

EVIDENCE INCONSISTENT WITH
THE SUPER-ESP HYPOTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

The so-called *Super-ESP* hypothesis is sometimes advanced as an alternative explanation for material suggestive of Survival. The present note details a case from the literature which appears to defy this hypothesis.

THE STANDING OF THE HYPOTHESIS

The *Super-ESP* or *Super-Psi* hypothesis (the notion that any evidential information coming from mediums or from supposed discarnate sources is explicable in terms of telepathy from the living, or clairvoyant knowledge of the material world, rather than by invoking post-mortem communication) was first considered in the 19th Century by Charles Richet, and was also worked over (with varying degrees of acceptance and rejection) by leading members of this Society in the early decades of the present century. American sociologist and psychical researcher Hornell Hart coined the term *Super-ESP* in 1959, and psychologist Gardner Murphy further explored the usefulness of the idea during the 1960s and 1970s.

The hypothesis can potentially be used to discount evidence suggestive of Survival, but in order to do so it has sometimes to postulate the existence of ESP of a power and complexity far beyond anything demonstrated in the laboratory or in spontaneous ESP cases. It seems unlikely in the extreme that such ESP can function right across the wide range of cases where evidence suggestive of Survival has been obtained. Alan Gauld, in one of the most thorough and insightful investigations of the hypothesis on record, reaches the conclusion that "the Super-ESP theory will not suffice to explain the quantity of correct and appropriate information [relating to survival] sometimes furnished" (Gauld, 1982). There, for all practical purposes, the matter can be left to rest. But there remains the niggle that as evidence for Survival can only be verified by checking it against existing sources, telepathy and clairvoyance from material sources remain theoretical alternative possibilities, however wildly unlikely they may be.

THE DALLAS CASE

It might therefore seem impossible to come upon a case suggestive of Survival which is immune to this niggle. However, this is not so. A good case is described in one of her books by Helen Dallas (1929), and it deserves to be more widely known. Helen Dallas was an Honorary Associate of this Society, and a friend of Sir Oliver Lodge, who referred cases to her and to whom, with his permission, she dedicated the book in question. She sat frequently with Gladys Leonard and with most of the leading mediums of her day, published papers in our *Journal*, and put forward useful ideas in connection with the Cross-Correspondences. These facts, together with the evidence from her

several books (the best known of which is probably Dallas, 1927), suggest that she was a careful and reliable researcher.

The case in point, which I summarise below, was experienced by Dallas at first hand. The medium was Otto von Bourg, and the ostensible communicator was Dallas's deceased uncle and guardian, who had looked after her affairs when he was alive. Von Bourg first described the gentleman in question, apparently accurately, then said "I get the word *uncle*". The medium then asked Dallas if the uncle had . . .

. . . helped me to arrange any papers before he passed over. I realised that he had helped me to draw up my will. [Von Bourg] then said: "I get *incorrect*, so strongly". This surprised me, and I asked whether he meant that my uncle wished me to alter my will. He said: "No, the basis is all right; but there is something incorrect, and I think that if you see it he will impress you as to what it is."

Dallas subsequently wrote to her solicitor for her will, and sent it to a friend of hers, a retired judge, with the request he look at it for her. He replied promptly that "The will as drawn appears to me to contain a bad blunder, which would defeat your intentions to some extent". Dallas does not specifically tell us that the will had been checked by the solicitor when it was first lodged with him, but it is clear from what she says that it had been, and that he had failed to notice this blunder. She tells us that the judge informed her that he had "found similar blunders . . . made by other solicitors", and she adds that "neither the solicitor nor myself *can* [her italics] have been aware of the mistaken wording".

Dallas uses this case to rule out telepathy from the living. Neither she nor the solicitor knew of the mistake at the time of the sitting with von Bourg, and the same goes for the judge, who only learnt of it when she subsequently sent him the will. But she might also have effectively ruled out clairvoyance, because at the time of the sitting nothing existed in writing to say that the will was imperfect, and we cannot assume that the will was aware of its own error and was able to reveal this knowledge to the medium. Thus nowhere was there in existence any relevant information about the blunder which the medium could have accessed clairvoyantly.

The judge certainly carried in his head the knowledge of similar blunders made by other solicitors, but he knew nothing of the possible mistake in Dallas's will until she contacted him after the sitting. We can hardly offer the absurd argument that he had unrecognised psychic abilities and had somehow become unconsciously aware of the will in the past and of its imperfect wording, and that the medium had then selected him clairvoyantly and fished the information from his unconscious mind. Equally absurd is the notion that the solicitor had registered the blunder unconsciously, and that the medium had gone fishing into that area of *his* mind. No one has as yet seriously suggested that the Super-ESP theory should be stretched to cover all the information which we hold in the unconscious, information whose existence, since it *is* unconscious, cannot in any case be verified. Just as absurd is the notion that the medium had read the will clairvoyantly, that he possessed more legal knowledge than the solicitor, and that he had found the mistake for himself.

We can of course appeal to the last refuge of the Super-ESP theory, namely the notion that everything that is to happen can potentially be known by the

mind, and that in consequence the medium may have picked up precognitive knowledge of the judge's scrutiny of the will and of his subsequent discovery. But in the present instance such a refuge is only available if we first abdicate any claim to the scientific method. Not only are we unclear whether or not precognitive abilities, if they exist, do have access to all classes of events, there is no evidence that such abilities operated in the present instance. The medium conveyed information only of a current event, namely the mistake in the will, and not of the future events surrounding the discovery of this mistake. He made no reference to the part played in this discovery by the judge, or to the judge's role in informing Dallas or her solicitor of the relevant findings. His single vague reference to the future — i.e. that if Dallas looks at the will her uncle will "impress her as to what [the mistake] is" — turns out in fact to be incorrect. It was not her uncle but the judge who did the impressing.

Dallas herself took the view that her deceased uncle "found out after death that he had made a mistake in his drawing up of my will", and therefore wished to set matters to rights. It is not easy to argue with this view. Of course, we would like to know further details, such as the names of the judge and of the solicitor, and we would like to interview these gentlemen and obtain written evidence of the blunder in the will and of the circumstances surrounding it. The gap in time renders this impossible and in any case, who ever knew of a solicitor committing to paper evidence of his own incompetence? But even without these details, we are left with an intriguing case, and one which, unless we are to accuse Dallas of deliberately misleading us, should figure in any future arguments against the Super-ESP hypothesis.

CONCLUSION

There may be other cases of this kind. Taking this as our model, the conclusion is that we could usefully look for those communications by alleged discarnates which draw attention to secondary issues (such as errors) which are not spelt out in the material information to which our attention is being drawn. Such secondary issues should be unknown to anyone who has previously had dealings with this information, and should be subsequently detected by outsiders who have no connections with the case. Moreover, the circumstances under which the detection takes place should not feature in the communications themselves.

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