

PSYCHIC MEDIUMS AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD

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Spirituality is representative of all that is intangible, of everything that requires beliefs and faith. Science, on the other hand is representative of logic, fact, and certainty. Recently, science and spirituality have come together, specifically in the realm of afterlife communication. With the current mainstream popularity of psychics and their abilities, a scientific approach has been taken to validate the potential reality of spiritual phenomena. Essentially, the spiritual world and the scientific world, two entities that have usually remained separate, are now beginning to combine. In her book, *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong discusses the concepts of *mythos* and *logos*. *Mythos* is knowledge about the workings of life and what answers life's questions (xiii). Meanwhile, *logos* is essentially all that is logical and factual (xiv). In today's society, there is a pressing need for proof. The *mythos* aspect of religion is no longer strong enough on its own; what is needed is *logos*. Consequently, many have begun to turn to psychic ability as proof of an afterlife. James McClenon discusses this issue further in his book, *Deviant Science: the Case of Parapsychology*, while examining the research regarding spiritual phenomena and its struggle for acceptance. However, the motivation behind the acceptance of psychic evidence in both the scientific as well as the general community must be taken into account. One must consider whether belief and research in spiritual mediums are driven by actual proof or if there is a substantial following simply because people want to believe in communication with the afterlife so badly that they will create evidence to support their claims. This is an interesting thought, particularly when applied to psychic medium, Sylvia Browne. Browne appears to demonstrate a very real connection with the afterlife, or what she calls "The Other Side." Through two of Browne's books, *Life on the Other Side* and *Adventures of a Psychic*, I will explore the popularity and debate within the scientific arena regarding psychic phenomena, demonstrating that psychic acceptance is based more on a need for answers than an actual emergence of proof.

Paul Kurtz, author of the article "The New Paranatural Paradigm: Claims of Communicating with the Dead," published in the *Skeptical Enquirer*, notes that "at present there is intense popular interest in [life after death] in the United States. It is stimulated by the mass media, at least as measured by the number of popular books,

magazine articles, movies and television and radio programs devoted to the theme" (Kurtz NP). At this point, has experiencing spiritual phenomena become a trend or is it something that we are all desperately clinging to as an explanation for the unknown? For instance, Browne boasts that throughout her career as a psychic medium she has appeared on television shows such as Larry King Live and The Montel Williams Show, speaking of her ability to foretell the future and communicate with the spirits of deceased individuals (Browne and May 116-118). However, this begs the question: what is there to be gained from supposed psychic communication with the dead other than a good movie or a one-hour television show? Does the popularity of a psychic prove anything other than their reassurance of an afterlife to the public?

In an effort to comprehend acceptance of communication, Assistant Professor Joshua Gunn discusses the desire to believe psychic mediums in his article, "Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead." He asserts, "The idea of communication is a coping fantasy that shields us from the terrifying ambivalence of subjectivity" (2). In other words, believing in communication with spirits is a way to cope with the uncertainty of reality. To demonstrate the idea of fantasy as a coping mechanism, consider what Sylvia Browne claims her psychic grandmother told her about the afterlife when she was younger: "She said that when life on this earth ends, our eternal spirits leave our bodies and go Home to God in a place of unimaginable beauty, full of colors and music and pure, all-encompassing love" (Browne and Harrison 12). What is gained here is a delightful fantasy of everything that objective reality is not. Terms such as "unimaginable beauty" and "pure, all-encompassing love" are very inviting. Of course, a fantasy, such as the mystical world of wonder that is the afterlife, is difficult to maintain if only a small group of people believe in it. Fantasy gains strength in numbers and this is easily accomplished through media popularity, thus explaining why Browne's numerous television appearances uphold her status as a world renowned psychic. At a later point in his article, Gunn quotes Robert Freed Bales, stating, "as the individual person creates and maintains a system of symbols with other persons in a group, he enters a realm of reality...he 'comes alive' in the specifically human sense as a person in communication with others, in the symbolic reality they create together in the drama of their action" (Gunn 8). Thus, through the media and the growing popularity of psychics, the fantasy of communication with the dead transforms from a subjective

reality to an objective reality. The inviting fantasy of the afterlife is then reinforced by the sheer fact that so many people believe in it, and in a way, the fantasy takes on a reality of its own.

