. Among them are Michael Murray and Michael Rea, who wholeheartedly recommended Edwards' ridicule of reincarnation research in 2008 and relied almost exclusively on it—although, curiously, they stated in a related context that

“the resort to ridicule is simply a signal that serious *arguments* aren't available. And once that is clear, the ridicule itself starts to look ridiculous.”[107,p.266]

Yet, after presenting a grossly deficient overview of Stevenson's work, that he had allegedly already summarized in a 1975 book that doesn't even exist in the form they claimed, Murray and Rea concluded:

“The fact that such flaws are present in the vast majority of [Stevenson's] cases makes it hard to take seriously the reincarnation hypothesis in the few cases that aren't manifestly flawed.”[107,p.278]

Keith Augustine approvingly cited Murray and Rea's distorted critique in 2015 when he recapitulated Edwards' arguments in his *Introduction* to a thick book entitled *The Myth of an Afterlife*. [108] Following the critique advanced by Edwards, Leonard Angel offered a noteworthy criticism of the somatic cases published in Stevenson's monumental monograph. [109] He pointed to flaws in some of Stevenson's presentations of cases and offered an alternative statistical approach to determine the likelihood of the presence of birthmarks that match wounds on another body. However, given the lack of explanation for his statistical approach, one cannot understand it or judge its pertinence. Nevertheless, Angel concluded that Stevenson's entire work is mistaken. Similarly, just like Murray and Rea, also Augustine [110] and Angel [111] erroneously insinuated or stated that Stevenson performed very little research after the early 1970s. More recent cases have rarely been considered. Even in 2018, the renowned proponent of physicalism Michael Shermer considered Edwards' outdated book “still the best work on the topic”. [65,p.102]

According to Augustine, the critique advanced against Stevenson—or more exactly, the potentially critical arguments that were originally introduced and discussed by Stevenson himself and other parapsychologists, can be summarized follows: [108]

1. Parents coach their children to tell tales of remembering a past life in order to obtain better living conditions, property, or media attention.
2. In cases where children display early childhood phobias, the parents might have instilled fears related to the manner of death of the deceased person whom they have encouraged their child to identify with.

3. In somatic cases, the presence of a birthmark might have triggered parents to encourage their children to think of themselves as reincarnations of particular deceased persons *because* of this birthmark. A deceased individual with matching wounds or marks might be found by chance and then be identified as the “previous personality”.
4. CORT are also created unwittingly by parents who encourage suggestible children to mold normal childhood fantasies into “memories” of past lives without being consciously aware of it. Parents and other informants erroneously attribute statements about a past life to the infants which they originally obtained from other sources, thus falling prey to memory misattribution.
5. The children also overhear information exchanged between the two families or derived from local gossip, and incorporate it into their own past life story, perhaps unwittingly falling prey to memory misattribution as well.
6. Interpreters who share a belief in reincarnation distort their translations accordingly and those unfamiliar with the local language cannot detect such distortions.
7. The usually short visits to the locality of a CORT don’t allow the research depth required to form reliable opinions to be achieved.
8. Researchers use leading questions in their interviews, thus receiving the information they want to hear.

Many of these items can be subsumed under the heading of the so-called “socio-psychological hypothesis”: The protagonists involved in CORT are driven to create them artificially by conscious or unconscious motives, thereby fulfilling psychological needs adapted to the prevailing cultural context. I call this explanatory model for CORT the “motivated physicalist model”.

Problematic aspects of the motivated physicalist model

The listed points of criticism are principally valid and nobody has denied that several CORT might indeed suffer from such shortcomings. Since 1960, Stevenson has discussed many of the above-mentioned issues, and he has published accounts of cases he found to be contrived to highlight their characteristics.[112] But a look at the reports of the better-documented cases demonstrates that these critiques simply fail. For example, none of the critiques listed above applies to the strong before-cases in which written documents were made before the previous personalities were identified and the families met.

Take, for example, the before-case of Ryan Hammons. It emerged in the USA in a family without an initial belief in reincarnation. Plenty of communication and years-long conversation was possible without the need for interpreters. Leading questions cannot have played a role before Marty Martyn was identified by a professional film archivist, and the entire case unfolded in a manner that practically excluded purposeful or unwitting deception, memory misattribution, or chance. I have not yet seen a published critique of Ryan’s case, but I see only one possible way to refute it: The critique must include the allegation that Ryan’s parents actively initiated an immense hoax back in 2009, and have sustained it until today.

The case of Gnanatilleka Baddewithana presents similar difficulties for physicalist explanations. Consequently, Indian “rationalist” Abraham Kovoov composed a grotesquely misleading critique of her case that contains several egregious errors, and effectively alleges that the researchers actively contributed to presenting an obvious hoax as a compelling CORT.[113]

Apart from the critique of physicalists as a whole being easily refutable by strong before-cases, some of the individual arguments of the motivated physicalist model are likewise unconvincing. Regarding birthmarks in somatic cases, it isn’t enough to conclude from a few flaws in Stevenson’s cases that the entire field of research is mistaken. Were this an acceptable procedure in science, there would be no science at all. At the very least, the entire physicalist critique of CORT would have to be dismissed as well, because all such publications I am aware of contain flaws or obvious errors. Many of Stevenson’s somatic cases remain strong, and Figure 3 shows examples of birthmarks that were investigated by researchers other than Stevenson.

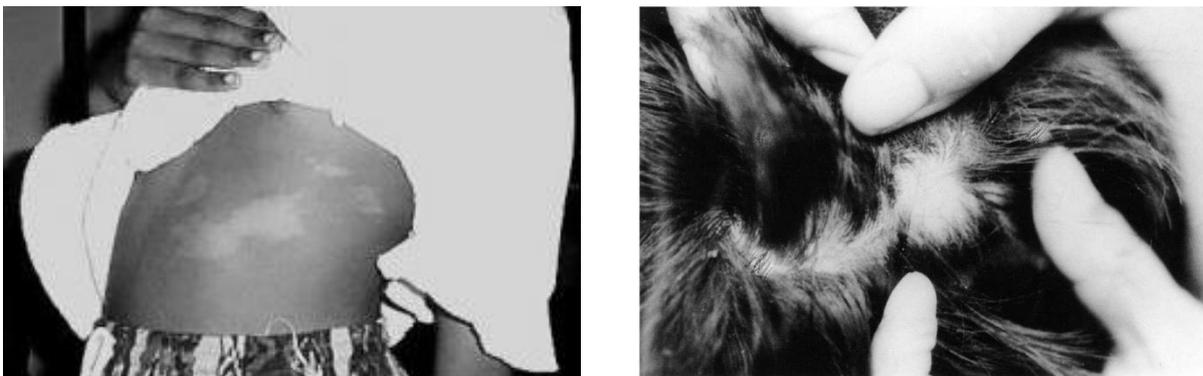


Figure 3: Left: These birthmarks on Purnima Ekanayake’s trunk are located in the area in which the previous personality was fatally injured in an accident involving a bus.[96,97] Right: Four birthmarks on Kuldeep Singh’s body matched wounds of the previous personality, including this hairless area on his head.[93]

But there are many more challenges for the motivated physical model. I present just a few of these in the following:

- The supposition that the children’s parents coached them with the aim to obtain better living conditions, property, or media attention is obviously not applicable in countless cases in which the previous personality wasn’t rich. Even in the other cases, receiving noteworthy material gain from the other family can hardly be expected with reasonable confidence, and if a family indeed received something, it usually consisted of presents for the child, or was so low in value that it would hardly justify arranging a hoax of enormous dimensions, often requiring years-long preparation until the families finally meet—that is, if they meet at all. Whilst it may take years until the families finally meet in solved cases, we must not forget that very many ‘CORT’ remain permanently unsolved—despite pertinacious efforts to identify the matching previous personality. Unsolved cases hardly fit the motivated physicalist model.
- It is also difficult to explain the case of Jasbir Jat in terms of parental coaching. After he revived from a state of apparent death due to smallpox at the age of three, he insisted on being a just deceased Brahmin named Sobha Ram for the rest of his life. There was simply no time to train him to become Sobha, neither purposefully nor unwittingly. Besides, his behavior upset his entire family. Jasbir wouldn’t even eat the usual meals anymore, insisting on eating only Brahmin food that a neighbor was required to prepare. His family obtained no material gain at all as a result of his claims.[12,69]
- Moreover, given that it is not easy, if possible at all, to induce memories of a bygone life by parental coaching in a toddler who will later identify with a previous personality and talk about this past life emotionally for years, it is obvious that this will be even more difficult in twins who live together. Take cases in which both twins speak of a previous life: Have they been trained together by their parents who must have taken pains to feed each child only with information belonging to one specific previous personality but not the other, carefully preventing any confusion? Did their siblings also participate in this training, or were they carefully kept aside all the time? Or did the parents perhaps “unwittingly” train their twin children to identify themselves with, for example, two neatly separated past lives of an impecunious homosexual couple of insurgents who were killed in 1971, as in the case of Sivanthie and Sheromie Hettiaratchi,[86] or with twins murdered under cruel circumstances in rural India, as in the cases of Rajoo and Ramoo Sharma?[50,94] Are such scenarios plausible at all in rural Asian villages where spare time and leisure are rare and hard work is plenty?

