

Mediumship and Multiple Personality

This article examines certain similarities between the personalities that communicate in trance mediumship and those that manifest in cases of dissociative identity disorder, in order to establish whether a comparison may shed light on either state, or carry implications for claims of postmortem survival.

Introduction

Scholars have recognized since the late nineteenth century that there may be a deep link between dissociative identity disorder (DID) (formerly known as multiple personality disorder) and mediumship. In fact the investigation of this possibility was one of the principal activities of the founders of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR). For that matter, the SPR devoted much of its early energy to the study of dissociation and hypnosis generally, and probably few today realize how much valuable pioneering research was printed in the pages of its *Proceedings* (conducted principally, but by no means exclusively, by [Edmund Gurney](#)).

The founders of the SPR believed, along with many others, that dissociative phenomena promised insights into the nature of mind generally, including processes underlying normal mental phenomena. Moreover, certain SPR stalwarts suspected that the study of dissociation might also illuminate the nature of ostensibly *paranormal* mental phenomena. ([Frederic Myers](#) and Gurney were the most notable proponents of that position.) They recognized that even if psychic functioning were not explainable in terms of dissociative processes, at the very least the forms of dissociation might be kinds of *bridge* phenomena, linking normal cognitive functions to paranormal cognitive functions.

It is easy to see why parapsychologists were drawn to these issues. For one thing, some of the early studies of hypnosis suggested that dissociative states might be psi conducive.¹ Many of those studies contained fascinating reports of ostensibly paranormal occurrences, such as apparent apports, materializations, and especially varieties of 'lucidity' (clairvoyance and telepathy). And for another, the early studies of hysteria and dual or multiple personality demonstrated at least superficial similarities between the presentation of those phenomena and the various forms of mediumship (and possession). As a result, some wondered whether mediumship might be nothing more than a type of dissociation, rather than a phenomenon indicative of survival of bodily death. Others, however (including Myers), took a more radical approach and proposed that dissociative phenomena of all sorts were best explained by adopting an analysis of the mind and human personality that embraced the reality of survival.

This essay will address several related questions, all founded on the suggestive overt similarities between dissociative identities and mediumistic communicators: What *are* we to make of the ostensibly discarnate personalities communicating through the medium? Might they be 'ordinary' alternate personalities claiming or appearing to be postmortem entities? Are they really postmortem individuals? Or—and this option was more popular around the turn of the twentieth century than it

is today (perhaps with good reason)—are alternate personalities really discarnate entities parading as elements of a person's psyche?

More generally, the underlying issue before us is to consider how what we now know about DID (and dissociation generally) bears on the evidence suggesting postmortem survival. So for example, when we compare cases of mediumship to those of multiple personality, do we find evidence suggesting that the two types of phenomena are fundamentally distinct? Or does the evidence suggest that they are fundamentally alike, even if they fall along rather distant points on a single continuum of phenomena (dissociative or otherwise)? To address these questions properly, we must examine three principal hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Mediumship and DID are both forms of dissociation; neither requires explanation primarily in terms of an outside agency, much less a survivalist explanation. Let us call this the *dissociation hypothesis*. Thus, the dissociation hypothesis asserts that *all* cases of ostensible mediumship (and possession) are actually cases of dissociation. The weaker hypothesis—that *some* cases of ostensible mediumship are not genuinely mediumistic (and are likely to be dissociative)—is, we may assume, too obvious to be interesting.

Hypothesis 2: Although some cases of mediumship may be nothing more than examples of dissociation, others are radically different and manifest the agency of postmortem individuals. This is the hypothesis that the dissociation hypothesis usually challenges, and we may call it the *survival hypothesis*. (Clearly, it is more specific than what is usually called the survival hypothesis—namely, the general assertion that human beings survive bodily death. By contrast, the present hypothesis is concerned merely with the interpretation of mediumship.