In *Life on the Other Side*, Browne states that seeing spirits “has been a constant part of [her] reality” (9). She elaborates further, saying “[The spirits] would blithely mill around in a room full of people, seemingly unnoticed by everyone but me, two dimensions superimposed over each other and both of them equally real” (Browne and Harrison 11). Interestingly, Browne refers to her ability to see spirits and communicate with them as “reality.” Her word choice is particularly intriguing in light of research conducted by two scientists named Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili. Performing experiments with brain activity and meditation, in a book called *Why God Won’t Go Away*, a link between science and claimed spiritual phenomena is demonstrated. Instead of opposing the joining of science and spirituality, these two scientists are working with the brain activity that occurs during spiritual experiences and have showed that there is a significant and meaningful change that occurs. From these results, they go on to explain that there are two different types of reality, an objective reality and a subjective reality (143). Objective reality “is based on the belief that nothing is more real than the material world...the physical, material universe” (144). Subjective reality, on the other hand, is believed to be “a primary reality that runs deeper than material existence--a state of pure being that encompasses the lesser realities of the external world and the subjective self” (145). Newberg and D’Aquili conclude that spiritual occurrences may be real to the person himself, even if there is no physical proof of the realness the occurrence holds in the material world. Through these findings one can then assume that what Sylvia Browne is claiming to experience is indeed a form of reality, specifically, her subjective reality. Unfortunately, there is a problem with the issue of subjective reality. With such a reality, verification of its existence is rather impossible. Anyone can simply say anything he wishes and claim it as his own reality. For instance, in her book *Life on the Other Side*, Brown claims she has researched communication with the dead and has written over twenty books on her psychic findings (51). However, the only verification of these findings requires the reader to trust in her abilities, thus becoming a part of her subjective reality. Scientifically, a situation such as Brown’s does not provide any evidence at all of an afterlife. Therefore, a method for validation, perhaps more like that of Newberg and D’Aquili, must be established.

The attempt to prove, in some form or another, the existence of the psychic medium's reality has emerged in what many consider the pseudo-scientific field called parapsychology. D. Scott Rogo defines parapsychology in his book, *Parapsychology: A Century of Inquiry*, as "the study of psychical phenomena, or more distinctly, behavioral or personal exchanges with the environment which are extra-sensorimotor--not dependent on the senses and muscles. To be a little less obscure, parapsychology deals with cognition such as telepathy or foreseeing the future that is not based on any of the five senses" (11). Through parapsychology, there is a hope to bring together the worlds of spirituality and science. In *Deviant Science: The Case of Parapsychology*, author James McClenon notes that, "Parascientists form a bridge between religious groups that accept crypto-scientific claims and scientific groups that support parascientific claims" (73). Parapsychology is a bridge connecting the world of *mythos* to the world of *logos*. Unfortunately, this is a futile attempt. The scientific community does not readily accept parapsychology, just as it does not readily accept psychic mediums like Sylvia Browne. Yet, one would have to wonder why. According to Armstrong, "*Logos* forges ahead and trie[s] to find something new: to elaborate on old insights, achieve a greater control over our environment, discover something fresh, and invent something novel" (xv). Then why is the study of a topic that has long been a mystery not accepted? The answer is simple. *Logos* is the basis of our society (Armstrong xiv). We are in constant need of fact, of replicable experiments. Even Browne has fallen victim to the need for *logos* through the justification of her abilities in the form of what she calls her research. Unfortunately, the study of mediums and clairvoyant individuals has yet to provide solid proof of their capabilities. Likewise, popularity and trends may also be part of the reason that the scientific community is reluctant to acknowledge parapsychological research.

D. Scott Rogo demonstrates the hypocrisy of what is the Western World's *logos* by asserting that "resistance to [spiritual phenomena] is often more emotional than scientific or logical. Science naturally resists innovation and abhors anomaly if these breakthroughs or events are not consistent with the current vogue of scientific thinking" (24-25). Although this opinion may be somewhat biased, it does hold some truth. Scientific interest changes with time, setting the bar for what is considered accurate. Perhaps it is in this way that scientific fact is used to "achieve a greater control over our environment" (Armstrong xv). With each new discovery, the

scientific viewpoints change, thus “[elaborating] on old insights” (xv). However, it is important to remember that with new information comes a great deal of debate before the correction of erroneous mindsets. Here the hypocrisy lies. *Logos*, while according to Armstrong, “forges ahead” and “discover[s] something fresh,” is also being critical of parapsychology and, according to Rogo, is “resist[ing] innovation.” Essentially, this contradiction in what *logos* is representative of and the actions that are actually carried out by intellectuals are what is preventing parapsychology from creating the metaphorical “bridge” between science and spiritual phenomena that McClenon writes about in his book.

The reasoning behind the resistance to parapsychology is best explained through an example. There was a time when reading something in the Bible was enough to live one’s life by. If someone held a belief from the Bible he was not questioned, he was not asked to provide factual information to support his claims. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one’s view, “our religious experience in the modern world has changed, and because an increasing number of people regard scientific rationalism alone as true, they have often tried to turn the *mythos* of their faith into *logos*” (Armstrong xv-xvi). In the modern world, believing is no longer enough. In order for something to be true, it must be seen time and time again, proving itself without failure. From a scientific viewpoint, *mythos* has no place left in the Western world. Various aspects of *mythos* must be picked apart, studied, and verified in the same manner that *logos* based information would. This is evident by Sylvia Browne’s involvement with psychical research and her claims of work with detectives and doctors (Browne and May 138). Clearly, Browne is attempting to legitimize her spiritual capabilities and present them as factual and scientific to appeal to the skeptics of society.