- Or, what are we to make of the twin before-case of Sunita and Anita Chandak? These sisters were very close. But curiously, only Sunita spoke of a past life, not Anita who was nevertheless encouraged to do so as well. Did their parents, in contrast to their assertions, train Sunita to remember a past life, but not Anita? Or was Anita simply unwilling to participate in this dubious undertaking and remained silent about her parents' coaching of Sunita throughout all the years? If so, why did their parents train Sunita to identify with a previous personality who died almost 30 years ago in a remote and difficult-to-reach village? In order to gain from their story, they should have chosen a richer family living more closely, and one whose member had died more recently. And why did the parents take Sunita to three wrong Belgaons before changing their pretended research method and finding the correct one? I'd assume that if the entire affair was a purposeful or unwitting hoax, they would have chosen the correct Belgaon right from the start. Alternatively, if it was little Sunita who was eager to fulfill childhood fantasies, why didn't she accept the first Belgaon as the correct one, rather than returning home three times in disappointment? Obviously, she had a highly specific and fixed expectation about what the Belgaon she claimed to belong to must look like, and this doesn't sound very much like a mere childhood fantasy.
- Numerous cases, especially twin cases, share similar difficulties and challenges for the hoax hypothesis when studying the relevant details and thinking them through. Remember, for example, the Burmese sisters who reported past lives as Japanese soldiers. It seems difficult to find a reasonable motivation for their parents and also for the twins that would explain the development of this case. The parents were not interested in their daughters' reincarnation story, and the twins were reluctant to talk about it even to their parents. Nobody attempted to obtain material bargain or local attention, or to attract researchers from the West.
- Such disinterest is actually more common in CORT than physicalist authors have often suggested. As Shroder experienced, foreign researchers are frequently met with quite some reluctance, and the families in question are often not too fond of the inquisitive crowds gathering around them and their child. In fact, numerous parents actively try to suppress their children's talk about a previous life because they think such behavior causes bad luck and might lead to premature death of their children. Besides, the children's fervent insistence on belonging somewhere else, etc., is frequently quite distressing. Therefore, in regions where CORT are common, such as in India or Myanmar, there are manifold traditional methods that can be applied to suppress the subjects' memories. These include spinning the children on a potter's wheel until they

become dizzy, or putting partly chewed food into their mouths. As a last resort, particularly stubborn children may even be beaten, e.g., little Preeti, the twins Rajoo and Ramoo Sharma, or Jasbir Jat and Veer Singh, who plagued their families with haughty behavior and dogged refusal of their food, claiming to be reborn Brahmins eating only food appropriate for their caste.

- It is furthermore doubtful that Augustine's suggested explanation for CORT involving phobias does them justice. He hypothesized that the parents instilled phobias in their children related to the manner of death of the deceased person with whom they encouraged their child to identify. But in cases of prelingual phobias, such as those of Shamlinie Prema and Cevriye Bayri, the children also connected their very first words with their supposed memories of a previous life. Given these cases are authentic, their parents must have instilled an intense identification with this previous personality upon their children, along with reasons to develop their phobias, even before they could speak. This must also have included sufficient information to enable them to express correct statements about their alleged past life in their earliest utterances. The latter is also true for cases in which the infant's very first words related to the previous life in the absence of any associated phobias, such as in the before-case of Bishen Chand Kapoor. Similarly, this is also relevant for cases involving prelingual play or habits later shown to be related to a previous life.
- The case of deaf-mute Süleyman Zeytun is also worth mentioning here. He displayed a phobia of water from early on. It is difficult to imagine how the parents coached little Süleyman or otherwise induced his quite specific past-life memories. He couldn't even hear their words.
- CORT involving prelingual phobias, early past-life-talk, *and* birthmarks are even more problematic. In these cases, the parents must have encouraged their children to identify with a deceased individual whom both the birthmark *and* the phobia fitted, at a time that predated their ability to speak, and they must have provided information along with this identification induction that enabled these children to utter correct statements about their supposed past lives through their earliest words (e.g., the case of Maung Myo Min Thein, who had a depression on his head where the previous personality had been hit with a heavy door bolt; see also p. 30).

I could go on, for example, with discussing secret cases, which can only be regarded as being non-authentic from a physicalist perspective. But I suppose it suffices to conclude with one of the strongest arguments that has convinced numerous parents and researchers of the genuineness

of the subjects' memories, but that physicalist authors rarely mention: The children's steadfast and often unbreakable identification with the previous personality, against which innumerable parents have fought in vain, and the heartfelt emotions when meeting members of the previous family (e.g., Figure 2). Can young children really be trained to behave like this? Reflecting on what he had seen in real life, Shroder put it this way:

“Most of the skeptical arguments had been summarized in the Paul Edwards book that I had read months earlier: The children were fantasizing. The parents fed the children information until the children repeated it. The psychocultural need to believe in reincarnation created the cases in an unconscious conspiracy between parents and children, neighbors and strangers. To make their point, the skeptics mentioned all the things I had pondered at length: factual inconsistencies that appeared in even the strongest cases, the possibility of connections between present and past-life memories, the various incentives for wanting to be thought of as being reborn. [...] I felt certain that none of the above came close to explaining all I had witnessed in Lebanon.”[48,p.145f]

Refuting the critique of using local research assistants

One of the reasons that led Edwards, Augustine, and others to believe that Stevenson was misguided when interpreting his field studies in foreign countries was that he usually entered the scene as a stranger without deeper insights into the local conditions and that he had to rely on local researchers and interpreters in his interviews—for example, Satwant Pasricha. Because she is Indian and believes in reincarnation, Edwards considered her and other local assistants who believed in reincarnation and participated in CORT investigations principally unqualified to participate in these studies. However, this line of reasoning, of course, cuts both ways. Shroder aptly remarked:

“If Satwant should be disqualified from studying these cases because her faith supported the belief in reincarnation, then anyone who personally believed that personality ended with death should be equally disqualified.”[48,p.152f]

In the light of Edwards' emotionally-tainted ridicule of CORT research, one might indeed question whether he was better qualified to form an impartial opinion on CORT than those who did the actual fieldwork. Even more, Pasricha stressed that some features of the CORT she studied would actually contradict features of the traditional doctrine of reincarnation held by her faith—and this is quite obviously also true for many CORT occurring in Lebanon and elsewhere.

But Edwards and Augustine's argument can be further refuted on more factual grounds: Sometimes, Stevenson used different interpreters during his repeated visits for follow-up studies, and the important details were always congruent. The previous translations and case reports held. They also matched with the reports of independent local researchers who investigated the same cases as Stevenson with or without exchanging their notes. Of course, Pal, Nissanka, and others were able to understand the mother tongue of the interviewed families. Moreover, Stevenson, Haraldsson, Keil, Mills, and other Western researchers investigated numerous cases in which they *were* able to communicate directly with the interviewees, for example in French or English, and this not only in the West. Finally, the initial written records made in many before-cases were recorded and verified by native speakers, so it seems unlikely that they were misunderstood.

The predictive weakness of the motivated physicalist model

In addition to evaluating how far the motivated physicalist model can account retrospectively for reported CORT, it is also possible to test its predictive power. A reasonable prediction is this:

In CORT involving seemingly unrelated families, those who start the purposeful or unwitting collusion to obtain better living conditions, property, or media attention should make sure that the previous personality can be identified. The easiest way to ensure this identification consists of providing personal names of the previous personalities and/or of their family members. Consequently, such names should be given in contrived cases.

