

Communicating with the Dead: The Evidence Ignored Why Paul Kurtz is Wrong

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Abstract—A far-ranging attack on the evidence for the paranormal in general, and the case for post-mortem survival of intelligence in particular, was published in 2000 by Professor Paul Kurtz in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, organ of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Reluctance of its Editor to fulfil an undertaking to publish a response has prompted this more extensive review of the deficiencies in his argument. It points in particular to areas which Kurtz either ignores entirely or misrepresents, notably in the extensive literature relating to early mediumistic communications whose paranormality has yet to be undermined by any objective examination; some of the early examples of cross-correspondences; book tests with Mrs. Osborne Leonard; and the Edgar Vandy case as an illustration of the unscientific manner in which skeptics seek to mislead readers. Finally there is a summary of more recent statistically measurable research into veridical communications from gifted mediums.

Keywords: Skeptics—mediums—survival—cross-correspondences

This article, albeit in a considerably shortened form, was due to appear in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, organ of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). This article was intended to be a response to a criticism of claims of paranormality in general, and belief in communication with the dead in particular. The criticisms, published in the November/December 2000 issue, were from no less a figure than the founding chairman and leading thinker of CSICOP, Paul Kurtz (Kurtz, 2000). Although the Editor of the *Inquirer* undertook to publish my response, and even averred that Professor Kurtz himself supported that intention, various pretexts were given for delays over the following 18 months until finally it became clear that the Editor was reluctant to fulfil his earlier intention.

There is no duty on the part of an avowedly propagandist organisation to publish material clearly hostile to its deeply held beliefs. But where such a body constantly emphasises its adherence to the strict requirements of scientific rigour, its abhorrence of misrepresentation, its denunciation of pseudo-science and its determination to maintain those high standards of objective evaluation of evidence which proponents of the paranormal are widely held to ignore, there is an especial obligation to publish an article which shows just where in several

respects such standards have been besmirched. The experience of David Leiter (Leiter, 2002), who found that ridicule and *ad hominem* attacks were associated with a refusal to publish rebuttals, will be fresh in the mind of many *Journal of Scientific Exploration* readers.

Kurtz's article disregards inconvenient facts dealing with the evidence for life after death. His concern arises from the "intense popular interest" in these questions in the USA, a concern he illustrates by listing a number of best-selling books and TV shows: a "massive media onslaught" which helps to account for the top ranking enjoyed by the USA among the democracies as number one in belief in survival of consciousness. Kurtz then rhetorically asks what scientists have to say about life after death, but he does not provide an answer, for two very good reasons. One is that scientists are not unanimous about this; the other is that very few have studied the evidence. A glance at the ostensibly impressive list of references appended to Kurtz's article, as well as a study of the arguments he adduces, supports the suspicion, despite his claims of 25 years' study, that either he is among the uninformed majority or that he has ignored evidence which appears inconsistent with his long-held belief that there is no reliable evidence in favour of the paranormal, let alone survival of human consciousness beyond death.

All serious psychical researchers are aware that the most formidable body of evidence for discarnate communication resides in the cross-correspondences. These began shortly after the death in 1901 of Frederic Myers, one of the principal founders of psychical research in the UK. The aim appeared to be an attempt by ostensibly discarnate intelligences, whose identities were apparent from the scripts, to defeat the theory that information conveyed could be attributed to the exercise of paranormal faculties of a single medium. Communications were received by several mediums in different countries, independently and usually in the form of automatic writing. Amid much gobble-de-gook, they contained fragments of reiterated phrases later found to constitute portions of coherent, intelligible and often subtle messages. By ensuring that no medium was given more than an intrinsically meaningless part of a message, the alternative explanation of survival of human intelligence beyond physical death seemed to be greatly strengthened. These so-called cross-correspondences, the full significance of which is still the subject of investigation as new evidence is unearthed from hitherto suppressed documents, continued for some three decades and involved the principal analysts in years of analytical and interpretive work.