Unfortunately, proving one’s belief system is a daunting, if not impossible, task. As if to inspire hope, during various scientific trials, Newberg and D’Aquili have tested brain activity during meditation and found that there was a significant and unusual decrease in brain activity. These results suggest that there is in fact something worth investigating in the realm of spiritual phenomena. In their research, they conclude:

The realness of the material world, therefore, is made clear to us when we compare it with other states. Since most of us have never experienced a state more real than the one our mind portrays for us

everyday, we have no reason to suspect that any higher reality exists beyond our subjective awareness of the material world. More important, we have no experimental reason to believe that any higher reality is even possible. (152)

Newberg and D'Aquili are further explaining their definition of objective reality by saying that nothing can be realer than what can be seen, heard, or felt with one's senses. Although this is a rather straight forward explanation of objective reality, Newberg and D'Aquili are leaving some room for those, perhaps *mytho*-centered thinkers, who interpret their surroundings by means of a subjective reality--particularly referencing their environment in a spiritual manner. In short, Newberg and D'Aquili are allotting for those individuals who are sound of mind and experience things that are very real to them but may not necessarily be real to a person sitting next to them. For example, in her book *Adventures of a Psychic*, Sylvia Browne talks about her "spirit guide," Francine, who tells Sylvia all about life on the Other Side, or the afterlife. Sylvia says that she hears Francine's voice and that she describes, in intimate detail, everything she can about life on the Other Side (Browne and May 29). To Sylvia and her followers, claims such as speaking with the spirit of Francine are regarded as truthful. So then I ask: is psychic communication merely their reality or the reality of the world? Does Browne have psychological problems, has spirituality become an obsession for her, or is this simply a subjective experience, one that for Sylvia Browne is very *real*? Assuming that Browne is not abnormal, is she then not experiencing subjective reality rather than simply objective? Browne claims that she can speak to the spirits of the deceased in order to communicate with the living (Browne and May 136). Experiences such as those had by Sylvia Browne are becoming much more common, although it is difficult to tell whether this can be attributed to the actual occurrence of spiritual phenomena or rather the current popularity surrounding psychic mediums.

The media has a way of influencing the public opinion; although we see it most prominently in fashion and in body image, these are not the only social areas affected. In *Adventures of a Psychic* the authors state, "In the trade, Sylvia Browne is known as 'good TV' because the ratings invariably zoom when she appears" (Browne and May 1). Again, I ask, what is to be gained by psychic mediums aside from a reinforcement of the fantasy of the afterlife? Some would say not much. In his book,

James McClenon alludes that the media is the downfall of the acceptance of paranormal communication. He goes on to explain:

Elites within the media consider [spiritual phenomena] a source of popular entertainment appealing to a large segment of the public. Scientific parapsychologists consider [spiritual phenomena] an anomaly requiring explanation. These value differences and the limited interaction of scientific parapsychology with the public give [spiritual phenomena] a distorted public image. This image pictures [spiritual phenomena] as an "occult" phenomenon that has little possibility of being integrated into mainstream science. (198)

McClenon is saying that because of media distortion, the actual act of studying the *mythos* in terms of the *logos* is being made much more difficult. However, this is to be expected, particularly when the evidence to back up the physical communication with the dead is weak. If the evidence is indeed weak, as skeptics claim, then why are psychic mediums so popular among the public? The answer to this question lies in the reasons for believing in the first place. In his article, Kurtz states the following:

As far as we know, the death of the body entails the death of psychological functions, consciousness, and/or the personality; and there is no reason to believe that ghosts hover and haunt and/or can communicate with us. I realize that this flies in the face of what the preponderance of humans wish to believe, but science should deal as best it can with what is the case, not with what we would like it to be.

The key phrases here are "no reason to believe" and "wish to believe." In other words, there is no physical proof, scientifically speaking, that wonderful things happen to us when we die and that our spirits are able to communicate with psychics. Technically, there is no reason to believe. So then why do we? People believe simply because they want to believe.