CORT involving unrelated families are particularly frequent in Sri Lanka. But although the subjects of these cases provide just as much information about their past lives as children in many other countries, they rarely mention personal names. Consequently, an unusually high proportion of 76% of Sri Lankan CORT remained unsolved in Stevenson's files.[72] I have already mentioned that unsolved cases pose a problem for the motivated physicalist model, but the extraordinary share of unsolved cases in Sri Lanka flatly contradicts what must be expected. It isn't reasonable to assume that all these people launched complex hoaxes but omitted, of all things, the most relevant details. But this curious lack of providing names matches the survival model: At least when Stevenson conducted his investigations, people in Sri Lanka avoided using personal names as much as possible for traditional reasons. According to Stevenson, they almost had a national phobia about calling anyone by their given names, even among spouses.[72,74] It wouldn't be too surprising if words which were rarely spoken or heard in a past life, and concepts which were effectively avoided, might not rank high among items remembered or spoken of in the next life.

The predictive power of the motivated physicalist model can also be tested in other ways. For example, it is assumed in this model that members of the families involved in CORT will exchange information about the previous personality and attribute it (wrongly) to the subjects. Because of this information exchange between the families, one would expect a higher percentage of correct statements given by the interviewees in CORT when statements were recorded only *after* they interacted (“after-cases”)—compared to those in before-cases in which the statements had already been recorded *before* the families met and there was little chance to add correct information. Furthermore, one would expect the total number of correct, incorrect, and unverified statements to be lower in before-cases.

In a study comparing both types of CORT, however, they yielded approximately equal percentages of correct statements. The average overall number of statements was even *higher* for the before-cases. These empirical findings contradict the motivated physicalist model and increase the overall credibility of after-cases.[114]

This conclusion is supported by another study according to which reports of CORT typically become less detailed and weaker over time rather than becoming embellished.[115]

Moreover, the above-mentioned list of CORT critiques included the supposition that suggestible children might be particularly suited to molding childhood fantasies into “memories” of past lives. However, so far three psychological studies have found that CORT subjects aren’t more suggestible than their peers, contradicting this supposition.[116–118]

In yet another study, a scale to determine the evidential strength of CORT was developed by Jim Tucker.[119] The resulting score was tested against numerous features of CORT. The following correlations further challenge the motivated physicalist model:

- A greater distance between the subjects and the previous personalities was associated with more evidence for a “paranormal” explanation. This counters the supposition that the children acquired their knowledge about the previous personality through normal means of communication.
- There was no correlation between the strength of a case and the social status and caste of the subjects. This counters the supposition that CORT would preferably be created in poor families to increase their financial or social status.
- There was no correlation between the strength of a case and the reaction of the subject’s parents to their children’s claims. This is inconsistent with the supposition that the parents stimulate and encourage the creation of CORT.

Curiously, however, none of the physicalist critics of CORT of whom I am aware ever mentioned the above findings.

Conclusion: Why the motivated physicalist model fails

Summarizing this section on the criticism launched against CORT research from the physicalist authors, the take-away messages are these:

- 1) Only relatively few authors from the physicalist camp have published criticisms of research into CORT. In addition, most of this critique has focused solely on the individual case studies published by Stevenson.
- 2) The critique offered by these authors is usually superficial as well as punctiform, and sometimes even explicitly biased, misleading, ridiculing, and full of errors. Counterarguments advanced by Stevenson and others are habitually ignored.
- 3) In cases where factual weaknesses or potential flaws have been identified in individual CORT reports, physicalist authors have overstated their significance. A flaw doesn't necessarily discredit the entire case, and even several flaws don't render the results of an entire research branch that has already existed for 60 years "worth nothing".
- 4) When manifest flaws could not be detected in specific CORT, physicalist authors have resorted to postulating that deep flaws must still exist somewhere somehow. This implies that the documented eyewitness testimonies are principally worthless, and that ultimately, all CORT reports are the result of misinterpretations, errors, and especially in the more complex and well-documented cases, collusions upheld for years.
- 5) Several predictions implied in the motivated physicalist model have not been confirmed. However, physicalist authors have never mentioned these findings.

From a perspective striving for an impartial assessment of the matter, I don't think that the physicalist arguments for rejecting the authenticity of *all* eyewitness testimonies and the resulting CORT reports are compelling. Regarding the better-documented cases, an explanatory model that ultimately needs to resort to postulating numerous years-long, fraudulent, water-tight conspiracies by entire extended families plus various neighbors, villagers, strangers, and perhaps even researchers—and all this without being able to show solid positive evidence supporting this notion, and in the light of several failed predictions of its background hypothesis whilst simultaneously ignoring all counter-evidence—is modest at best. By contrast, eyewitness testimonies are usually regarded as the bedrock for judgment in court systems worldwide. If

CORT occurrences were described concordantly by 20–50 eyewitness testimonies in a trial, no impartial court would be able to judge in favor of the meager and arbitrary armchair critique advanced by physicalists. However, the inadequacy of their arguments might not even be their fault. *It is simply impossible to formulate a more reasonable physicalist critique of well-documented CORT.* In other words: CORT render human survival very likely when compared to the physicalist alternative model.

4.2 Refuting Living-Agent Psi Explanations for CORT

I think it is fair to say that the physicalist critique of CORT is considered highly unconvincing by the vast majority of parapsychologists and other people who are convinced of the reality of psi phenomena, due to personal experiences and/or studying the respective literature with an open mind. The same applies to physicalist models explaining ADCs, NDEs, and mental mediumship. Consequently, the discussion about survival phenomena in parapsychological circles no longer revolves around the question of whether they can be explained in physicalist terms or not. Parapsychologists are already one step ahead and discuss which psi-inclusive model fits best to the reported phenomena. Apart from the survival model, the model that has received most attention is the model of living-agent psi. As already mentioned, survival is not implied here. Rather, it is assumed that all survival phenomena are created unconsciously by people who are still alive, using hidden psi faculties to fulfill their needs. Discussions of the living-agent psi model have reached a considerable degree of sophistication in the parapsychological literature, particularly regarding mental mediumship as well as CORT involving adolescents and adults. But curiously, although CORT involving young children are most important from a theoretical perspective, they have largely been neglected. To fill this gap, I will now dwell upon these cases at some length.

Preliminaries

Traditionally, the living-agent psi model is also called the “super-psi” model. This term points to the fact that psi of an enormous quality and quantity is required to explain all facets of survival phenomena. In my definition, it is a quantitative attribution that denotes a difference in psi degree, not one in nature, similar to distinguishing “stars” from the rarer but more impressive “super-stars” in show business. The related term “living-agent psi” is a qualitative attribution

similar to saying that a star or super-star can be a “music star” or a “movie star.” It stresses that the psi or super-psi required must be attributed to living beings but not to deceased agents.

In general, most authors who have discussed the living-agent psi model in detail have ultimately dismissed it and conceded that the overall survival evidence tips the balance towards survival. By contrast, most authors who hold the view that it would be impossible to decide which model fits the evidence better, or who even prefer the living-agent psi model, have merely expressed their opinion but haven’t provided detailed arguments to justify it. As yet, Michael Sudduth is the only author who has taken pains to explain *exactly why* it would be impossible to favor the survival model over the living-agent psi model. Therefore, his writings must be considered.

Intermission: The passive-remains model

Before turning to discussing the living-agent psi model proper, I will briefly mention a closely related model that has been promoted in different variations by several parapsychologists. I call it the “passive-remains model” because it builds on the assumption that memories or information pertaining to deceased individuals continue to remain on earth after their owners have died. This information might then attach to developing fetuses or babies who absorb it in such a manner that they identify with them, erroneously believing they lived the life of the personality to whom these memory remnants belonged. The latest incarnation of this model was formulated by Jürgen Keil, professor of psychology at the University of Tasmania, who termed these passive remains “thought bundles”.[120] He stressed that they are unaware of their surroundings and can neither create new thoughts nor interact. There is no active continuation of the previous personality.