Anyone claiming to be an authority on the subject who is unaware of cross-correspondences or who (worse still) chooses to disregard what he cannot explain, is not serving the interests of objective science. Let me give in summary just one experiment and invite Kurtz or anyone else to explain how the evidence can be squared with his views. It is an old case, but good evidence neither rusts nor withers. It is in no way dependent on subjective assessment, cold readings, inflamed emotions, religious belief or any of the other explanations which litter

Kurtz's article and reflect the explanations repeatedly advanced by such leading skeptics as Frank Podmore, Ray Hyman, C.E.M. Hansel, Chris French, Richard Wiseman, Joe Nickell, and many others. Unlike the bulk of the cross-correspondences, however, it was initiated from live experimenters rather than from entities communicating their complex puzzle-messages from the Other Side.

Leonora Piper was (as Kurtz rightly states) a famous Boston medium who was investigated under controlled conditions, notably by Professor William James, the father-figure of modern psychology, and Dr. Richard Hodgson, an avowed skeptic. Such was her fame that she was invited to the UK to be tested by, among others, Frederic Myers and Sir Oliver Lodge. Following Myers' death in 1901, a voice claiming to be his spirit communicated through the entranced medium who was undergoing rigorous investigation by George Dorr in Boston. Aware that Myers had been a distinguished classical scholar, whereas Mrs. Piper was not, Dorr invited "Myers" to say what the word *Lethe* conveyed to him. A considerable number of references emerged. Many were unknown to Dorr, whose classical knowledge was modest; but investigation showed that nearly all of them were accurate, if usually oblique, references to persons, incidents, descriptions and places found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which gives an account of the mythological Hadean stream of *Lethe* bounding the shores of the Elysian fields, and from whose waters the newly dead must drink to purify themselves and wash away all earthly memories before re-birth (Piddington, 1908).

When Sir Oliver Lodge learned of this, he decided to pose the same question through another medium known as Mrs. Willett, with whom he was having sittings in London. She was a very intelligent, well-educated woman, but with little classical knowledge. She was also Myers' sister-in-law, and she too had been transmitting messages purporting to come from him. In response to the same question, she communicated a long series of references, many of them unknown to Lodge or his fellow classicists Piddington and Mrs. Verrall, the latter being a University classics lecturer. Virtually all of these were found to derive not from Ovid but from an entirely different account connected with Aeneas's visit to Elysium with Anchises, his father, as described in Book Six of Virgil's *Aeneid*, on which Myers had once written a scholarly commentary. They were equally accurate, although many were clearly allusive, and some were linked to the Ovidian messages received 3,000 miles away via Mrs. Piper (Lodge, 1911).

When Lodge asked why "Myers" had not given the same responses, Mrs. Willett's automatic writing replied that, had he done so, critics would have dismissed the evidence as mere telepathy between the mediums.

This summarises lengthy and detailed accounts of these sittings which appear in several Proceedings and issues of the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, whose leading sceptic, Frank Podmore, did his best to ascribe the Piper evidence to telepathy. He died before the Willett confirmation was available, but even he was clearly rattled by it (Podmore, 1910). He would have

been a good deal more rattled had he known that around this time, apart from Mrs. Willett and Mrs. Piper, three other mediums, most unknown to one another, were producing scripts with references to doors or sesame (as in Ali Baba's command) or even in some cases, less punningly, to the name of Dorr (Sidgwick et al., 1910). It need hardly be said that the simplistic explanations of fraud, cryptomnesia or collusion were thoroughly investigated and decisively ruled out by the highly critical group of experts who examined these cases.

This evidence is a small fraction of the huge volumes of independently written or spoken messages coming from a number of mediums in different parts of the world in which fragments of individually meaningless phrases, names or quotations were later assembled to make collective sense, just as a scattering of fragments of a jigsaw puzzle might begin to assume a discernible picture only when the parts are fitted together. The aim was obvious: it was to falsify the hypothesis that telepathy or clairvoyance could account satisfactorily for communications giving information which would appear to have come only from the entity purporting to communicate.