Hypothesis 3: Although some (or many?) cases of DID may be nothing more than examples of dissociation, others, like many (or most?) cases of mediumship, require positing the existence and influence of postmortem individuals. In other words, some alternate personalities are discarnate entities in disguise. Although this hypothesis, like the last, asserts the survival of bodily death, it attempts to account specifically only for certain phenomena of psychopathology. And since, unlike cases of traditional mediumship, the phenomena happen to persons who do not overtly solicit interaction with a discarnate agency, we may call it the *intrusion hypothesis*.

So how does one decide between these rival hypotheses? One ambitious approach would be to determine first whether there is any evidence of any kind for survival, or—in case one doubts the very intelligibility of the concept of survival—whether there *could* be any such evidence. However, not only is that approach a massive undertaking, but it would also take us too far afield.² A more modest and workable alternative is to compare the symptoms of DID to the behaviour of entranced mediums, and then to look for outstanding similarities or differences. This has been a standard tactic for dealing with the aforementioned hypotheses (adopted even by those who, in addition, attempt to evaluate the evidence for survival in its totality), and we may call it the *comparative method*. Apparently, the assumption underlying this method is that if mediumship and multiple personality are distinct, one would expect to find telltale differences in their manifestations. On the other hand, if the

phenomena are essentially the same, then one would expect to find only superficial differences in their manifestations.

Unfortunately, the comparative method is both risky and somewhat limited. It is risky because different (similar) underlying processes may have similar (different) manifestations or effects. For example, phenomenologically similar (distinct) headaches may be caused by distinct (similar) processes. Or more relevantly, distinct (similar) behaviour may be due to similar (distinct) causes. Moreover, the method is limited because it is of little help in evaluating the very *possibility* of survival. The reason, obviously, is that one can defend or reject the possibility of survival quite independently of any similarities or differences between mediumship and DID. Therefore, not only might those similarities or differences be fortuitous, they might simply add nothing to already strong arguments for or against survival.

Nevertheless, one can't know *a priori* that the comparative method has no utility at all—that is, that the evidence has nothing to teach us, especially if one is undecided about the possibility of survival. Therefore, it is at least reasonable to see whether there are any suggestive differences or similarities between mediumship and DID, even if they won't be conclusive. And that will be the modest goal of this essay. If (as seems likely) the comparative method does not help us select one of the three hypotheses, that itself is a result worth knowing. And in any case, the very process of inquiry will require grappling with some interesting issues along the way.

It is important to remember, however, just how modest the goal of this essay is. To do full justice to the comparison of mediumship to multiple personality, one would have to assess fully the significance of mediumship as evidence for survival. And to do that one would sooner or later have to evaluate carefully, if not all the best evidence for survival (including cases of ostensible reincarnation, possession, and apparitions of the dead), at least those cases of mediumship whose features seem most difficult to explain without positing the survival of bodily death. Only then would one be in a position to assert confidently that no cases (or all or some cases) of ostensible mediumship are cases indicative of survival. Of course, that project goes well beyond the scope of the present essay: our immediate concern is merely to see what insights flow from the comparison of mediumship to DID. Moreover (as noted above), that will allow us to assess the utility of the comparative method without having to decide whether survival is either actual or possible.

Let us consider, then, to what extent the comparison of mediumship to DID supports the three hypotheses mentioned above. Our best course will be to focus on classic cases, both of mediumship and DID. In the case of mediumship, the reason is that the older cases are often so strong and so detailed that they provide much more material to work with. Moreover, the comparison of mediumship to DID is most interesting when the evidence suggests strongly that mediums are what they purport to be. And in the case of DID, the reason is that the older case reports are likewise the most scrupulously and thoroughly documented. By contrast, current clinical reports tend to be relatively cursory.

Another reason for concentrating on classic (generally older) cases of multiple personality is that those are the cases on which the best previous discussions have relied. And (as we shall see) the weaknesses of those discussions are often closely

linked to their reliance on the older cases, as well as to a corresponding and rather outdated picture of DID.

The Dissociation Hypothesis

Consider, now, how one might argue, based on the comparison of mediumship to DID, that mediumship is merely a form of dissociation rather than a phenomenon indicating survival.