However, considering the details of the phenomenology of CORT, this model runs into several difficulties which I have explicated elsewhere in more detail.[121] To name just a few: It is quite unclear how the link between these passive remains and the future subject is established—especially in cases involving large geographic and temporal distances. Also, passive bundles of information emitted by the dying should not contain knowledge about verifiable occurrences that happened *after* their owner’s death, such as during the seemingly continuing intermission. Similarly, departure dreams, announcing dreams, apparitional experiences, and mediumistic communications of the previous personalities should not occur. They must be added via living-agent psi of members of the involved families that neatly ties in with the information content of the postulated thought bundles. Somatic

cases likewise complicate matters, particularly if they mirror bodily traits of a previous personality that were unknown to the subject's mother, and if they manifested on the body of the previous personality only *after* his or her death. In such cases, Keil assumed that bodily traits repeated in the subject might be created by the mother who psychically perceives that her fetus is associated with a previous personality's body showing these traits. Then, without being consciously aware of it, the mother imprints these traits onto the fetus growing in her womb via "maternal impressions" or psychokinesis. For these and other reasons, the passive-remains model cannot function without relying heavily on active living-agent psi in addition to the hypothesized thought bundles, as acknowledged by Keil.[122] Therefore, I regard this model as a subcategory of the living-agent psi model and won't consider it separately in the subsequent discussion.

However, taking a close look at the living-agent psi model reveals numerous conceptual problems. The trouble begins with the hypothesized motivation for living agents to simulate complex phenomena suggestive of survival. Just as in the motivated physicalist model, the proponents involved in the unfolding of a CORT must have a motive to do so from the living-agent psi perspective. Philosopher Stephen Braude, one of the most influential theorists of the living-agent psi model, called this the "motivated-psi hypothesis" and was quite explicit on this matter, saying:

"Super-psi explanations shouldn't be taken seriously unless they explain credibly why someone might be motivated to simulate survival with their psychic abilities." [123,p.203]

Braude and Sudduth posit that young children cannot have such motivations. The motivation must either exist in adult members of the previous family who may still suffer from the loss of a loved one, or in members of the subject's family, usually the parents. The latter's motives might concern an improvement of their social or financial status. However, Braude didn't discuss these issues in more detail. As he argued that the complex phenomenology of CORT favors the survival model anyway, this doesn't matter much. Yet, for anybody willing to explain why the super-psi or living-agent psi model is as justified as the survival model, it is mandatory to provide palpable motives that "explain credibly why someone might be motivated to simulate survival with their psychic abilities."

Nevertheless, Sudduth's treatment of this most fundamental and pivotal constituent of the living-agent psi model is surprisingly feeble. In a book containing 307 pages of text expounding the outstanding importance of the living-agent psi model for properly evaluating the survival

question, he spent only about half a page on detecting potential motives of adults to induce CORT in their children. Roughly speaking, Sudduth simply asserted that detecting credible motives of adults for simulating survival in CORT is very difficult, and if such motives cannot be detected, they must still be there somehow. I must protest here. To build a robust theory, one cannot glide across a gaping fundamental theoretical hole in this manner, failing to address the most basic element on which the entire theoretical construct is supposed to rest. If the living-agent psi model is to be taken seriously, and if it claims to account for all documented CORT, it is essential that factually plausible motives of mortal humans to induce CORT are identified in as many cases as possible—ideally, in every documented case.

But Sudduth merely continued to explicate in general terms that under the influence of such an assumed adult's motive, the children would be driven into a dissociated state closely related to that known from dissociative identity disorder. Because such a dissociated state would be psi-conducive, the adults' influence would furthermore activate the child's super-psi or living-agent psi faculties along with the compulsion to identify with the memories and/or skills acquired by a deceased personality. In this way, adults' hidden desires would be fulfilled by the artificial CORT construct.

This is a logical possibility, although one study has already found that the psychological profiles of CORT children differ widely from cases of dissociative identity disorder,[118] which in addition, manifest only in adolescents and adults. But for the sake of the argument, and to obtain a deeper insight into the problems associated with what I call the “motivated living-agent psi model”, I'd like to hypothetically assume that the described process can take place. As when considering the motivated physicalist model, I will relate this motivated living-agent psi model to the phenomenology of reported CORT to explore how well it can demonstrate tangible motives for creating them.

Motivational problems of the motivated living-agent psi model

First of all, the motive triggering CORT must exist in adults, as Sudduth also correctly stressed. But still, the children must nevertheless develop (unconscious) motives on their own to be able to realize their roles in the unfolding drama. This is the motive to become dissociated to fulfill a very specific need of the parents. The motive of the child might be generated by the parents' conscious or unconscious guidance exerting a psychological pressure strong enough to urge their child to take refuge in this dissociative state, just as in cases of dissociative identity disorder that seem to develop in response to a psychological need or motive. This parental psychological

pressure exerted on their child must frequently be huge, because it needs to correspond to the dimension of the supposed dissociation of CORT subjects which is often massive with regard to its emotional intensity and duration. Without appropriate psychological pressure, the child would have no sufficient reason, stimulus, or motive to enter such a dissociative state in order to fulfill the parents' needs.

Second, the child's motive to dissociate must already be very strong very early in life. This would especially apply in prelingual cases in which the subjects relate their very first words to a past life. Here, the children's motives to dissociate must be strong enough to accomplish the psi-conducive dissociation even before they utter these first words, and sometimes lead further to corresponding nightmares, phobias, etc., related to the previous personality's life and death.

Third, we frequently have to postulate not only at least two motives in CORT, but also at least two considerably dissociated psi-sources who act in perfect accord. This is the case because the selection of an appropriate previous personality to play a role in the unfolding family drama is performed by adults in somatic cases, not by the children. Sudduth suggested that birthmarks on subjects are present before the actual selection of a "previous personality" is performed. This identification is merely added in retrospect after the parents have located a matching deceased individual with fatal wounds at corresponding locations on the dead body via their own unconscious psychical powers. Thereafter, the parents impose their selection of the previous personality upon the dissociating child who then psychically taps into the same and potentially verifiable information about this selected previous personality, and incorporates it in such a manner that they claim to be this previous personality reborn. But while the past life of these deceased individuals is strongly externalized by CORT subjects, their parents remain permanently unaware of their own association with the same deceased individuals. To shape the unfolding family drama in the desired direction, they frequently fight vigorously against what they personally acquired psychically on a subconscious level and then imposed upon their child. Therefore, the parents must have entered a dissociated psi-conducive state as well, albeit of a different kind from their child's.

Fourth, this scenario is nevertheless only one of two possibilities to account for CORT including somatic cases. Sudduth stressed that another plausible motive to induce CORT consists of the deep wish to have a lost loved one reincarnated. But this means that the development of CORT must frequently be initiated from the previous personality's family, not from the subject's family as outlined in the previous paragraph. For example, somebody suffering great grief might psychically locate an infant born with birthmarks matching the fatal wounds on the body of the lost loved one. The child's subsequent behavior would then be explained by means of telepathic

influence from this member of the previous family. This remote person, often a complete stranger to the subject and his or her family, would induce the required psi-conductive dissociation in the child from a distance, without any contact or conscious knowledge of it, without exerting direct psychological pressure, and keep all this up for years.¹⁵ The supposed unconscious motive of the previous personality's family member must furthermore be exceedingly strong to be able to override the frequent purposeful and direct educational attempts of the subject's parents to counter it, trying to drive their child away from making reincarnation claims. In cases of twins who speak about past lives in which they died young or were murdered, the psi-conductive dissociation must even be imposed unknowingly, from a distance, upon *two* toddlers who never confuse memories of these two lives. When exerting such a massive but unconscious psychical influence on unknown infants living somewhere else, the living agents of the previous family must also enter a dissociated psi-conductive state to an enormous degree in this scenario. This is supported by the fact that both hypothetical scenarios and motivations of parents, which imply quite different circumstances, apparently result in creating CORT of practically indistinguishable character.