One of the first, and most obvious, steps that had been taken by distinguished and experienced investigators like William James, Hodgson, Lodge and Myers was to eliminate all of the "normal" explanations involving sensory perception or deduction, which sceptics traditionally use to explain away any apparently veridicality in such communications. Having done so, they were left to settle the two immediately outstanding issues: (a) is the information derived telepathically from human beings, or does it come from discarnate sources, and (b) if the latter, how can one be certain of the correct identity of the purported communicator?

The cross-correspondences make no sort of sense unless they are recognised as an attempt to answer (a) and, in the process, to demonstrate (b). Whether the intelligences responsible for these elaborate and sometimes mystifyingly complex messages succeeded is a matter of opinion. But no one is morally entitled to express an opinion without having devoted some time to studying at least a summary of the principal evidence. I doubt whether my views on haematology would carry much weight if I confessed I knew nothing of plasma or leukocytes or erythrocytes.

Critics have long argued that, without intimate knowledge of Latin and Greek, anyone would find these cross-correspondences almost impossible to fathom, that they are too complex, ambiguous and allusive. But this excuse will not wash. There are perfectly intelligible analyses extant of some aspects of them, the most important and persuasive being the Countess of Balfour's examination of the Palm Sunday Case (Balfour, 1960). This stretches almost beyond intellectual integrity the hypothesis that an ability to pick up fragments of apparently unrelated and meaningless clues, later found to convey to an ageing former UK Prime Minister information that only he knew, and that related to events in his private life which had taken place a full half century earlier, was simply telepathy by the living rather than communication from the dead.

Survival is not proven: it is a matter of the weight of evidence and the competing explanations. But what every serious and unblinkered student of psychical research has accepted for a century is that the issue is not whether the evidence points to the existence of a telepathic faculty in mankind: that was regarded as clearly established by the end of the 19th century, long before Rhine and his successors tried replicatory experiments. It was whether the evidence, primarily that from sources immune to attributions of cold reading, body language, guesswork, hallucination, misdirection, darkness, ambiguity or deception, pointed clearly either to the existence of one or more discarnate intelligences, or whether it could be ascribed to a superior form of telepathy among the living, later to become familiar as the super-PSI hypothesis.

Yet Kurtz, in purporting to give his readers a potted account of the history of such communications, ignores these communications altogether. He leaves his readers with the impressions that the leading figures in both the Society for Psychical Research and its younger USA parallel body devoted their attention either to reports of apparitions and ghostly hauntings or to physical phenomena. The former Kurtz dismisses these as subjective hallucinations, despite massive evidence that accurate information, unknown to the percipient, was most commonly associated with the event reported. The latter he cites only to refer to those occasions when accusations of fraud were made against such prominent practitioners as Eusapia Palladino and several unnamed but allegedly bogus mediums exposed by Houdini. Kurtz acknowledges that, like purported demonstrations of ESP, this has little to do with the survival of human intelligence or communication with the deceased. One consequently looks for a scholarly and objective summary of evidence which has convinced so many distinguished scientists, psychologists and philosophers in the past, to say nothing of a substantial segment of USA citizens, whose gullibility Kurtz clearly laments.

However, one looks in vain. First, there is the dismissal of all mediumistic statements on the grounds that either sensory clues or direct fraud can be trusted to explain them all. There is no indication that tests which completely eliminate such hypotheses were conducted more than a century ago by scientists no less sceptical than Kurtz, that proxy sittings, which preclude sensory clues, are commonplace, and that readings by telephone and e-mail are now not infrequent.

