

Theories About Collective Apparitions

Parapsychologists agree that at least some apparitional episodes have non-normal causes, but are divided about how they should be interpreted. Are the forms hallucinatory images, created telepathically in the mind of the witness by the appearing person, and lacking substance in the physical world? Or do they rather have some objective, quasi-material existence? This article examines the arguments.

Introduction

The topic of apparitions was among the first to be examined in depth by the founders of the British SPR. Their Census of Hallucinations and monumental studies of apparitions of the living laid the groundwork for systematic study and contain a wealth of valuable material.^{[1](#)}

When the SPR was founded in 1882, interest in apparitions was due largely to the widespread interest in the possibility of survival of death. Parapsychologists and laypersons alike assumed that apparitions were a form of paranormal mental phenomena. And most believed that paranormal mental phenomena pointed to a realm of the spirit, one that was not only free from familiar constraints on physical systems, but was also neither describable nor explicable in terms of the materialistic theories then in vogue. Furthermore, in those days the prevailing philosophical approach to dualism was Cartesian. Most understood dualism to be a theory positing the existence of two different substance-kinds, rather than two different levels of description. Therefore, since most conceived a 'spirit realm' along ontological (rather than merely explanatory) lines, even ordinary telepathy and apparitions of the living seemed to strengthen the case for survival.

The principal reason for focusing on collective apparitions is that these cases throw theoretical options into particularly sharp relief. Theories which seem plausible for individual cases of apparitions often seem implausible – or at least more questionable – when applied to collective cases. Moreover, collective apparitions are especially interesting for the way they encourage interpretations in terms of psychokinesis (PK).

Early parapsychologists lavished attention on apparitions, regarding their study as thoroughly respectable, despite the career risks involved in researching physical mediumship, with which the phenomenon shares certain similarities. One reason for that is that hardly anyone took seriously – or even raised the possibility of – an antemortem PK interpretation of apparitions, even when they regarded apparitions (especially in collective cases) as objective entities. The biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, who took an active interest in paranormal research, believed apparitions to be ordinarily perceivable entities but thought they were produced by postmortem individuals.^{[2](#)} Frederic Myers, a co-founder of the SPR, felt that collective apparitions are objective entities produced by both the living and the dead, but he regarded them as non-physical.^{[3](#)}

It may be that only Charles Richet, the French physiologist and psychical researcher, seriously considered the possibility that both apparitions and the materializations witnessed in the séance room are physical psychokinetic products of living agents.⁴ One reason why he was unusual in this respect, no doubt, is that materialization phenomena had typically been produced under conditions quite unlike those in which apparitions occurred. But poltergeist phenomena likewise occurred in conditions different from those found in experimental or semi-experimental cases, and that did not obscure their possible connection to the physical phenomena of mediumship. So perhaps another reason for the failure to link the two is that many considered materializations to be inherently more suspicious than other physical phenomena, an attitude nourished in Britain by the prevailing prejudice within the SPR against physical phenomena generally. In fact the distaste many felt for the 'lower' phenomena of spiritualism may have blinded even those who (like Myers and his colleague Frank Podmore) considered some apparitions to be objective entities. In their view the entities were localized but non-physical. (More on these matters below.)

Before proceeding with a survey of theories, some further introductory remarks are in order. The first point concerns methodology. One may be tempted to suppose at the outset that all apparitional phenomena are nomologically continuous – that is, that they may all be explained as instances of some general paranormal process (such as telepathy). However, different sorts of cases pose different sorts of theoretical problems, and explanations that work neatly for one sort may be cumbersome or implausible when extended to another. Thus, it seems unwise to assume that apparitional phenomena must be united by anything deeper than a name. The evidence consists of cases occurring both while awake and during sleep, perceived both individually and collectively, most of them visual but others not. Some suggest the persistence of consciousness after death, others only interaction with the living. Some strongly suggest the presence of localized objective apparitional entities, while others suggest nothing more than telepathic interaction. Like the various somatic phenomena we designate generally as *pains*, different sorts of apparitional phenomena may require quite different sorts of explanations. In fact even phenomenologically similar cases may demand different explanations, just as phenomenologically similar headaches may proceed from different causes.

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to expect some unity to underlie the diversity of phenomena, and no doubt some superficially distinct phenomena require similar explanations. In fact one would expect many cases of individual and collective apparitions to result from similar processes; the number of potential percipients may simply be an accidental feature of the cases. But it may well be that only in accounts of collective apparitions are we likely to discern some theoretically relevant features of apparitional phenomena which individual apparitions tend to obscure. Indeed, explanations that seem plausible for individual apparitions frequently seem implausible for collective apparitions, although the converse is rarely the case.

Moreover, a striking feature of the evidence is that apparitions tend to be collectively perceived when there is more than one potential percipient present.

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, GNM Tyrrell claimed that in about one-third of the cases where there is more than one potential percipient, the apparition is experienced collectively.⁵ Hornell Hart's figures⁶ are even more impressive and revealing. Whereas Tyrrell considered cases in which there was more than one potential observer 'present', Hart considered cases that 'reported other persons so *situated* that they would have perceived the apparition if it had been a normal person'.⁷ Therefore, Hart's case selection excludes those in which potential observers were present but asleep, or facing away from the apparition, or with their viewpoint obstructed by walls or other objects. Hart found that 46 out of 167 cases (28%) had two or more properly situated potential observers, and that 26 of those (56%) were reported as collective. So perhaps the processes at work in the collective cases are more pervasive than the small proportion of collective cases would suggest.

Sample Cases

Discussions of apparitions tend to observe the customary distinction between apparitions of the living and apparitions of the dead. But actual cases may not be so cooperatively clear. For example, in some of the cases below either the identity of the apparitional figure is unknown or else it is not clear whether the ostensible agent (the person seen) was dead or alive at the time of initiating the apparitional process. In any case, the following selection is drawn primarily from apparitions of the living. That is not intended to discount the importance of evidence for apparitions of the dead. Rather, the point is to avoid additional complications raised by the topic of survival, most of which are irrelevant to the theoretical issues discussed in this essay. For example, if apparitions are psychokinetically produced localized objective entities, they could be produced by either the living or the deceased.

Investigations of apparitions have decreased drastically since the initial flurry of interest around the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, many of the best cases remain those investigated by the founders of the SPR.