Fifth, as highlighted by Braude, the “crippling” complexity of some especially impressive CORT would have to involve the unusual but successful interplay of multiple sources of information from the living-agent psi perspective, thus weakening its position compared to the simpler causal nexus underlying the survival model. This may also apply to reciprocal experiences involving the intermission, e.g. in shared dreams or apparitional experiences, but also departure dreams and mediumistic features of CORT. Still operating from the assumption that the eyewitness testimonies and case reports are authentic, just take the secret case of Maung Zaw Thein Win, the claimed reborn husband who appeared in a dream of his widowed wife during the intermission between the two lives and explained to her where he had hidden money. Of course, this dream occurred before Maung Zaw Thein Win was born, and he was born with a birthmark that matched the fatal wound that the husband had received on his head. Musing about how this case might have developed from a living-agent psi perspective, we are left with different possibilities of which I will only sketch the two I consider to be the simplest: 1) The case was initiated by the parents of Maung Zaw Thein Win, who first psychically induced a reciprocal dream involving the widow and their own future child. Then, they imprinted a matching birthmark on the developing fetus, psychically provided their child, once he was born and dissociated, with access to information about the selected previous life including knowledge of the money's hiding place,

¹⁵ Stevenson described several kinds of psychological and behavioral disturbances that can develop in young children under respective parental influence. Usually, these disturbances disappear again when the stimuli causing them disappear.[69]

and additionally supplied him with alleged memories of a contrived intermission that never occurred, but that included an alleged reciprocal dream that Maung Zaw Thein Win cannot have participated in. 2) Alternatively, the case was initiated by the widow, who clairvoyantly perceived the previously unknown hiding place for the money, transforming this clairvoyant vision into a dream of her deceased husband. Later, when Maung Zaw Thein Win was born and she identified him psychically as a child bearing a birthmark that matched the fatal head injury of her husband, she dissociated him from a distance, enabled him to gain access to her husband's memories, and also supplied him with alleged memories of a contrived intermission that never occurred, but that included an alleged reciprocal dream that Maung Zaw Thein Win cannot have participated in. Obviously, the survival model can account for such cases much more smoothly.

However, the problems for the motivated living-agent psi model don't end there. Difficulties in identifying a plausible motive also arise in much simpler cases, and they frequently mirror the motivational problems already discussed in relation to the motivated physicalist model:

- Whose motivation caused the sudden transformation of three-year-old Jasbir Jat? Remember that he revived from an apparent state of death, and to the amazement of his family, insisted on being Sobha Ram for the rest of his life.
- Whose motivation induced the psi-conductive dissociation of only one of the close Chandak twins, Sunita, who insisted on remembering the life of a person who died almost 30 years ago in a distant village?
- Whose motivation caused the before-case of Kemal Atasoy in Turkey? This case would probably have always remained unsolved if Jürgen Keil hadn't taken pains to solve it. Kemal remembered the life of a man who had died about 50 years earlier in Istanbul, 530 miles away from his current home. Nobody in his family had ever been to Istanbul, nobody knew anybody who lived there, and nobody was interested in taking Kemal there. It took Keil three visits to Istanbul to finally verify that the man whose life Kemal seemed to remember had actually existed. At that time, the descendants of Kemal's previous family had already dispersed and none of them could be located.[70,71]
- There are several remarkable super-psi-inclusive CORT in which the two families had practically no interest in mutual contact even after the cases were solved, e.g. the important before-cases of Kumkum Verma[81,83] and Ajendra Singh.[80] What motivation made the families fabricate and sustain these cases?
- Whose motivation caused the supposedly psi-inclusive but unsolved case of the secretive Burmese twin sisters claiming to remember lives as Japanese soldiers who died 14 years

before they were born? Whose motivation let the twins become emotionally shattered by the mere thought of their beloved mother back home in Japan?

- More generally: Whose motivation causes the many unsolved and potentially unsolvable CORT? Remember, for example, that CORT subjects in Sri Lanka rarely give personal names pertaining to their past life, rendering a large proportion of Sri Lankan CORT unsolved. Why take all the motivated trouble to construct artificial CORT to improve one's social or financial status, or have a lost loved one "reincarnate", but let the unleashed super-psi faculties of dissociated adults and children fail, especially regarding the most crucial items, letting the adults wait for years in vain for the case to be solved—and this 1) all across Sri Lanka, but 2) nowhere else to a comparable degree? According to its proponents, super-psi shouldn't be limited by personal habits or social customs in this manner. By contrast: It can retrieve even the most unusual details from anywhere, including the intermission.
- Actually, why can't dissociated adults and children of the two families directly reach each other with their activated super-psi faculties, informing each other about the simulated rebirth and thus solve a hitherto unsolved case? There are a small number of departure and announcing dreams in which this feat was ostensibly accomplished successfully, and dream states are usually regarded as quite psi-conducive. So why don't such comparably trivial but utterly helpful psychic dreams occur on a more regular basis in unsolved CORT that are otherwise rich in detail? In the motivated living-agent psi model, which postulates multiple interactive telepathic, clairvoyant, and retrocognitive super-psi abilities in adults and children, eliciting such dreams shouldn't be too difficult. But they rarely occur. However, the conspicuous lack of such dreams would fit the survival model, which chiefly posits mere self-referential, non-interactive memories of a past life in the subjects.
- We might furthermore ask: Why do adults often continue to sustain the dissociation of the subjects in unsolved CORT for years? Are unsolved CORT already good enough to largely satisfy the adults' hidden needs, so that solving them isn't really necessary? In ancient CORT of bygone centuries, when means of communication and travelling between villages were much more difficult, unsolved and unverifiable CORT must have been the usual way to fulfill the parents' alleged needs, anyway. But if unsolved CORT suffice already: Why would functioning super-psi in dissociated CORT subjects and adults be required at all?

Again, I could go on. But these considerations already demonstrate that the central question about the motivation for simulating CORT cannot easily be glossed over in the motivated living-agent psi model. In the light of the problems outlined above, it is not enough to simply postulate that when a fitting motive for unleashing super-psi to simulate CORT cannot be identified, it must still exist somewhere, somehow. No impartial court would rely on such an intangible conjecture if it had to decide on a matter in which the identification of a factual plausible motive were essential. This somewhere-somewhat conjecture of the living-agent psi model merely equals the conjecture of Edwards, Augustine, or Murray and Rea, according to which CORT that are not “manifestly flawed” must still be deeply flawed—somewhere, somehow.

The predictive weakness of the motivated living-agent psi model

Just as in the motivated physicalist model, it is of course also possible to formulate predictions that should be confirmed if the motivated living-agent psi model has any merit. However, I’ve already given examples of failures of possible predictions above when highlighting the peculiar super-psi failure in so many Sri Lankan CORT lacking personal names, as well as the failure to solve cases via simple telepathic or clairvoyant dreams. Other possible predictions are based on the general axiom of the motivated-psi hypothesis as advanced by Braude. Analyzing cases in India, he argued that the motivation to improve the adults’ social or financial status, or to contact lost loved ones, could induce super-psi-inclusive “CORT” that matched the belief system of these adults and their society. In India, this naturally comprises phenomena suggestive of reincarnation.

Correspondingly, Western parents who are also inclined to use their children purposefully or unwittingly to improve their social or financial status, or to contact lost loved ones, should be motivated to produce children who dissociate in order to display psi faculties that correspond to these parents’ and/or their society’s Western belief system. Obviously, this should *not* result in creating dissociated toddlers who talk about past lives, at least not in the vast majority of cases. By contrast, Western infants should provide information about deceased individuals who live a happy life in heaven, waiting for their embodied loved ones to join them. The children might assert that they don’t belong on earth but in the heaven they just left, insist fervently on being taken back there, and speak of angels and other Christian religious figures with bewildering emotional intensity. They might also display marvelous telepathic, clairvoyant, precognitive, or retrocognitive abilities concerning earthly events.

But this simply doesn't seem to happen. Stevenson searched the literature of psychiatry and psychological research for such cases in vain. Reviewing recent decades, I too am not aware of reports about children who have behaved in the described manner for a number of consecutive years. Rather, in Western families whose members had no initial belief in reincarnation, such as the Hammonses, super-psi faculties in infants also seem to be largely restricted to a narrow field of knowledge and to corresponding emotions pertaining to only one specific deceased individual, paired with the claim to be this person reincarnated. Admittedly, there are Western children who report prenatal memories comparable to intermission reports of CORT subjects—but these reports don't come close to the full complexity, duration, and emotional intensity displayed in purportedly psi-inclusive CORT, of which the sometimes-claimed intermission memories are a mere optional side aspect.