(1) To begin with, the cognitive and behavioural traits of mediumistic communicators are sometimes suggestively similar to those of alternate personalities. This is particularly (but not exclusively) true of so called 'control' personalities, who act as intermediaries (or masters of ceremony) between the medium and the rest of the spirit world. For example, controls might claim to deliver messages from other spirits, or they might simply announce the presence of a spirit who then communicates through the medium. Control personalities are frequently (but by no means always) highly artificial and do not appear to correspond to any formerly living person.

Consider, for example, the resemblances between (on the one hand) the alternate personalities (or alters) 'Sally' in the Miss Beauchamp case³ and 'Margaret' in the Doris Fischer case,⁴ and (on the other hand) the Feda persona of the medium Gladys Leonard.⁵ As CD Broad observed, Sally and Margaret were 'entertaining and likeable', but apparently also 'devoid of any deep feeling'.⁶ Moreover, they were prankish, and somewhat disdainful of and spiteful toward the host personality. They also showed little or no respect for the property of the host personality, but seemed strongly attached to items of their own. Feda, likewise, could be amusing or engaging in a childlike way and was somewhat contemptuous of Leonard. She also showed little concern for Leonard's possessions. For example, she would sometimes give away (or threaten to give away) jewellery or other items valued by the medium. On the other hand, Feda would display a strong attachment to objects given or promised to her—that is, given or promised to the medium when she (Feda) was in control. In addition, both Margaret and Feda distorted or perverted the language in childish ways.⁷

Unfortunately, these similarities prove almost nothing. For one thing, alternate and mediumistic personalities display a wide range of behaviours. In fact, in some cases of DID, no alters exhibit the childlike behaviour of Sally or Margaret. Hence, it is clear that childlike behaviour is not essential to cases of DID. Furthermore, one would think that if postmortem communication is possible, then the communicators needn't only be those of adults. Thus, the childlike behaviour of some mediumistic communicators is not even clearly *suggestive* of dissociation. It is equally suggestive of the survival of a child (or childlike) personality.

To avoid misunderstanding, we should note that Broad would not have argued for the *prima facie* similarity of *all* ostensible communicators to alternate personalities. He wrote, 'It is only a regular control, like the Feda persona, which bears much resemblance to any of the secondary personalities studied by psychiatrists'.⁸ Presumably, then, Broad would have been reluctant to defend the strong version of the dissociation hypothesis under discussion here. Moreover, it is

probable that, by emphasizing the comparison of a 'regular' control personality to alternate personalities, Broad was making a rather questionable (and perhaps until recently a somewhat familiar) assumption—namely, that alternate personalities are always relatively enduring and personality-like rather than ephemeral and fragmentary. But that assumption would be clearly false. More recent studies of DID have reported many cases of personality *fragments*, apparently formed dissociatively to serve very simple tasks, such as cleaning toilets, taking enemas, or baking cookies.⁹ Thus, Broad may have been relying too heavily on turn-of-the-century cases of DID, which do not exhibit the transitory and functionally quite specific and one-dimensional alters found in many cases today.

(2) Another initially interesting but ultimately unpromising cognitive or behavioural similarity between mediumship and DID is the following: Sometimes a medium's personality is relatively bland compared to those of communicating personalities (especially the control personalities). This appears to be true of Leonard, but it is much more conspicuous in other cases—for example, Pearl Curran (in the case of [Patience Worth](#))¹⁰ and Minnie Soule ('Mrs. Chenoweth').¹¹ Similarly, in cases of DID, the presenting or host personality is often less interesting than its alternates, just as Doris Fischer and the 'real' Miss Beauchamp were less interesting than Margaret and Sally, respectively.

One might argue, then, that an appeal to dissociation accounts nicely for these resemblances. What happens, according to the argument, is that a dissociative process strips the subject of certain characteristics, or perhaps draws on latent or repressed attributes or traits, which then emerge in alternate personalities (or fragments) of one form or another. And of course, these emerging (or re-emerging) traits will sometimes be quite interesting or vital. Moreover, to support the argument, one could attempt to show how this kind of re-assignment of interesting personality traits has survival value for the formerly abused or traumatized multiple, as well as a related utility for the medium, who can thereby avoid taking personal responsibility for the socially provocative or otherwise risky behaviour of communicators.