Consider, first, one example each of so-called *crisis* and *experimental* cases. These are of particular interest because the individual whose apparition is perceived seems to have some obvious intention or motive for 'appearing' to or communicating with a remote person. Cases lacking this feature we might call *inadvertent*, although of course equally potent needs or intentions might be operating under the surface, unrevealed by the evidence.

Miss Hervey

In April 1892, Miss Hervey recounted the experience she had four years earlier of her cousin's apparition.⁸ The case was later investigated by Frank Podmore in July 1892.

In April 1888, Miss Hervey was in Tasmania, while her cousin was working in Dublin as a nurse. The two women had been close friends but had not seen one another since Miss Hervey moved to Tasmania in 1887. The cousin's apparition was seen coming upstairs, dressed in grey, between 6 and 7 pm on 21 April. Miss

Hervey's experience was so vivid that she ran to Lady H, in whose home she was staying. Lady H laughed at her but suggested she write a note about the matter in her diary. Podmore later saw the entry, which read, 'Saturday, April 21, 1888, 6 pm Vision of [nickname given] on landing in grey dress'. Miss Hervey wrote a letter that night to her cousin, telling her about the vision. The letter arrived after she had died, and was returned to Miss Hervey, who then destroyed it.

At the time, Miss Hervey was unaware of the fact that her cousin had been stricken by a sudden and quickly fatal attack of typhus fever, lasting only five days. Death came on 22 April 1888 at 4.30 pm, about 32 hours after the apparition occurred. News of the event did not arrive until June. Miss Hervey retained a letter, written 22 April 1888, giving an account of her cousin's death. Podmore examined the letter, and reported that it speaks of the cousin being 'so heavy with fever all through'. Podmore also examined the material used for the nurses' dresses at the hospital where the cousin was employed. In his opinion, Miss Hervey's apparent perception of a grey dress was not especially significant, although the pattern of white, dark navy blue, and red in the nurses' dresses had 'a greyish tone at a little distance'.

Mr Kirk and Miss G

Mr Kirk was employed as an administrator at Woolwich Arsenal. In a letter to the SPR dated 7 July 1890 he described a series of experiments conducted between 10 June and 20 June 1890, in which he tried to produce a visual apparition of himself for his friend, Miss G.² During the previous four years, the pair had collaborated on some slightly different experiments. In those tests Kirk had tried simply to produce a general impression of his presence, not specifically a visual impression. But in the later series Miss G was unaware (at least normally) that Kirk was conducting experiments again, much less that he was trying to produce a visual apparition of himself.

All but one of the new experiments were conducted at Kirk's house between the hours of 11 pm and 1 am. The one exception was the second experiment of the series, which took place in Kirk's office on Wednesday, 11 June, between 3.30 and 4 pm. Kirk and Miss G met occasionally during the ten-day period of experimentation, and although Kirk did not mention his activities, Miss G complained each time of sleeplessness and restlessness from an uneasy feeling she was unable to describe or explain. One night, she said, the feeling was so strong that she had to get out of bed, dress, and do some needlework until 2 am, when the uneasiness finally disappeared. Kirk offered no comments and dropped no hints, although he naturally suspected that his efforts were causing the unpleasant feelings in his friend. Because he felt that he had failed to produce a visual apparition and had succeeded only in depriving Miss G of rest, he soon discontinued the experiments.

But on 23 June, during a conversation with Miss G, Kirk learned that he had apparently succeeded after all, during the one experiment conducted from his office. His decision to conduct the trial had been made suddenly, in the midst of doing some tiring auditing work. He had laid down his pencil, and while stretching himself had an impulse to try to appear to Miss G. Although he did not know where she was at the time, he thought of her as located in her bedroom and accordingly

tried to appear to her there. As it happened, Miss G was in her bedroom at the time, dozing in her chair, a condition that might have made her particularly receptive, for instance if the phenomenon was due to telepathy.

Miss G gave her account of the incident in a letter written on Saturday, 28 June. On the morning of 11 June she had taken a long walk, and by mid-afternoon she was tired and fell asleep in the easy chair near her bedroom window. Suddenly she woke and apparently saw Kirk standing nearby, dressed in a dark brown suit she had seen before. He stood with his back to the window and then passed across the room to the door, which was closed, approximately fifteen feet away. When the figure got to about four feet from the door, it disappeared.

It occurred to Miss G that perhaps Kirk was trying to affect her telepathically, because he had tried to do so in the past. But she had no idea that he was presently so engaged, and she dismissed the thought anyway, because she knew that at that time on a weekday he would have been working in his office. So she concluded that her experience had been purely imaginary, and she resolved not to mention it to Kirk. Miss G's resolve lasted until her conversation with Kirk on 23 June, when she told him all about it 'almost involuntarily'. Kirk was very pleased to learn of his success and he asked Miss G to write an account of her experience. He mentioned that he had purposely avoided the subject of telepathy in her presence lately and had hoped she would introduce it herself. Miss G also insisted that she was awake at the time of the experience and had neither been dreaming of Kirk immediately beforehand nor thinking of him that afternoon.

According to Kirk's account, when Miss G related her experience to him, he had asked her to describe how he was dressed. That was certainly not a leading question, and Miss G replied that he had been wearing his dark suit and that she had clearly seen a small check pattern on it. Kirk states that he had in fact been wearing his dark suit on that occasion and, moreover, that it was unusual for him to do so. As a rule he wore a light suit in his office, but on the day of the experiment it was at the tailor's shop for repairs.

Turning now to collective cases, we find reports of phenomena that appear to be more intractable than those surveyed above.

Mr and Mrs Barber

Shortly before sunset on 19 April 1890, in light still bright enough for reading outdoors, Mr and Mrs Barber were returning home from a walk.^{[10](#)} When they were about six yards from their gate, Mr Barber saw a woman pass through the open gate and walk toward the house. At that moment, Mrs Barber's eyes had been fixed on the ground, making sure she would not trip over the loose stones on the road. When she looked up a moment later and saw the apparition, the figure was already about a yard inside the gate. Apparently Mrs Barber saw the apparition before her husband had spoken. In fact the two exclaimed, nearly simultaneously, 'Who is that?' (According to Mrs Barber, her remark slightly preceded that of her husband.) The figure appeared 'thoroughly commonplace and substantial' and walked quietly up the path and then up the two steps to the door, at which point it disappeared. Mr Barber then ran toward the house with his latchkey, expecting to find the woman

inside. After unlocking the door, he and Mrs Barber carefully searched the house (the daylight was still sufficient) but found nothing. According to Mrs Barber, the woman was dressed in grey. Mr Barber observed a plaid shawl and a grey black bonnet 'with a bit of colour in it'.