Moreover, countless people on this planet have very strong and plausible motives outside the context of CORT or survival to know important information inaccessible to them. As it is unreasonable to assume that hypothetical abilities to induce super-psi-conducive dissociations in oneself or in one's children can only occur in the survival-related context, the living-agent psi model should predict that these people would likewise be able to induce super-psi-inductive dissociations to fulfill needs that are not survival-related. This is even true for Asia, the continent of gurus, where the reality of psi faculties or "siddhis" such as telepathy, clairvoyance, retrocognition, and psychokinesis is widely accepted. Infants displaying super-psi of these kinds (i.e., potential future gurus) would be much better suited to improving their parents' financial or social status than children who merely talk about past lives that are frequently not even verifiable. Yet, case reports of super-psychic toddlers outside the context of CORT or survival are clearly lacking even in India.

In fact, Indian CORT subjects are often *expected* to possess paranormal powers such as fortune telling and healing,[81] which would indeed greatly increase their parents' financial or social status. But despite these high expectations, these children generally don't display such abilities—and their parents remain poor.

General comments on the living-agent psi model

I close my evaluation of the motivated living-agent psi model with more general considerations. Sudduth's book is aptly entitled *A Philosophical Critique of Empirical Arguments for Postmortem Survival*. When reading it, I became increasingly concerned because of two intertwining characteristics of it: Like many other philosophical books, it is exceedingly abstract and therefore also exceedingly

subjective. If the history of philosophy has shown one thing, it is this: No philosopher ever agreed with another philosopher on every aspect of the other's thinking. There are probably as many different philosophies as philosophers. It is therefore noteworthy that elsewhere, Sudduth explicitly stressed that he loves “logic chopping” and that his philosophy including his conceptual criticism of empirical survival arguments is subjective indeed:

“I suspect that philosophy [...], the form it takes and how it's implemented, is fundamentally a subjective confession. At any rate, it has been for me. Even when I'm dealing with conceptual analysis and formulating precise arguments, I am necessarily encountering and speaking about myself. Perhaps this is the most important truth to be realized.”[124]

Quite right, and I'd like to add: The more abstract conceptual analyses are, the more likely they are to be subjective confessions. For example, Sudduth and other writers on the survival question, including Augustine, make much of *Bayesian Confirmation Theory* and related approaches. In their somewhat tortuous writings, terms like “fit with background knowledge”, “prior probability”, and “posterior probability” abound. It is assumed that we can operate with these terms as if they were definable entities. By handling them properly, it is claimed, we can decide with reasonable confidence if the survival model is more probable than the physicalist model or the living-agent psi model—or not. Admittedly, such an approach may work in disciplines of science where all important information is available in comparably objective forms. But of course, it doesn't work when assessing controversial spontaneous phenomena in frontier areas of science where hardly anything can yet be objectively measured or collectively agreed upon. Furthermore, it doesn't work if this additionally includes issues surrounding this peculiar phenomenon called “consciousness” that nobody has ever explained, if it is explainable at all. In these domains, the notions of what should be regarded as established “background knowledge” are frequently antipodal, and “prior probabilities” only mirror personal preconceptions. Consequently, abstract Bayesian analyses turn into mere self-fulfilling loops of thought, as the following examples show:

A Bayesian analysis conducted by physicalists Keith Augustine and Yonatan Fishman in *The Myth of an Afterlife* allegedly demonstrated that the mind is dependent on brain chemistry.[125] As a result, personal survival cannot occur and survival phenomena are to be explained in physicalist terms. Augustine holds even less sympathy for the living-agent psi model that he considers “incredibly *ad hoc*”. [108,p.33] Sudduth, by contrast, considers physicalist explanations for survival phenomena “highly inadequate”[9,p.249] and in his Bayesian analysis, he arrived at the

conclusion that the living-agent psi model is very reasonable. Of course, both these antipodal results are “logical” from the perspective of those who performed the analyses.

Conclusion: Why the motivated living-agent psi model fails

As demonstrated, abstract philosophical logic chopping is fruitless in frontier areas of science because it amounts to hardly more than subjective confessions. It is therefore not too surprising that the motivated living-agent psi model has grave shortcomings when applied to empirical CORT reports obtained from real life.

- 1) It is often conspicuously unable to retrospectively provide credible explanations for why someone might be motivated to simulate survival with their psychic abilities.
- 2) It additionally fails to prospectively predict which kinds of psi phenomena should occur in response to specific motives.
- 3) Several auxiliary assumptions of the living-agent psi model, such as the postulated types of subconscious super-psi-conductive dissociation inductions, especially from a distance in unknown twins and prelingual toddlers, stretch its credibility further—in my opinion, beyond reason.

The theoretical conceptualization of the motivated living-agent psi model lacks grounding in empirical experience. Edward Kelly, Professor of Research at the University of Virginia, described how reading the extremely abstract parts of Sudduth’s book left him with the odd sense of looking through the wrong end of a telescope.[126] I can only agree. Depending on how the instrument of logical thinking is applied, it can effectively lead to *increasing* the distance to appropriately understanding the phenomena one actually intended to understand more closely. Therefore, I am convinced that impartial judges in court would never prefer abstract philosophical reasoning to direct eyewitness testimonies when having to decide upon a case—for example, when determining a credible motive for a given action. In the context of CORT, the survival evidence still stands strong in comparison to the arguments of its most serious competitor, the motivated living-agent psi model.¹⁶

¹⁶ For strong CORT, one might even wonder whether the degree of “simulated” survival postulated by the living-agent psi model does in fact equal proper survival. As a minimum, the criteria of self-aware identification and of verifiable knowledge continuity with a deceased personality (see p. 5) are continuously fulfilled for years. From the first- person perspective of the subjects and from the third-person perspective of other people involved in CORT, it doesn’t matter whether the memories, “thought bundles”, habits, skills, emotions, somatic features, etc., pertaining to previous personalities were prompted to reincarnate via the deceased individuals themselves or via other means. The experiential and phenomenological results are identical.

5 The Larger Picture

It is now time to integrate the previous considerations about CORT into the larger context of the other survival phenomena—and of life in general. For this purpose, I'd like to introduce a few distinctions between the types of survival evidence available. Rather than speaking simply of “evidence”, realizing that there are different facets of evidence that deserve separate consideration allows for a more astute analysis. This helps strengthen the overall arguments in specific ways. For example, I regard the best available evidence for survival, CORT, as also the *core evidence* for survival. Moreover, empirical evidence derived from a single case study is *factual evidence*. When referring to factual evidence furnished by multiple single case studies of CORT or of other survival phenomena of the same kind, I speak of *cumulative evidence*. Obviously, dozens of well-documented CORT that, ideally, were investigated by different researchers provide much better evidence for their authenticity than just one single case. The frequently used argument of cumulative force applies here.

Furthermore, I refer to the survival evidence provided by the other survival phenomena as *ancillary evidence*. This ancillary evidence adds to the evidential strength of the core evidence of CORT. The inherent interrelatedness of CORT with phenomena constituting ancillary evidence such as ADCs, NDEs, and mental mediumship is what I call *interrelational evidence*, because these interrelations add a new dimension and quality to the evidence provided by CORT that goes beyond the mere accumulation of cases of the same kind. Such interrelations allow bridges to be built between different but related phenomena and areas of research. Because the survival evidence provided by CORT supports the notion that consciousness and memories can exist independently of a brain, similar interpretations of NDEs, ADCs, NDVs, and mental mediumship become considerably more likely as well. In return, very strong case studies documented in fields of survival research apart from CORT support the strength of the core evidence—and as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, there are several lines of strong evidence that seriously challenge the “production hypothesis” of consciousness proclaimed by physicalists, and favor a psi-inclusive survival model. It is very important to recognize that we are not only dealing with a few well-documented CORT that call for an explanation, but with an entire network of survival phenomena that forms an integrated whole.[23,49].

Nevertheless, factual evidence provided by singular strong case studies, such as in CORT, is most important on the fundamental level. If only one transparently documented case provided very, very strong evidence for survival, this would make the survival model much more plausible in other cases as well. Shroder put it this way:

“If I accepted even *one* of the cases as genuine, I had to accept many, if not most of them. If reincarnation were possible, even once, then it instantly became a far simpler explanation for Shiva, the milkman, and the others than was the strained chain of conspiracy and coincidence that I had to cook up to explain them all away.”[48,p.211]

This is one reason why, from a physicalist and living-agent psi perspective, one should avoid admitting that even one single CORT, such as those of Ryan Hammons or Gnanatilleka Baddewithana, can best be explained in survival terms. The salient strands of cumulative and interrelational evidence that link numerous case studies of CORT and the other fields of survival research would inevitably cause a domino effect, tilting the explanations for other cases towards the survival model as well.