Nor is there the least hint in Kurtz's criticisms of many hundreds of experiments were undertaken during the 1920s and 1930s in particular by C. Drayton Thomas in book tests (Drayton Thomas, 1922). In these, a purported discarnate communicator identifies a passage of significance and relevance to a known individual, and which appears on a line or specified part of a page of a book located at a given number of places from a stated end of a numbered shelf on a particular cabinet in the library of the experimenter or someone he is representing as a proxy. Similarly ignored are cases like Drayton Thomas's lengthy analysis of a proxy sitting with one of the century's most gifted and prolific mediums, Mrs. Osborne Leonard (Drayton Thomas, 1939), where both

the quality and quantity of pieces of veridical information are assessed against the performance of another medium, showing striking successes.

It is equally noteworthy that readers are left in total ignorance of what many now regard as the most persuasive evidence for some sort of survival: Professor Ian Stevenson's four decades of research into children who remember past lives. Stevenson's work, especially those cases where children show birthmarks closely related to the location and shape of mortal injuries sustained by their previous presumed incarnates, is particularly relevant to any objective review of the evidence for survival. To overlook it is like giving an account of evolutionary theory without mentioning *The Origin of Species*.

One familiar technique to avoid this uncomfortable evidence is to tarnish the evidence for both telepathy and survival by lumping them into the same basket of questionable companions as phrenology, astrology, numerology, Biblical fundamentalism and creationism. Likewise, by implying that the evidence for discarnate communication is based on the activities of unscrupulous psychics feeding on gullible clients desperate for a sign that their loved ones are still around, Kurtz destroys any claim he may have had to objectivity.

Typical of this technique is an article by Professor Kenneth Oldfield (Oldfield, 2001) published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* 12 months after the appearance of Kurtz's denunciation of the paranormal and all who believe in it. It was related to what many psychical researchers would regard as one of the classic cases indicative of intelligent communication from beyond the grave, or (as an improbable alternative) an extraordinary demonstration of telepathy among the living.

Shortly after the drowning death of the young inventor, Edgar Vandy, in August, 1933, his brothers consulted a number of mediums in conditions of elaborate anonymity, taking full records of all the five sittings. They wanted to discover just what had happened. These sittings yielded a wealth of highly precise and accurate information about Vandy, his secret invention, and the circumstances of his death. The case is lengthy, but meticulously documented. It was published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research* in 1957 and extensively analysed by the distinguished philosopher and psychical researcher, Professor C. D. Broad (Broad, 1962). Oldfield went to considerable lengths to obtain a copy of both these publications, and he devoted most of his lengthy article to showing that "all the Vandy 'hits' can be explained as cold readings, luck, preparatory research, or common parlour tricks".

In the light of Oldfield's dismissal I made a detailed analysis of this evidence. His ostensible purpose was to show how foolish a certain Professor Arthur Miller had been to take the Vandy case seriously enough to warrant the construction of a (highly fanciful) theory of near-death communication to explain apparent post-mortem survival. The analysis revealed the extent to which Oldfield had used the not unfamiliar instruments of suppression, misrepresentation and deception to present readers with a totally false picture of the facts. What makes Oldfield's action the more reprehensible is that he

cannot plead ignorance—save perhaps of a reading given later by another medium (of which he might well have been unaware had he been negligent in his research), and which drives an extra nail in the coffin of his argument. That plea might have been appropriate earlier, because Oldfield had submitted his original paper to another specialist publication (the *Journal of Parapsychology*), when at least one of the referees concluded that he had “made his ignorance of the relevant literature glaringly apparent on almost every line”, having manifestly never looked at the original Vandy report or at Broad’s lucid analysis of it. There is ample evidence that Oldfield belatedly remedied this deficiency, but no doubt reasoned that few if any readers of the *Skeptical Inquirer* would be likely to go to the trouble to look up a lengthy paper in an obscure specialist journal nearly half a century old in order to check the accuracy and fairness of what purported to be an authoritative analysis by a prominent academic. A detailed account of Oldfield’s misrepresentations appears in the October issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (Keen, 2002). Attempts by two correspondents to draw attention to these deficiencies were ignored by the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