Mr and Mrs Barber submitted accounts in January 1891 and were interviewed by Frederic Myers in August of that year.

Canon Bourne

Bourne and his two daughters were out hunting on 5 February 1887. In a statement written jointly,^{[11](#)} the daughters assert that at about midday they decided to return home with the coachman, leaving their father to continue on his own. They were delayed for a few moments when somebody came to speak to them, during which time Bourne presumably went on his way. Then, when they turned to go home, all three saw the father waving his hat and beckoning to them with his usual gesture. SPR researcher Eleanor Sidgwick noted, after interviewing the family, that Bourne's gesture was 'peculiar' and apparently unlikely to have been that of anyone else. Bourne appeared to be on the side of a hill, standing near his horse. 'The horse looked so dirty and shaken', the sisters wrote, 'that the coachman remarked he thought there had been a nasty accident'. Sidgwick later determined that the sisters were familiar with the horses in the neighborhood and that no other horse would have been mistaken for their father's. His was the only white horse in the area, and because Bourne was a heavy man, the horse eventually 'adapted to carry [his] weight, [and] was quite unlike any other horse in the neighborhood'. The sisters also distinctly 'saw the Lincoln and Bennett mark inside [their father's hat], though from the distance we were apart it ought to have been utterly impossible ... to have seen it'. The strangeness of seeing the mark did not register until later.

Fearing that Bourne had suffered an accident, the daughters and the coachman hurried down the dip in the field toward the hill where he had been seen. The terrain forced them to lose sight of the figure on the way, but although the trip to the hill took only 'very few seconds', when they reached the spot, Bourne was nowhere to be seen. They 'rode about for some time looking for him, but could not see or hear anything of him'. When they later met at home, Bourne told his daughters that he had not even been near the field where they apparently saw him, that he had never waved to them, and that he had not met with an accident.

The following month, one of the daughters saw an apparition of their father when she was out walking alone. He was again seen with his horse Paddy. This time he appeared to stop at one of his plantations to examine a wall that needed repair. But Bourne claimed to have been nowhere near the plantation that day, having ridden home another way. The sister then realized that from where she stood it was impossible to see either the plantation or the wall.

The Scott Sisters

This is a case of a collective and reiterative apparition.^{[12](#)} The first incident occurred on 7 May 1892, at about a quarter to six in the afternoon. Miss MW Scott was returning home from a walk near St Boswells, England, and had reached the top of

an incline from which the whole road ahead could be seen. The road had a hedge and a bank on each side. Miss Scott had just begun to hurry home down the road when she saw a tall man dressed in black walking ahead of her at a moderate pace. She felt uncomfortable at the idea of a stranger watching her run, and so she stopped to let him proceed further. She watched him turn the corner, and although he was still distinctly visible between the two hedges, he vanished instantly. As she approached the spot where the man had disappeared, she saw her sister, Miss Louisa Scott, looking around 'in a bewildered manner'. When she asked her sister where the man was, she found that Louisa had also seen a similar figure.

But apparently the two experiences were successive rather than simultaneous. Louisa had seen the figure approaching her and took his black clothing to be that of a clergyman. She looked away momentarily, and when she looked up again she was surprised to discover that the man had disappeared. She was certain that had he attempted to scale one of the high hedges on either side of the road she would have seen it. In any case, she looked around into the fields but could find no trace of him. As she continued further down the road, she saw her sister starting to run down from the incline, stop suddenly, and then look around her much as she herself had done about five minutes earlier. Neither sister had expected to find the other on the road that afternoon.

Toward the end of July, at about the same time, Miss MW Scott and another sister were walking down the same spot in the road when the former saw a dark figure approaching and exclaimed, 'Oh, I do believe *that* is *our* man. I won't remove my eyes from him!' Both sisters kept their gaze fixed on the figure, although Miss MW Scott again saw the entire figure, while her sister saw only the head to below the shoulders. 'The man was dressed entirely in black, consisting of a long coat, gaiters, and knee breeches, and his legs were very thin. Round his throat was a wide white cravat, such as I have seen in old pictures. On his head was a low crowned hat ... His face, of which I saw only the profile, was exceedingly thin and deadly pale'. While the sisters looked at the figure, it seemed to fade away toward the bank on the right side of the road. Both women rushed forward but discovered no trace of the man. They questioned some boys who were on the top of a hay cart nearby and to whom the entire road was visible. But the boys claimed that no one had passed that way.

Miss MW Scott reported that during this period, two girls from the village had had similar experiences as they stopped by the road to pick berries. They had heard a thud or thump on the ground, and because they saw nothing when they looked up, they resumed their task. But the sound occurred again, and this time they saw a figure matching the description given above (the principal difference being that his garments were enveloped in a white filmy vapor or sheet). The apparition gazed intently at the girls, who were so frightened by its countenance that they fled down the road. When they turned to look back, they saw the figure still standing, and while they watched he gradually faded away. Two years earlier two boys reportedly had similar experiences, and for nearly a fortnight many people followed moving blue lights occurring near the spot on the road after dark. According to legend, a child had been murdered close by.

Separate statements were submitted within a year of the incidents by Louisa and Miss MW Scott. The third sister approved the account of the second incident, but

she felt that an additional statement from her would be of little value.

On 12 June 1893, at about 10 am, Miss MW Scott saw the figure again, but this time she was alone. At first she thought the figure was a woman she had wanted to see and hurried after it. But when she found that it was the same apparition she followed it boldly, feeling no fear this time. Although she ran after the man in close pursuit, and although the figure was apparently walking slowly, she was unable to get closer than within a few yards, because he seemed to float or skim away. Eventually he stopped, and feeling afraid again, Miss Scott stopped as well. The figure turned and gazed at her with a vacant expression and the same pallid features. He was dressed as before, although this time Miss Scott noticed black silk stockings and shoe buckles. Finally, the figure moved on and faded from view at the usual spot near the right hedge. Miss Scott related this incident in a letter two days after it occurred, and in a second letter, on 28 June, she mentions that the figure's costume was that of a clergyman of the previous century.