Unfortunately, as was the case with childlike behaviours, the alleged parallel between mediumship and DID holds—at best—for only a limited number of cases. In fact, exceptions are rather common. Not only are some presenting or host personalities quite interesting, mediums are often fascinating and very engaging characters ([Eileen Garrett](#) and [Leonora Piper](#) are clear examples). Even more seriously, in cases of DID it is unclear which alter (if any) corresponds to the personality of the medium. As Stephen Braude has noted,¹² the concept of a *primary* personality is problematical. The reason is that although multiples often have a regular presenting personality or a host personality who takes charge of (or acts as spokesperson for) the others, neither that nor any other personality seems clearly to be *historically* primary, or primary in any other interesting—much less long-term—sense. Thus, no alternate personality is clearly analogous to the medium's personality in the total system of alters.

(3) A different sort of similarity concerns epistemological relations between apparently dissociated parts of a subject's mind. For example, mediums are often unaware of what transpires when a communicator is in control, just as presenting

or host personalities tend to be amnesic for periods when an alternate personality is in control. Moreover, some mediumistic communicators (such as Feda) claim to have access (if they wish) to all the medium's thoughts and feelings, just as some alternate personalities seem to know the thoughts and feelings of the presenting or host personality.

Now this observation might hold more generally for mediumship and DID than the preceding two. But there are still numerous exceptions, especially in connection with amnesia and mediumship. Although amnesia is commonly found in a multiple's presenting or host personality (as well as in some others), in general only *trance* mediums tend to be unaware of what transpires during ostensible communications. And even then, amnesia is common only in those trance mediums whose trance is *heavy*. By contrast, mediums who experience a lighter trance are often aware of what occurs during the trance. In fact, they may even carry on other activities while the communications are in progress. For example, mediums who receive communications through automatic writing or talking might simultaneously prepare food in the kitchen, write letters, or carry on a conversation.

But even when we focus only on those cases of mediumship where the similarity to DID holds, there is no reason for taking the medium's amnesia (say) as a *prima facie* indicator of dissociation. For one thing, it is still unclear which (if any) alternate personality is analogous to the medium's personality. But more important, one would think that amnesia (like headaches and broken toes) can have different sorts of causes. Thus, for all we know, amnesic barriers between mediums and communicators might also be a natural result of a genuinely mediumistic process.

(4) A rather different similarity between DID and mediumship concerns (on the one hand) the process of personality switching, and (on the other) the way mediums yield control to communicators. Mediums display a variety of ways in which they are 'taken over' by communicators. Some do it instantly, while others go through 'warm up' periods of varying length, during which the medium's face sometimes acquires a vacant expression, and which may also be accompanied by groaning, eye rolling, swaying, and other sorts of movements. But the same is true in cases of DID. Until recently, the case literature (and motion picture industry) tended to support the mistaken impression that switching of personalities took the rapid and 'clean' form familiar from some classic cases. But in fact, really clean, quick switching is the exception rather than the rule. Many cases of DID exhibit slower switching, ranging from a few seconds to several minutes. And in all cases (but especially in the slower ones), the subject may temporarily acquire a vacant look, and there may also be accompanying physical movements (such as eye-rolling or rhythmic swaying).

Here, at last, we find a genuinely pervasive similarity between mediumship and DID. But once again, it is compatible with a survivalist interpretation of mediumship. And one needn't be especially sympathetic to the possibility of survival to grant that point. It would simply be rather foolish to expect all mediums to relinquish control to a communicating entity instantly or in the same way. Indeed, one would expect their 'reaction times', or styles of submission, to be as

varied as the ways in which people normally respond to the everyday influence of others.