Kurtz is right, believing that we all die, our bodies cease to function, and nothing happens to us after death is morbid and most people would prefer to think that something greater occurs. It is simply nicer to cling to a belief that after death, great things happen to us and we all meet again. Therefore, one can deduce that the reason mediums are believed is because they tell us what we want to think is true. They have the answers to all of life's burning questions and they can help us contact loved ones who are no longer with us. The idea is very appealing, which is precisely

why people will cling to their beliefs with every shred of their being. However, at what point does an appealing idea go too far? Is it possible that even individuals who should remain scientific cannot bear the thought of nothingness after life so much so that they go in search of proof of spiritual phenomena such as communication with the dead? A situation such as this is all too common for psychic Sylvia Browne. She claims to work with professionals in the scientific field on a daily basis. In her book, it is stated:

Sylvia has been able to bring insight into mental and emotional problems as well as physical ones. Thomas Peters, a Campbell, California psychiatrist, has worked with Sylvia since 1975. "We have consulted with each other freely about families, adolescents, and children in need psychologically and emotionally...Her liaison with the medical profession has been outstanding. In the psychiatric and psychological area, Sylvia's intuition has been particularly useful to me in terms of diagnosis and insight into family dynamics."

(Browne and May 209)

Thus, when issues of the mind are involved, it is easy to see how Browne is helpful. This psychiatrist, Thomas Peters, claims that Sylvia has helped families who are suffering; however, no more detail is given. There is no statement as to what the problems of the patients she is involved with are. Could it be that a family member has died and the patients of Thomas Peters are suffering from depression? If this is true, then can it not be assumed that Sylvia Browne was "particularly useful" with giving a psychic reading from the deceased family member? If this is the case then Browne was helpful, however, only in providing additional hope that death is not the end of the family's relationship with the deceased loved one. Unfortunately believing that Browne spoke to a deceased family member cannot be scientifically validated within the objective realm of reality and must remain a part of one's subjective reality.

Through their research, Newberg and D'Aquili came one step closer to showing evidence of the objective realism within spiritual experience. On the results of their brain scans:

A skeptic might suggest that a biological origin to all spiritual longings and experiences...could be explained as a delusion caused by the chemical misfirings of a bundle of nerve cells. But the SPECT scans

suggested another possibility. The orientation area was working unusually but not improperly, and we believe that we were seeing colorful evidence on the SPECT's computer screen of the brain's capacity to make spiritual experience real. (9)

Here we see that Newberg and D'Aquili noticed unusual activity in the brain during meditation. This activity was not abnormal in the sense that it was a psychological disorder or a malfunction of the brain, instead it was abnormal in the sense that the kind of brain activity shown in the scans does not occur under normal circumstances. Essentially, whatever subjective reality the subject was experiencing as he meditated felt like objective reality to the person because of his brain activity. This begs the question, if a situation feels objectively real and the brain is not malfunctioning, is the experience itself then no longer considered subjectively real? After all, a human being's somatosensory experiences are merely interpretations of our surroundings created by the information carried to our brains. If we see green grass it is only because our brains interpreted the signals it received in a matter that allowed us to see what we call the color green. Any other organism would see that green grass in a completely different way depending on how their brain interprets the signals. Thus, relative to the organism of comparison, our interpretation of color is subjective and only becomes objective when we as a species all interpret the green color of the grass universally. Keeping this in mind we turn to Browne's experiences. In her book, Sylvia discusses her assessments with psychiatrists, who could find nothing wrong with her other than the fact that she had these strange capabilities. A psychiatrist "interviewed Sylvia extensively and subjected her to a series of tests... he concluded, 'You're quite normal, but something *paranormal* is going on" (Browne and May 40). An incident such as this shows once again that there is potential truth in Browne's claims. Perhaps she is experiencing subjective reality and that is the reason for difficulty in proving her assertions. However, one must keep in mind that a line must be drawn between what is acceptable as subjective reality. There is always a danger in allowing someone to use the excuse of an experience being solely real to him. If subjective reality were commonly accepted as an alternative to objective reality then anyone would be able to claim what he wishes. In any event, with the research that Newberg and D'Aquili are conducting, and especially with their findings, it seems that the line between both objective and subjective realities, as well as *mythos* and *logos* is thinning. Now that *mythos*, in the sense of the spiritual experience, is

starting to be quantified through the terms of *logos* the place of religion and spirituality in society seems to be on the verge of a massive reconstruction.

In essence, the core issue of psychic mediums and their ability to communicate with the dead is not whether they are capable of such an action, but rather, why as individuals and as a society we are intrigued by them. The issue is then complicated further with the constantly shifting balance of *mythos* and *logos*. On one hand there is spirituality, a compelling force that brings forth the beauty and serenity in our lives and on the other there is science, the cold, hard, and undeniable truth. We as a people are torn by what is objectively real and tangible and by the things that are emotional and intuitive, however still feel at the very least subjectively real. Through these modern times in which logic prevails over faith, certain individuals such as Sylvia Browne and Newberg and D'Aquili have attempted to quantify spirituality to the new state of society and made an attempt at combining it with the scientific realm in order to prove its existence. However, the question of intrigue still remains. Is there acceptance because of the presence of real proof, or is there acceptance due to a strong wish to believe? Essentially, we must be vigilant of the unconscious decision to be accepting of information solely because an idea is appealing and we wish it to be true.

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