The Rev H Hasted

Rev Hasted, of Pitsea Rectory, Essex, seems to have been unusually prone to making apparitional appearances.¹³ The two young Williams sisters reportedly saw him coming along the road toward the Rectory from behind some nearby bushes in their garden. At the time of the experience, however, Hasted claimed to have been at least a mile from that location. On another occasion a lady friend reportedly saw him on the beach at Bournemouth, when he was not in Bournemouth at all. And on still another occasion a woman reportedly saw Hasted ride up to the gate of a neighboring rectory, raise the latch with the loop of his whip, and stoop down to push open the gate. She also thought she recognized his horse, which was unlike any other in the neighborhood.

But the most impressive and best documented case is the following. On 16 March 1892, at 11 am, two of Hasted's servants, Eliza Smallbone and Jane Watts, were standing outside the Rectory talking with the rat catcher, N, who had come to tell Hasted about a dog. The servants noted the time, because they looked at the clock when telling N that their master would return by 12.15 for lunch. Mrs Watts was watching N drive away with two dogs in his cart, when she said 'Here comes the master!' Eliza saw him also, accompanied by his dog. They watched N approach Hasted, expecting them to meet; but instead of stopping to talk, N drove on.

At about that time they lost sight of Hasted, even though the lane was straight and open to full view. They thought he might have gone to Mr Wilson's house, because they saw Wilson standing in front of his house by the road. Wilson confirmed he was standing where the servants saw him, but claimed that no person other than N was on the lane. When the servants mentioned the event to Hasted, he told them he had been at the home of Mr Williams at the time. Hasted's location was confirmed by a statement of Mrs Shield, written later that day. It was Mrs Shield who submitted the case to the SPR. The servants gave a joint account the next day.

Eleanor Sidgwick investigated the case a month later and queried Hasted, Wilson, and the two servants. She added that the servants struck her as good witnesses, and that they had noticed Hasted's peculiar way of walking and his swinging his stick.

Furthermore, the only other dog in the neighborhood like Hasted's brown and white spaniel was kept tied up. Sidgwick also records that both Mrs Shield and Miss F Williams noted the time when Hasted was at the Williams' home. Hasted had been hurrying to finish some work, and they had wondered whether he would be done in time to go for lunch at 12:15.

Dadaji

This last case is contemporary and is an example of the sort of [*reciprocal*](#) case occasionally reported in connection with 'traveling' clairvoyance or out of body experiences (OBEs).¹⁴ It is also one of the few cases where the apparition is reported to have left behind physical traces. Therefore, some might prefer to consider the case a possible instance of bilocation or teleportation. However, if we allow apparitions to be materialized entities, that may be unnecessary.

Dadaji (Mr Chowdhury) had been a celebrated radio singer. After leaving radio for the life of a businessman, he trained at a Himalayan ashram and returned to India as 'elder brother' – Dadaji. Apparently he practiced OBEs as an integral part of the guru-devotee relationship.

Early in 1970 Dadaji was touring in Allahabad, about four hundred miles northwest of Calcutta. While his devotees were singing religious songs in one room of a house, Dadaji was alone in the prayer room. After emerging from the prayer room Dadaji asked one of the ladies present to contact her sister in law in Calcutta to see if he had been seen at a certain address there at the time. The sister in law complied, and found that the Mukherjee family, who lived at that address, had indeed seen Dadaji's apparition. Osiris and Haraldsson interviewed Dadaji's hosts in Allahabad, the sister in law in Calcutta, and the Mukherjee family.

The Mukherjees' story is the following. Roma, the daughter, was lying on her bed studying for an English examination, when she heard a noise. She looked up and through an open door saw Dadaji in the study. At first he seemed semi-transparent and she could see objects in the study through his figure. But eventually the figure became opaque. Roma then screamed, alerting her brother (a physician) and mother. The apparition did not speak, but through sign language told Roma to be silent and to bring him a cup of tea. Roma then went to the kitchen, leaving the door to the study ajar. Her brother and mother followed her when she returned to the study with the tea. Roma reached through the partially open door and handed the figure the tea and a biscuit. Her mother, through the crack in the door, saw the apparition. The brother's vantage point was not so good; he saw only Roma's hand reach in through the opening and come back without the tea. But there was no place for Roma to set the cup without entering the room.

At that point, the father, a bank director, returned home from doing the morning shopping. When the family told him about the apparition, he was incredulous. But when he peeked through the crack in the door, he saw a man's figure sitting on a chair. The family remained in the living room, within full view of the study door, until they heard a noise. Thinking Dadaji had left, they then entered the study. All four observed that the other door leading from the study was locked from the inside, by an iron bar across it and also by a bolt from above. The apparition was

indeed gone, as was half of the tea and part of the biscuit. Moreover, a cigarette was still burning on the table, and it was Dadaji's favorite brand.

Theoretical Remarks

Telepathic and Objectivist Theories

Traditionally, theories of apparitions have divided into two main groups: *telepathic* (or subjectivist) and *objectivist*. The former treat apparitions as constructs of inner experience, while the latter take them to be localized external entities of some sort. Naturally, each of these general theoretical approaches assumes a variety of forms, particularly with regard to cases of collective apparitions. But before considering these – in fact before examining specifically the conceptual issues posed by collective apparitions – consider first some outstanding general features of these two main theoretical approaches, as well as the issues they address.

In rough outline, the telepathic theory proposes (i) that a mental state in agent *A* produces a mental state in apparition percipient *B*, and (ii) that the telepathically induced mental state of *B* manifests itself as a hallucination. What is initially plausible about this theory (as HH Price observed¹⁵) is that telepathy is usually and reasonably considered to be a two-stage process. First, the agent telepathically affects the percipient; then the effect manifests itself somehow in the percipient. And of course this second part of the process can presumably take different forms. For example, the telepathic effect could emerge in a dream or in a waking mental state. And if the latter, it could manifest either as an image, a vague change of mood or feeling, a more precise and sudden disruption of the mental flow, an impulse to do something (for instance 'I should telephone so and so'), or perhaps even as automatic or semi-automatic bodily behavior (as in automatic writing and speech). As far as the topic of apparitions is concerned, a more relevant option is that the telepathic effect manifests itself as a hallucination of an external object. On the telepathic theory, then, apparitions would simply be one of the many possible effects of telepathic interaction.