(5) Some cases of mediumship—particularly trance mediumship—suggest that the medium is engaged in a kind of unconscious role-playing, and that ostensible communicators are nothing more than trance *impersonations*. These cases suggest that mediumistic communicators, like alternate personalities, result from the subject's own creative activity, however autonomous some of those creations might later become (as in cases of multiple personality). Of course, when the communicators are conspicuously artificial (as control personalities often are, and as [Helene Smith's](#) 'Martian' communicators were¹³), this point seems both obvious and relatively uninteresting. It becomes interesting, however, in connection with more realistic communicators, especially those who offer information apparently unknown to the medium and sitters.

A famous and unusually obvious example is the case of Gordon Davis.¹⁴ In this case, the medium, Blanche Cooper, presented a trance impersonation of one Gordon Davis, whom she did not know. The sitter (Soal) had known Davis but claimed to believe his acquaintance had been killed in the First World War. The Gordon Davis manifesting in Mrs. Cooper's trance presented itself as a discarnate entity and offered information about Davis that was later found to be correct, but which was apparently unknown to those at the sitting. As it turned out, however, Davis was alive and well at the time, working at his real estate business.

This interesting case is unfortunately also quite controversial, since the sitter who reported it was [Samuel Soal](#), a British parapsychologist whose startlingly successful results in ESP experiments were discovered after his death to have been systematically faked by him. Given the scale of the deception, his other findings are inevitably suspect. But even if the Davis case turns out to be worthless, this line of argument might nevertheless be the most serious challenge so far to the survivalist interpretation of mediumship, especially for those undaunted by the possibility of refined unconscious psychic functioning. Not surprisingly, however, it is the most difficult to support by straightforward appeals to the evidence. Of course, when mediumistic communications are evidentially unimpressive, it is relatively easy to argue that the medium is engaged merely in a kind of role playing. Examples of impressive mediumship, however, are more refractory. In fact the Gordon Davis case (if genuine) would be quite exceptional, because it very clearly discourages a survivalist interpretation. But generally speaking, in cases where ostensible communicators give information not normally available to the medium, it is much more difficult to establish that the communicator is not a genuine discarnate entity, and that the medium is simply exhibiting a form of psi-mediated dramatization.

Indeed, arguing for trance impersonations in these cases is a complex and formidable project. To begin with, one would probably have to argue that the ostensible communicators are too flat as personalities to be genuine surviving entities. And that, too, is no simple task, since it is unclear to what extent genuine communications from the deceased might be distorted, filtered, or 'watered down' by the process of communication. Of course, [Jule Eisenbud](#) partisans of the survival hypothesis can rely all too easily on that point, in order to wriggle away from

evidence apparently unfavorable to the hypothesis. But their anti-survivalist opponents, likewise, can rely all too easily on the assumption that genuine mediumistic communicators will be robust personalities. The frustrating fact of the matter is that we have *no idea* what to expect of a genuine mediumistic communication. For all we know, it might be difficult or impossible for a communicator to control a medium's organism and still manifest his or her personality in all its robustness (for instance, without the medium's thoughts or personality getting in the way). For any number of reasons, it might be difficult to prevent trance communications from seeming like personality caricatures. Still, one might argue that certain personality limitations are more revealing than others and that they strongly suggest dissociation rather than discarnate survival. That is part of Jule Eisenbud's strategy in dealing with Minnie Soule's Cagliostro persona,[15](#) and it is a strategy that requires a very deep grasp of human behaviour and a keen eye for its nuances.