This is all the more dangerous for those whose skepticism is hardening into an immunity to disturbing evidence—evidence which threatens to undermine a well-entrenched belief system. In the UK Professor Archie Roy and Mrs. Trish Robertson (Robertson & Roy, 2001) have been conducting a lengthy series of tests with platform, or stage, mediums to see whether an analysis of their readings falsifies the hypothesis that their statements are sufficiently bland and generalised as to be acceptable equally to those at whom the medium intends to direct his statements as they are to non-recipients. By eliminating the usual opportunities for conscious or unconscious deception through double-blind precautions, a large series of tests has shown a surprising degree of consistency in the acceptability gap between recipients and non-recipients, a gap susceptible to statistical evaluation, and showing a probability at astronomical levels against chance expectation (Roy & Robertson, 2001). The successful employment of what has been described as orthodox science’s Grand Inquisitor, the double-blind test, with the equivalent of a placebo control, must be particularly worrying to those nurtured in the conviction that such methods are beyond the competence of the derisively termed pseudo-sciences.

The results are consistent with the findings of Professor Gary Schwartz and his colleagues at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Criticism of this work (Wiseman & O’Keeffe, 2001), while substantially rebutted (Schwartz et al., 2001), has resulted in further protocol tightening in ongoing trials in which a number of mediums under conditions which preclude deception and error can give a p value of less than one in 10 million against a chance explanation of the accuracy of their statements about deceased relatives of hidden sitters. More evidence supporting and amplifying these results is accumulating (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2002). It will not do just to ignore them, and it is scientifically unsound to rely on weak or irrelevant material in order to justify blanket dismissal of

entirely different phenomena just because they appear to be assembled in the same occultist basket. The success of both these sets of experiments in the USA and UK may be explained by postulating survival of personality beyond death or, more parsimoniously, of mind-reading. Plausible explanations relying entirely on orthodox “normal” means for such evidence have not been forthcoming for well over a century. The telepathic theory becomes less sustainable when the information transmitted is unknown to both the recipient and the transmitter, of course; and there are ample cases where this occurs.

It will doubtless come as a welcome relief to Professor Kurtz and the *Skeptical Inquirer* to learn that a more recently completed study by one of CSICOP’s most prominent UK supporters, and which bears a strong similarity to the much-publicised Schwartz tests, has shown a negative result (Wiseman & O’Keeffe, 2002). It was subsidised by CSICOP. We may expect some interesting controversy not just about methodology but about the more insidious but well-established feature of so much psychical research, the experimenter effect, in which the personality and beliefs of the experimenter appear to influence the outcome of an experiment.

Kurtz’s dilemma is one squarely faced and sedulously dodged by his colleagues in the hierarchy of CSICOP: once telepathy or its associated phenomena of clairvoyance are conceded (as virtually all serious students of the subject had done by 1900) the way is open for consciousness to be recognised as a faculty unlimited by earthly boundaries of time and space. And once a gateway is thereby opened, there is nothing to stand between the sturdy fortress of scientific orthodoxy and the submergence of mankind in a wave of occult beliefs and superstitious nonsense. Hence it becomes essential to select the weakest and ignore the strongest evidence, to smear what one declines to contest, and to suppress what it would be dangerous to acknowledge.

However as a last resort, there is always the philosophy of Master Wilkins Micawber, that something will sooner or later turn up to explain everything. It has a respectable ancestry, as the following quotation shows. It was by the eminent Nobel Laureate biologist Charles Richet who remained firmly wedded to a materialist philosophy despite his acceptance after 30 years’ investigation of the reality of extra-sensory perception, ectoplasmic forms, psychokinesis and precognition, but who simply could not swallow the concept of survival.

The most reasonable hypothesis is the unknown hypothesis X, which it will be for the future to develop. (Richet, 1924)

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