Furthermore, Price suggests that if the telepathic theory is correct, then we would expect apparitions to be a particularly realistic or vivid subset of the set of telepathically induced hallucinations. In other words, he suggests that telepathic hallucinations naturally fall along a continuum of vividness or realism, and that apparitions belong at one extreme. Now one might easily agree that telepathic experiences will exhibit different shades of vividness or verisimilitude. But it is less clear why we should expect apparitions generally to be vivid or realistic. Quite possibly, Price's intuition is that, unlike drug- or stress-induced hallucinations, apparitions tend readily to be mistaken for real objects or persons and accordingly lack the fantastic qualities characterizing hallucinations of other sorts. On the other hand, according to the parapsychological literature, apparitions sometimes occur during sleep, and it is not clear why dreamlike experiences should be placed toward the realistic end of the continuum. Perhaps, then, Price meant only to consider waking apparitions. But in that case he would have been ignoring a substantial portion of the case material widely considered to fall within the purview of his topic.

Be that as it may, the objectivist theory raises different issues, and some might consider it to be far more radical than the telepathic theory. In outline, it proposes that an apparition is a real, localized, externalized entity, and not simply a subjective construct of the percipient. Early proponents of the theory maintained that the entity was non-physical, although it bore certain similarities to ordinary material objects. To some extent (as we will see), this claim rests on confusions over what physical objects are. In any case, it is not essential to the objectivist theory that the apparitions be of a particular ontological kind. Initially, all it must claim is that the apparition has certain properties not belonging to the material object it resembles. For example, apparitions – but not persons – are able to pass through walls and closed doors.

Frederic Myers and GNM Tyrrell were among those who argued that if apparitions are objective localized entities, they are nevertheless sufficiently unlike physical objects to be classed as non-physical (Alfred Russel Wallace, who also believed them to be objective entities, was noncommittal on this issue). The principal points of dissimilarity, as itemized by Tyrrell,[16](#) are: (i) apparitions appear and disappear in locked rooms, (ii) they vanish while being watched, (iii) sometimes they become transparent and fade away, (iv) they are often seen or heard only by some of those present and in a position to perceive any physical object genuinely in that location (v) they disappear into walls and closed doors and pass through physical objects apparently in their path, (vi) hands may go through them, or people may walk through them without encountering resistance, and (vii) they leave behind no physical traces.

But as Broad correctly noted,[17](#) various familiar spatial *physical* objects display these and related peculiar properties. Therefore, the properties are not signs of an object's immateriality. For example, a *mirror image* is a physical phenomenon located in the region of space occupied by the mirror. But (a) it is visible only to those properly situated, (b) tactile impressions of the image fail to correspond to its visual impressions, and (c) although the image appears *behind* the mirror, the mirror has no depth. Furthermore, the mirror image is *caused* to exist by an ordinary physical object, which resembles it in appearance, and which occupies a region of physical space distinct from that occupied by the image. So if apparitions are objective entities, they might be akin to mirror images, not only regarding their perceptible properties, but also regarding their causal dependency on ordinary physical objects. Moreover, although some physical objects, such as gases, electromagnetic fields, and rainbows, are present in, or spread out in, a region of space, they are more intensely localized in and perceivable from certain locations. Indeed, they exhibit the anomalous properties of apparitions precisely because of the manner in which they are extended in space. The moral here, of course, is that not all physical objects occupy space as a *solid body* does. Gases and rainbows have Tyrrell's properties (ii), (iii), (iv), (vi) and (vii), and electromagnetic fields have properties (i), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii).

The initial advantage of the objectivist theory is that it seems to account for collective apparitions more easily than the telepathic theory. If apparitions are hallucinations or subjective constructs, it is not clear, first, why more than one person would simultaneously suffer a spontaneous exceptional experience of that

sort, and second, why the content of the various experiences would correspond at all, much less in the manner of the ordinary impressions of physical objects.

Partisans of the telepathic theory have dealt with these problems in various ways. For example, Tyrrell claimed that collective percipience could be accounted for in terms of requirements for dramatic appropriateness. He suggested that the apparitional drama is something an agent manipulates unconsciously, trying to make it as realistic as possible by having the apparition fit (or appear to fit) smoothly into the physical environment of the percipient. But of course in some cases others are present in this environment, and accordingly they get drawn into the drama. How this might be accomplished is a matter we will consider below, in surveying the various forms of the telepathic theory. In any case, some have felt that a telepathic account of collective apparitions is artificial and needlessly complex and that the positing of externalized entities is more parsimonious.

But that theoretical intuition is questionable. Even if we grant that the objectivist theory's apparent simplicity is initially attractive, we are not clearly entitled to oppose the telepathic account on the grounds of its complexity or artificiality. That maneuver appears to rely on the tacit assumption that telepathic interaction has limits to its range or efficacy that can be specified prior to empirical investigation (presumably on grounds of antecedent reasonableness or plausibility) and which the production of collective apparitions exceeds.

Of course, the unjustifiability of imposing antecedent limits on psi phenomena also undermines a standard objection to the objectivist theory – namely, that the production of the appropriate entities exceeds plausible limits on the range of PK (psychokinesis). In fact, it is probably a sound general policy to be wary of ruling out any explanation of apparitions on the grounds that it posits a psi performance of implausible magnitude. Disheartening as it may be, it seems we have no decent idea what (if any) magnitude of phenomenon is implausible or unlikely, once we have allowed psi to occur at all.

Nevertheless, the telepathic theory faces substantial obstacles. One is posed by so called *reciprocal* cases, the prototype of which is as follows. Agent *A* experiences an OBE in which he ostensibly 'travels' to percipient *B*'s location and is subsequently able to describe features of the state of affairs there that he could not have known by normal means. *B*, meanwhile, experiences an apparition of *A* at that location. (In a few instances, others on the scene also experience *A*'s apparition.) Moreover, the details *A* describes are those that would have been visible *from the position* at which his apparition was ostensibly seen. Usually the apparition is visible only, but sometimes it is also sensed aurally and tactually.