But quite apart from the issue of personality robustness, major obstacles remain in the way of showing that mediumistic communicators are merely trance impersonations. For example, one must explain the *dynamic relevance* of the medium's behaviour. One must explain why *this* particular individual appears to communicate, rather than someone else with different characteristics and offering different information. If the ostensible communicators are products of a dissociative process, then presumably there is a reason why the medium's trance personality has the specific characteristics it has and offers the specific information it does (just as the specific features of alternate personalities make sense relative to the needs and interests of the multiple). But to establish this sort of claim in cases of mediumship, one would almost certainly have to make complex and inconclusive sets of conjectures about the lives, interests, needs, and hidden agendas of the medium and sitters at a séance and the underlying psychodynamics between them. Once again, the classic model for such a study is Eisenbud's fascinating and compelling analysis of the Cagliostro persona. And finally, to make matters worse, even if one had the ability and available information to meet this part of the challenge successfully, one must still explain (in the best cases) the origin of communicated information presumably known only to the deceased person being impersonated. But that might require appealing, not simply to some psychic functioning or other, but to a degree of psychic functioning that even some parapsychologists find intolerable.[16](#)

On the whole, then, these various comparisons of mediumship to DID lend very little support to the dissociation hypothesis. Not only do they not demonstrate that mediumship is simply a dissociative phenomenon; they are not even especially suggestive. Perhaps only the argument from trance impersonations is at all promising. But it is very difficult to defend, and in any case it will appeal only to those who are open to the possibility of quite refined and reliable psychic functioning. The above considerations show only that, if mediumship turns out to provide conclusive evidence for postmortem survival, that conclusion cannot be established (or even strongly supported) simply by comparing mediumship to DID.

The Survival Hypothesis

Let us move on, then, to the survival hypothesis, and consider to what extent comparing mediumship to DID supports the claim that at least some mediumistic communicators are postmortem individuals. Just as many have felt that similarities between mediumship and DID support the dissociation hypothesis, others have maintained that differences between the two types of phenomena support the hypothesis of survival. Most of the arguments discussed below are relatively standard, but we will focus on their most persuasive formulations in works by [CD Broad](#) and [Alan Gauld](#).¹⁷

(1) The first argument concerns the involuntary nature of DID as compared to the relatively voluntary nature of mediumship. Some argue that alternate personalities tend to be independent of the host personality and that they often take control for extended periods against the will of the subject (or host personality), whereas mediumistic controls and communicators tend usually to appear only with the medium's knowledge or consent. As Gauld puts it, their 'comings and goings ... unlike those of secondary personalities, are strictly circumscribed'.¹⁸

But this alleged difference may be challenged on several grounds. To begin with, in some cases of mediumship, communicators spontaneously take control of the medium. For example, sometimes Fedra took over Gladys Leonard without her knowledge or consent. Moreover, the literature contains numerous reports of so called 'drop-in' communicators, whom sitters at a séance apparently do not know, and whom they certainly do not invite. And as far as DID is concerned, the more functional multiples often have considerable control over which personalities appear and when they appear. The reason for that control, according to some multiples, is that they have a high degree of internal cooperation between their various alters (such as some sort of ruling or organizing body or 'council').

Nevertheless, it may well be that the comings and goings of mediumistic communicators are, *on the whole*, more restricted than those of alternate personalities. But it is not clear whether that difference is significant. As Broad realized,¹⁹ it might only be a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind. In fact it is obvious that one can explain the difference (if it exists) without positing radically distinct sorts of underlying processes, much less the existence of postmortem communicators. After all, dissociation can play different sorts of roles in a person's life. For the multiple, the creation of alternate personalities apparently begins as a reaction to intolerable suffering, and eventually dissociation tends to become a somewhat habitual means of coping with a broad range of stressful situations. For the medium, however, dissociation might not be linked (at least so conspicuously) to the exigencies of psychological survival. Perhaps it is not rooted in earlier disturbing traumas of the sort that lead to full-fledged cases of multiplicity. It might instead illustrate how a person can use dissociative capacities to reinforce a belief or world view (such as the belief in survival). And clearly, if dissociation is merely playing a different sort of role in mediumship from that in DID, the comparatively controllable nature of mediumistic communications is easy to understand. After all, mediums tend to place themselves voluntarily in situations where they can exercise their mediumistic capacities, either by holding séances or by making themselves psychologically open to mediumistic communications at any

time. By contrast, the multiple does not (at least consciously) seek the stressful situations that can trigger the switching of personalities.