But how does all this fit with our current understanding of life and the nature of the world? Can survival really be possible in a world that is seemingly dominated by physics and chemistry? It is perfectly possible, simply because not only is the physicalist model of consciousness mistaken, but also the physicalist model of the world at large. As I have argued elsewhere, the aspect of reality that we perceive as the world is only a small and biologically determined excerpt of reality. What we perceive as our world rests on a largely hidden background reality that has non-physical or psychic attributes, and it is here that all biological life including consciousness is deeply rooted.[127] In contrast to the claims of many physicalists, there is considerable empirical evidence supporting the notion that life cannot be reduced to physicochemical processes alone. In fact, the notion that *there is more to life than physics and chemistry* has a long tradition that has always existed as a side branch of mainstream biology. It is called “vitalism” and was particularly advocated and re-vitalized by Hans Driesch about 100 years ago.[128,129] In previous publications, I compiled numerous challenges to the physicalist model of life, calling for a revival of vitalist thought:

- We still don’t know how life on earth began. All hypotheses that have so far been offered are highly speculative and problematical.[129] There are at least 24 important biochemical difficulties that still need to be overcome, both in theory and in practice, before one can state with reasonable confidence that we might find a way to understand the origins of life.[127,pp.14–78]
- Approaches to explain evolution via random mutations and subsequent selection of the fittest are insufficient.[127,pp.79–202] This is currently recognized by an increasing number of biologists who are busily developing more extended models of evolution.[130]

- However, even these new models are based on a physicalist approach. They fail to account for psi phenomena, ranging from those occurring in the animal kingdom up to CORT, and for other evidence questioning that consciousness is exclusively generated by brain chemistry.[5,23,127,129,131]

Clearly, the physicalist world model needs a revision and expansion, as specifically signposted by psi phenomena. Telepathy and clairvoyance demonstrate that space is not what it seems to be, and precognition as well as retrocognition demonstrate that time is likewise not as it appears. Aspects of the mind can obviously tunnel our outwardly stable spacetime continuum. Unsurprisingly, several parapsychologists, but also physicists, have developed models of reality that comprise additional dimensions with non-physical properties that could account for these findings,[127,132,133] fostering the notion that we need “to mentalize space and spatialize mind.”[134,p.218]

There is a long list of biologists, philosophers, and other authors whose understandings of nature fit perfectly with these ideas. Among my favorites are Arthur Schopenhauer, Hans Driesch, and Carl Gustav Jung.[129,135]¹⁷ In the recent past, an increasing number of natural scientists and philosophers have challenged physicalism, and have come to sympathize with panpsychist and/or idealist interpretations of the world, thus matching notions held since time immemorial in mystical traditions.[129,138–140] Nevertheless, the non-physical background reality of existence will most likely be rather complex and difficult to comprehend using logical thinking alone, and so I hold with biologist John Haldane, saying:

“My own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.”[141,p.286]

In such a world, survival would constitute no oddity at all. Rather, one might even expect it to occur, albeit in only a very general sense. It is presently difficult to obtain a deeper understanding of what the afterlife realm might actually be like, or to determine which aspects of personalities might survive in what form, and for how long. But I think there are good reasons to suppose that the afterlife experience is shaped by culturally influenced personal experiences lived in the flesh, and this on a largely subconscious level.[49,142,143]

Thus, there might be different variants of survival that co-exist, and reincarnation might also only be facultative. It might even be that aspects of personalities split into parts with different degrees of activity or passivity, merge with aspects of other personalities, or even enter non-personal

¹⁷ Excellent introductions to the thinking of Schopenhauer and Jung were recently offered by Bernardo Kastrup.[136,137]

forms of awareness that may recondense into centers of individual awareness. These processes might be somewhat comparable to dreaming. Indeed, many ADCs do occur in dreams, including departure and announcing dreams in CORT. It is further intriguing that people report having mutual dreams and even mutual lucid dreams, especially in shamanic and mystical traditions.[129] These experiences indicate that the joint existence of individuals in a collective non-physical realm is possible, and that, speaking with Driesch,

“the means of communication that are normal for the deceased were ‘paranormal’ for the living.”[144,p.26]

From an evolutionary perspective, such a non-physical realm would develop in mutual interplay with the experiences of organisms on the earthly plane, and it might therefore also be influenced by experiential streams of consciousness other than human minds.

Regardless of such speculations, which can only be substantiated by further research, the point I am making here is that survival fits very well into the most appropriate model of the world that is currently available.

This now prompts me to introduce another type of evidence that adds weight to the survival interpretation of all the other types of evidence compiled. It is what I call *permissive evidence*. This type of evidence demonstrates that the survival model doesn’t hover in an empty space with no connections to other established branches of academic thought. In contrast to what many physicalists assert, the fundamental nature of the world permits survival.¹⁸ We just need to look beyond the rim of mainstream science to recognize this. Driesch put it this way:

“One must look for exceptions, because exceptions are the best means for avoiding dogmatism. The abnormal is to be investigated; but naturally not because it is abnormal, but because it opens our view for understanding the essence of the normal.”[152,p.261]

¹⁸ In his 1993 contribution “Revising survival research: Proposals for a new paradigm”, philosopher Michael Grosso indicated that new impulses for advancing survival research might also be obtained by investigating what are currently termed “unidentified aerial phenomena” (UAP).[145] The evidence supporting the facticity of UAP has increased substantially, especially in recent years.[146] Just in June of this year, official authorities in the USA reported that between 2004 and 2021, 80 UAP that behaved in inexplicable ways had been objectively registered across multiple sensors, including radar, infrared, and electro-optical, as well as by weapon seekers and visual observation.[147] Because the phenomenology of UAP shares striking parallels with that of psi phenomena, both must rely on the same properties of the background reality of existence.[145,148–151] Consequently, efforts to advance understanding of UAP and the intelligence controlling them needs to entail a research program focusing on psi phenomena, and a revision of physicalist biology.[148] In return, the growing evidence for UAP increases the likelihood for human survival further by providing added interrelational and permissive evidence for it. Future research into UAP might well contribute to the necessary breakthrough lifting our understanding of life and nature onto the next level.

Figure 4 depicts all the different types of evidence described. It shows their positions and interrelations integrated into the shape of a pyramid. This pyramid represents the *integrated evidence* for survival. Simultaneously, it stands for the mountain of arguments compiled throughout the pages of this essay to determine the best available evidence for survival and its strength: Mount Evidence. And, if CORT constitute the best available evidence for survival of all survival phenomena, then this mountain of integrated evidence constitutes the *very* best evidence for human survival after permanent bodily death as a whole.