The difficulty presented for the telepathic theory concerns the status of *A*'s apparition. That apparition seems to be where *A*'s consciousness is, because from that position one would normally see the things *A* reports seeing while ostensibly out of his body. And of course, *B* is not located at that position, although he is in the general vicinity. The problem, then, is that according to the telepathic theory the apparition of *A* is *B*'s hallucination. It is supposed to be something *B* creates in response to a telepathic stimulus from *A*. Therefore, it is unclear (i) why *B* should create an apparition where *A*'s consciousness seems to *A* to be, and (ii) why *A* seems

to be sensorially aware of information from a position not occupied by *B* but ostensibly occupied by *A*'s consciousness (or so called secondary or astral body). The difficulties may be further compounded in collective cases, in which more than one percipient experiences *A*'s apparition. We will return to this topic shortly, in our survey of theories of collective apparitions.

One last difficulty for telepathic theories generally concerns what Broad terms *reiterative* cases, in which the apparition appears more than once in a single location occupied by a series of different individuals. Cases of this sort are frequently considered examples of *haunting*.

Shotgun Theory

Telepathic explanations of collective apparitions have taken various forms. One of the earliest was proposed by Gurney; Broad dubbed it the theory of 'Multiply Directed Telepathic Initiation'. Stephen Braude¹⁸ descended into the vernacular for a more compact and easier-to-remember label, calling it the *Shotgun Theory*. According to this theory, agent *A* telepathically influences percipients $B_1...B_n$, *each independently*, and each B_i thereafter responds to the telepathic stimulus by creating an apparition.

Gurney was quick to recognize certain outstanding problems with the Shotgun Theory (although he seemed surprisingly oblivious to their persistence in his own alternative theories). He noted that every hallucination – whether telepathically initiated or not – is partially a construct of the individual experiencing it. When a person hallucinates, he presumably employs material from his own supply of past experiences and repertoire of images and symbols. But then it seems unlikely that people simultaneously stimulated by a telepathic agent would have very similar or concordant hallucinations. In fact, even if we ignore the cognitive contribution or elaboration of the percipient and consider a more passive and mechanistic analogy from radio transmission, a similar problem remains. Although mechanistic analogies may be dangerously misleading in this area, one might compare the Shotgun Theory's scenario to one in which different receivers pick up a signal from a certain transmitter. In such a case, the state of each receiver will partly depend on the idiosyncracies of its circuitry (such as sensitivity, frequency response, spurious signal rejection, etc.) and can therefore be expected to differ in various details.

Furthermore, cases of crisis apparitions and modern experiments in dream telepathy suggest that there may be a period of latency between the sending of a telepathic message and the subsequent telepathic experience of the percipient (typically dubbed *telepathic deferment*). In fact the evidence suggests that the emergence into consciousness of (or the behavioral response to) a telepathic stimulus frequently occurs when that event is convenient or otherwise appropriate relative to the ongoing background of events or the subject's state of mind. For example, the subject's response might be delayed until a time of repose or relaxation or at least to a time when surrounding events are not particularly distracting. But in that case it seems unlikely that different people, affected by the same telepathic stimulus, would hallucinate at the same time.

Broad¹⁹ noted, in addition, that the Shotgun Theory seems unable to explain why the collective experiences of an apparition should be correlated in the way different perceptions of an object are correlated from different points of view. But he cautioned that the evidence for these detailed correspondences may be greatly overrated. And Broad is quite right; no one has conducted a careful study of collective apparitions while they are occurring. Commentators have simply *inferred* the existence of perspectival correspondences between the various experiences from the testimony, and it is possible that non perspectival differences between the individual experiences may have been overlooked or inadvertently suppressed in the course of discussion among the percipients.

Still, we are entitled to ask whether the Shotgun Theory can explain why perspectival correlations would *ever* occur – that is, whether it could explain such correlations should the evidence turn out to be reliable. And in fact it seems as if the theory would have difficulty. Indeed, Broad's objection may even be superfluous; it seems merely to be a corollary of Gurney's first criticism. If the Shotgun Theory cannot satisfactorily explain why telepathically induced hallucinations should be similar *at all* or share any but the grossest similarities, *a fortiori* it will have difficulty in accounting for one sort of fine grained similarity in particular.

Still another possible difficulty with the Shotgun Theory, discussed by both Gurney and Broad, is this. There is good reason to believe, they argued, that *A* and *B* will interact telepathically only if there already exists a rapport of some sort between the two – for example, blood relationship, friendship, love, and so on. At the very least one might think that such rapport facilitates telepathic interaction, even if it is not a necessary condition for it. But in that case, we would not expect *A* to produce an apparition telepathically in *B* when, as it sometimes happens (both in collective and individual cases), *A* and *B* are strangers. Moreover, we would expect to find more instances than the literature contains of what Broad called *disseminated co-referential hallucinations* – that is, apparitions of *A* reported by widely separated individuals each of whom is in close rapport with *A*. Now there are some reasonably well documented cases of disseminated hallucinations, but they are much less common than cases of collective apparitions. In any event, Broad was inclined to minimize this objection on the grounds that cases of disseminated hallucinations would very likely be overlooked, even if they occurred frequently.²⁰

Perhaps both Broad and Gurney were needlessly concerned with the issue of pre-existing rapport. Granted, the evidence for telepathy consists largely of cases of apparent telepathic interaction between individuals who presumably are in rapport with each other. However, one would expect the evidence to take just this form. Strangers would be unlikely to discover that they have interacted telepathically, even if such interactions occur all the time. Moreover, even if pre-existing rapport is merely *conducive to* (rather than necessary for) telepathic interaction, it would probably be only one of a complex network of factors determining the likelihood, success, or extent of any given interaction. And if so, one would expect the importance of rapport to vary from case to case.

Notice, however, that even if we assume that telepathy has no inherent limitations, the problems noted above concerning the simultaneity and similarity of

percipients' experiences continue to have some force. Even if we assume that conditions for telepathic interaction (including rapport) are *optimal*, we must still wonder why several percipients would have similar or simultaneous experiences. The obstacles here do not seem to concern limitations on telepathic *interaction*. Rather, they have to do with factors that might limit or affect the *manifestation* of the interaction, once the interaction has occurred.

As long as we accept the apparently plausible assumption that telepathy is at least a two stage process, with an interaction (stimulus) stage preceding a manifestation (response) stage, the problems posed for the Shotgun Theory by simultaneous and similar experiences seem both serious and ineliminable. One would think that the experience of (or response to) any stimulus, telepathic or ordinary, permits the operation and interference of causal processes *independent* of those producing the stimulus – in particular, processes *idiosyncratic* to the subject. In cases of apparitions, the relevant processes would concern such matters as a person's cognitive or behavioral style and psychological history (that is, dispositional matters that influence a person's repertoire and choice of symbols, images, and responses), as well as more immediate contextual matters concerning the subject's state of mind at the time of interaction (for instance, whether the subject is distracted or in some other state unfavorable to experiencing the stimulus). Therefore, even if nothing either in principle or in fact stood in the way of unimpeded telepathic interaction, one might still expect the manifestation of (or response to) a telepathic stimulus to be affected by a variety of factors.

Infection Theory

Gurney's original alternative to the Shotgun Theory is usually called the *Infection Theory*. He suggested that agent *A* telepathically influences primary percipient B_1 (in whom he is particularly interested), and while B_1 (in response to the telepathic stimulus) creates his own apparent sensory image to himself, he in turn acts as a telepathic agent, causing others in his vicinity to have similar experiences. Thus, the principal difference between the Shotgun and Infection Theories is that in the latter the secondary percipients $B_2...B_n$ are affected telepathically by a person at the same location, rather than by a remote agent.

But as Broad correctly observed, the spatial proximity of B_1 to $B_2...B_n$ makes it no easier to understand why the experiences of all the percipients should be simultaneous with or similar to each other. Gurney's points about the cognitive elaboration or contribution of the percipient and about telepathic deferment apply with equal force to the Infection Theory. In fact, if the telepathic infection spreads from B_1 to B_2 , and then from B_2 to B_3 , etc., the scenario envisioned in the Infection Theory seems to resemble that in which a person tells a story or phrase to another, who then repeats it to yet another, and so on. But of course, that is a process in which the story or phrase tends to change, often dramatically.

Myers raised a further objection to the Infection Theory. If the theory were true, he suggested, we would expect to find cases of non-telepathic hallucinations (for instance, arising from purely intra-subjective causes) spreading by telepathic infection to others in the vicinity. But, according to Myers, there are no clear cases

of this. After some hedging, Gurney conceded that ordinary hallucinations do not seem to spread by infection. But perhaps he should not have yielded so easily to Myers's criticism: ordinary hallucinations are not collective, so he might have replied that both collectivity and infection are peculiarities of telepathically induced hallucinations. (Tyrrell later argued that at least collective percipience seemed to be a peculiarity of telepathic apparitions.) Of course, the Infection Theory would in any case still be plagued by its apparent inability to account for the simultaneity and similarity of subjects' experiences.

As it turned out, Gurney was dissatisfied with the Infection Theory anyway. He felt it could not adequately account for interactions between individuals who were apparently not in rapport with one another. Accordingly, he developed some complicated hybrid theories, borrowing elements from the Shotgun and Infection Theories. These were designed to explain how percipients might be telepathically sensitized or brought into temporary rapport with the telepathic agent. But there is no reason to survey those theories here. For one thing, they are no better able than the pure Shotgun and Infection Theories to account for the simultaneity and similarity of percipients' experiences.

Extravaganza Theory

The only other major telepathic theory is the one proposed by Tyrrell, which Braude called the *Extravaganza Theory*. As noted earlier, Tyrrell appealed to *dramatic appropriateness* as a way of explaining why apparitions are experienced collectively. More specifically, he suggested that agent *A* telepathically affects primary percipient *B*, and then *B*, in creating his apparitional experience, does whatever is necessary to render it dramatically appropriate. And since *B* is sometimes in the company of other people, it would be appropriate for at least properly situated members of that group also to experience the apparition. So *B* accordingly creates in them the appropriate apparitional experience.

Although Tyrrell is unclear about the nature of the telepathic interaction between the primary and secondary percipients, that portion of the Extravaganza Theory resembles the Shotgun Theory (at least on the surface) and is similar in certain respects to one of Gurney's hybrid theories. In fact, since primary percipient *B* is 'passing along' a motif communicated from agent *A*, the Extravaganza Theory seems to combine elements of both the Infection and Shotgun theories. According to perhaps the most straightforward reading of Tyrrell, the primary percipient (after telepathic interaction with *A*) telepathically affects each of the other percipients *individually*, but in such a way that their experiences conform to his own. The major difference between Tyrrell's approach and Gurney's is that while Gurney took pains to explain how certain of the percipients could be properly sensitized or brought into temporary rapport with *A*, Tyrrell seemed willing to grant telepathy a greater degree of control or efficacy. On Tyrrell's view, it is of little relevance that agent and percipient may not be in rapport. Telepathic influence is constrained primarily by considerations of dramatic appropriateness.

Price was uncomfortable with Tyrrell's reliance on the concept of dramatic appropriateness, for both individual and collective cases. In fact he offered an apparent counter-example.²¹ He cited a case in which the *wrong* person evidently

saw an apparition and the right person did not – specifically, a case in which the apparition of a resistance fighter during the second World War was seen on his parents' doorstep by a neighbor. But the young man's parents were not home at the time and only later learned of the apparition from the neighbor, who had never seen their son in the flesh. Price argued that if this were a case of telepathy, as Tyrrell's theory demanded, then presumably

...one or other of the parents would have received the telepathic impression and would have seen the apparition: and if a complete stranger saw it too, he ought to have been someone who was with the parents at the time. The fact that the parents were away from home at the moment should have made no difference. Telepathy, so far as we know, is a purely mind to mind relation, and the spatial location of the agent and the percipient makes no difference to it. If so, one would think that the parents would have received the telepathic impression wherever they were.²²

Price's argument has some plausibility, but it is not fully convincing. Too little is known about the underlying psychodynamics of the situation to be able to say how inappropriate the apparition might have been. At about the time the apparition appeared, the son was a prisoner of the Gestapo, and no one knows whether or why it might have been paramount to him to have the apparition appear on his parents' doorstep. One could argue, in fact, that the apparition's appearance to the neighbor was *maximally* impressive and effective. The parents would naturally have had their son's fate on their minds anyway, and an apparition or ostensible telepathic communication from him could easily have been dismissed as an artifact of their concern.

If one wishes to attack a theory of apparition's reliance on dramatic appropriateness, it might be more effective to challenge the appropriateness of certain standard features of apparitions – for example, their tendency to fade away or pass through solid objects. On the surface at least, these apparitional characteristics do not seem to contribute to the smooth blending of apparitions into the percipient's environment.