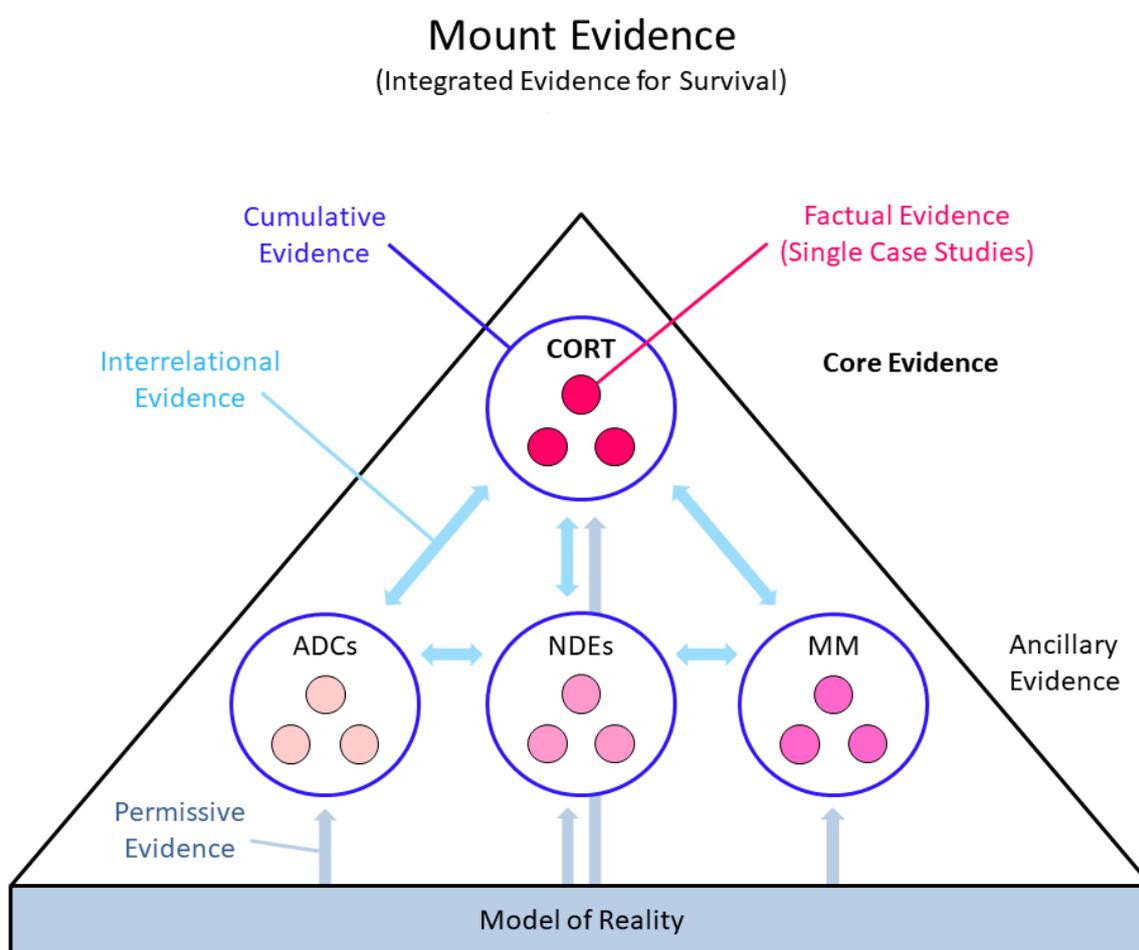


Figure 4: Mount Evidence, a graphical illustration of the available evidence for human survival after death. All known survival phenomena contribute to this *integrated evidence* for survival, but I have only depicted the four kinds of survival phenomena considered in this essay. The best available evidence is constituted by cases of the reincarnation type (CORT), which therefore provide the *core evidence* for survival. After-death contacts (ADCs), near-death experiences (NDEs), and mental mediumship (MM) constitute *ancillary evidence*. Evidence derived from single case studies (represented by the three filled circles in all four fields of research) represents *factual evidence*, evidence derived from multiple case studies in these fields constitutes *cumulative evidence* (blue circles). The interrelatedness of the different survival phenomena that lend support to each other provides *interrelational evidence*. The fact that the most appropriate model of reality permits survival to occur constitutes additional *permissive evidence*.

CORT in court

Finally, I frame the available survival evidence in a context of “proof beyond a reasonable doubt”. Because this concept is notoriously difficult to define,[153] and we usually don’t speak of “proof” in sciences like psychical research, I briefly explain how this concept should be understood:

Absolute or mathematical certainty is not required, but a subjective state of near-certitude that implies a firm and abiding conviction. This near-certitude is to be obtained after full and impartial consideration of all the evidence, governed solely by that evidence in determining factual issues, while excluding conjectures and unsupported inferences.¹⁹

In previous sections, I concluded already that an impartial court would have to favor the empirical survival evidence provided by CORT over the theoretical speculations of the physicalist and living-agent psi models. To be more precise, truly impartial court members would act like this: They would question the production hypothesis according to which consciousness is exclusively generated by brain chemistry. Numerous lines of evidence introduced in my essay have shown that this hypothesis is far from being established; and as stated in the Introduction, it is impossible to prove it from a purely logical perspective. Its widespread acceptance in Western cultures is merely socioculturally conditioned. Adolescent CORT subjects and other eyewitnesses deeply involved in CORT, especially in non-Western cultures, might well claim that the production hypothesis is an “extraordinary claim that requires extraordinary evidence” which has not yet been provided. Hence, impartial court members would disregard socioculturally determined preconceptions about the nature of consciousness. They would not regard survival “impossible” in an aprioristic way, but consider the scientifically established non-physical properties of the background reality of existence. They would take eyewitness testimonies just as seriously as they would do in other contexts. They would acquire a thorough command of the core evidence for survival, studying at least the CORT presented in Tables 2 and 3. Some may say that up to 53 concordant witness testimonies, such as in the case of Sumitra Singh,[11] already establish the facts regarding “what really happened in the past” (p. 19) beyond a reasonable doubt. Yet, court members would also have to consider the most important aspects of the ancillary evidence for survival. All this should then be compared to the conjectures and inferences of the physicalist and living-agent psi models, and the countercriticism offered. From this perspective, the available evidence for survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death clearly matches the standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

¹⁹ These formulations describing “proof beyond a reasonable doubt” are derived from a document issued by the Supreme Court of the United States of America.[154]

6 Future Outlook

The story doesn't end here. We need visions for the future to deepen our understanding of survival phenomena on the scientific and spiritual levels. I suspect we are still at the beginning of a thrilling expedition of endeavor, leading to the compilation of ever more compelling data, also regarding CORT. Potentially researchable new cases—of highly variable initial quality, of course—keep on being reported constantly, even in the West. Jim Tucker at the University of Virginia is contacted 10–15 times each month by American families,[155] and Jim Matlock's over 17,000-member reincarnation group on Facebook also receives promising case reports [personal communication]. Currently, I am aware of two new intriguing and still unreported Western before-cases that are being investigated. One of them includes audio and video recordings plus a written list of statements taken down before the previous personality was identified—a boy who was killed in a tornado. Without doubt, there are many more cases out there that can be studied. Establishing an international network linking CORT researchers across the globe to develop a systematic research program is therefore highly desirable, and respective plans are currently in the making.

Additionally, it is important to advance theory building in reincarnation studies. Documenting cases constitutes only the first step. To advance our understanding of them, we need a considerable number of reliable cases to look for patterns in meta-data that facilitate the judgement of theoretical models. I provided one example when discussing the CORT from Sri Lanka that conspicuously lack personal names—thereby challenging the motivated physicalist and the motivated living-agent psi models, but not the survival model. Such patterns provide an important added layer of potential evidence, a layer of *meta-evidence* that cannot be deduced from single case studies alone. On the basis of such patterns, empirically testable hypotheses can be developed.

But CORT are not only important because they constitute the best and the most researchable survival evidence, thereby evidencing that consciousness and memories are not produced by the brain. In addition, studying CORT might provide new insights into personality and character development, and a better understanding of post-traumatic stress symptoms or phobias in early childhood, but also of potential reasons for birthmarks and birth defects, and so forth. Growing public awareness of CORT could furthermore lead to increased acceptance of children who talk about past lives. Rather than ridiculing or trying to silence them, adults could progressively acknowledge them and appreciate that we can learn important lessons from our children.

From a more nature-philosophical perspective of biology, investigating CORT also bears considerable value for understanding the development of an organism. Given that experiences from past lives can contribute not only to shaping our character but also the development of bodily traits via psychically mediated carry-over effects, we must again take into account additional modes of causation, such as Aristotle's "final causes", Driesch's concept of "wholeness-causality", and other ideas of systemic and holistic top-down causation.[135] CORT also raise intriguing questions for evolutionary biology: Given that psychological and bodily traits can be transmitted to other individuals of later generations without relying on genetic inheritance, does this process perhaps influence the development of instincts and bodily traits over the course of evolution?[129]

Obviously, CORT open multiple lines of further scientific exploration. Their facets build bridges to different branches of biology, surmounting the current physicalist notion of most mainstream biologists that rests on an outdated understanding of nature and life. CORT provide solid arguments for developing modern versions of vitalism.[50,56] Exploring phenomena such as CORT, which directly relate to nature's background reality, might well lead to a breakthrough regarding our understanding of the nature of nature, of life, *and* of the question of what happens after we die.

Coming to a close now, I hope I was able to demonstrate in my essay

- 1) that the best available evidence for the survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death is provided by CORT.
- 2) that CORT are imbedded into a network of related phenomena that further strengthen the case for human survival.
- 3) that research into CORT must be advanced because they hold manifold potentials for expanding our scientific and spiritual knowledge about some of the most important questions facing mankind.

Let's hope with Driesch and Stevenson, who held Driesch's writings in high esteem, that courageous scientists who don't shy away from studying the truly exciting will step up and follow the call. The time is ripe for a paradigm shift.

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