In any case, there is good reason to think that the Extravaganza Theory is as impotent as the Shotgun and Infection theories to explain the simultaneity and similarity of the percipients' experiences. It seems to depend on what Tyrrell meant by saying that the secondary percipients are 'drawn into' the apparitional drama. Tyrrell argued that an apparition 'cannot be merely a direct expression of the agent's idea; it must be a drama worked out with that idea as its motif'.²³ And later he says, 'The work of constructing the drama is done in certain regions of the personality which lie below the conscious level'.²⁴ Finally, and perhaps most crucially, he concedes (quite plausibly), 'The apparitional drama is ... in most cases a joint effort in which ... both agent and percipient take part'.²⁵

But if in collective cases the primary percipient affects his colleagues individually, then Tyrrell's theory posits several different agent/percipient pairs: the initial interaction between A and the primary percipient, and the individual interactions between the primary percipient and each secondary percipient. But since each secondary percipient helps construct the apparitional drama of which he is a

spectator, one would expect the idiosyncratic contributions of the various participants to lead to a diversity of results. Analogously, if a drama teacher instructed one student to improvise on a given theme with each of the other students in the class *individually*, one would expect the results to differ from one case to the next. And because the other students may have radically divergent personalities, psychological histories, and immediate concerns and interests, one would expect the individual improvisations to differ considerably.

Furthermore, Tyrrell is sympathetic to Gurney's notion of telepathic deferment. But then it is unclear how his theory accounts for the simultaneity of percipients' experiences. Even if it is dramatically appropriate for primary percipient *B* to have the secondary percipients experience an apparition along with him, the other potential percipients will have their own immediate concerns and interests, some of which may be incompatible with those of *B*. Therefore, it may be highly inappropriate or inconvenient for one or more of them to experience an apparition at that time, and very much in their interest to defer their response to telepathic interaction with *B*.[26](#)

Conclusion

It appears that telepathic theories cannot account very neatly for some cases of apparitions. In particular, they cannot successfully bridge the gap between interaction and manifestation (stimulus and response) in collective cases and thereby explain the similarity and simultaneity of percipients' experiences. By contrast, objectivist theories seem, on the surface at least, to have certain clear advantages over telepathic theories – not only with regard to collective cases, but also with regard to reiterative cases. (As we will see below, when it comes to reciprocal cases, the situation is more of a toss-up.)

Reiterative cases are easily explained in terms of the persisting presence at a location of some kind of entity. Of course it is no easy matter to say what that entity is, and accounts may have to vary between apparent postmortem cases (ghosts) and ante-mortem cases. But if it seems unparsimonious to posit an enormously complex and successful web of telepathic interactions and responses to explain why different percipients on different occasions – often independently – have similar apparitional experiences at a given location, then we may have no choice but to swallow the bitter pill and posit the existence of an appropriate entity at that location. Readers uncomfortable with that option might find some solace in the reflection that the positing of novel entities is a familiar and thoroughly respectable move in scientific theorizing. The existence of microorganisms and carriers of hereditary organic traits were posited before they were actually detected, and theoretical physics virtually lives by its readiness to enlarge the directory of entities.

Reciprocal cases, too, can be explained fairly neatly by positing the existence of an entity capable of occupying positions different from that of the percipient(s). Whatever exactly that entity might be, and whatever exactly its connection might be with the subject whose physical body is at another location (for instance, whether it is a secondary or astral body, or a psychokinetic creation of the subject),

it must at least be the sort of thing capable of experiencing or conveying information *as if* from a point of view.

The telepathic theory, by contrast, must explain how such location-specific information is acquired about a place where no one or nothing sentient is present. Proponents of that approach would presumably argue, as Gurney did, that this information may be *constructed* from memories and knowledge about the room and its occupants. Thus, even if agent *A* had never before visited the location where he seems to himself to be and where his apparition is ostensibly seen, *B* is at that location. Hence, *B* could convey enough information – both from present perceptions and from knowledge and memories of the location from other points of view – for *A* to synthesize and construct for himself the appropriate location specific apparent perception. Adherents to the telepathic theory might also claim that the agent's location-specific knowledge is easily within the scope of clairvoyance, and that when the agent produces an apparition in *B* he simultaneously acquires needed information about *B*'s general location. Traditionally, however, proponents of telepathic theories have been loth to grant ESP that degree of refinement or success, usually on the weak grounds that one never sees such high quality ESP in formal experiments.

Therefore, it appears that if both PK and ESP are potentially unlimited in scope, neither of the two major analyses of reciprocal apparitions enjoys a clear advantage over the other. On the telepathic theory we need only posit first rate ESP, and on the objectivist theory we need only posit first rate PK (or the existence of a secondary or astral body).

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). See Gurney, Myers, & Podmore (1886); Sidgwick (1922); and Society for Psychical Research (1894).
- [2](#). Wallace (1896/1975), esp. 231-278.
- [3](#). E.g., Myers (1903), vol. I, 215-16, 263-65, vol. II, 75.
- [4](#). Richet (1923/1975), 544, 591ff.
- [5](#). Tyrrell (1942/1961), 23.
- [6](#). In Hart (1956).
- [7](#). Hart (1956), 204, emphasis added.
- [8](#). Society for Psychical Research (1894), 282-84.
- [9](#). Sidgwick (1922), 270-73.
- [10](#). Sidgwick (1922), 372-76.
- [11](#). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (1893), 129-30.
- [12](#). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (1893), 146-50.
- [13](#). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (1893), 131-33.
- [14](#). Osis & Haraldsson (1976).
- [15](#). Price (1960).
- [16](#). Tyrrell (1942/1961), 59.
- [17](#). Broad (1962), 234ff.
- [18](#). Braude (1997).
- [19](#). Broad (1962), 225-26.
- [20](#). Broad (1962), 201.
- [21](#). Price (1960), 123-24.
- [22](#). Price (1960), 124.
- [23](#). Tyrrell (1942/1961), 100.
- [24](#). Tyrrell (1942/1961), 101.
- [25](#). Tyrrell (1942/1961), 101.
- [26](#). For further exploration of Tyrrell's theory, and (specifically) the notion of drawing others into the apparitional drama, see Braude (1997).