(2) Gauld also suggests that multiple personality is a form of psychopathology, whereas mediumship is not. So perhaps that is a reason for thinking that mediumistic communicators are not merely dissociative constructs (like alters). But we must be careful here. For one thing, mediumship might be pathological, but its pathology might simply be more subtle or less severe than that found in DID. Once again, Eisenbud's conjectures²⁰ about the sexual repressions of medium and sitters are a model of the deeper analyses we must make before drawing hasty conclusions about the relationship between mediumship and psychopathology.

Besides, pathology is inevitably a matter of degree. Even if mediumship is a dissociative disorder, the fact that DID appears more pathological may (again) reflect no more than a difference in etiology or a difference in the role dissociation plays in the subject's life. For example, the problems leading to classic cases of DID might simply be more dramatic than those conducive to the development of mediumship. Whereas DID typically arises from severe trauma or abuse, the generally less disruptive phenomena of mediumship may reflect a milder causal history. But then the phenomena of DID and mediumship might not be fundamentally different. Not only might they both be dissociative phenomena linked to an underlying psychological instability or weakness, but they might also both be ultimately maladaptive (though to different degrees).

Moreover, we should remember that not all cases of DID are as dramatic or life-disrupting as the classic or best known cases. In fact, not only are some multiples far more functional than others, some mediums are clearly *less* functional than others and have varying degrees of difficulty coping with their mediumship and with everyday life. Hence, when we consider the extent to which DID and mediumship are pathological or maladaptive, there are reasons for thinking that the various cases can all be spread out along a single continuum.

(3) Now Gauld never explicitly said that DID is pathological and that mediumship is not; he only suggests it. His explicit point is somewhat different. He claims 'There does not seem to have been anything disturbed about the normal personalities of Piper, Leonard, and other leading trance mediums'.²¹ Presumably, Gauld means that the host or dominant personalities in cases of DID *are* disturbed, by contrast.

But one must be careful here as well. It is not clear what Gauld means by 'disturbed'. One would think he means something like 'not well adjusted'—that is, that disturbed persons behave erratically, or that they respond inappropriately or self destructively to life's daily turmoil, or that in some other way they show little ability to handle everyday situations. But if that is what Gauld means, then DID and mediumship may not differ in the way he suggests. For one thing, some alternate personalities (including dominant personalities) show few (if any) signs of being disturbed in this sense. In fact, they often appear quite stable and functional, and at least as normal and well-adjusted as many non-multiples and non-mediums. Granted, those alters might be relatively one dimensional or flat as personalities compared to some (or most) non-multiples. But their personality limitations are often quite subtle and need not interfere with the multiple's ability to navigate

through the day. And in any case, many quite functional non-multiples are comparably limited as personalities.

Moreover, criteria of normality are very tricky; and usually, one's important personality disturbances are not evident on the surface, or even under the sort of scrutiny accorded most great mediums. In fact, one should remember that mediums, unlike multiples, are not typically investigated by mental health professionals on the lookout for personality disturbances and poised (if not eager) to make a diagnosis. But in any case, there is no reason to suppose that mediums generally are well-adjusted, even if Piper and Leonard seemed to be. Quite probably, mediums are no better adjusted on the whole than members of other occupational or avocational groups, most (if not all) of which contain their fair share of troubled individuals. (Consider, for example, weekend golfers, amateur photographers, bird watchers, construction workers, airline personnel, account executives, ministers, politicians, and most certainly academics.) But even if all mediums were well-adjusted, the difference between well-adjusted mediums and poorly-adjusted alters may still be no more than a by-product of their distinctive sorts of histories (severely traumatic, presumably, only in the case of DID). It may not point to any fundamental difference in underlying processes—for example, in the origin of mediumistic communicators as compared to alternate personalities.

Perhaps Gauld should have made a somewhat different, but related point—namely, that the dominant personalities seem more incomplete, or less well-rounded, than those of mediums. And *that* claim may be defensible, since a multiple's various alternate personalities (even the most robust ones) often seem somewhat flat by comparison to many non-multiples (well-adjusted or otherwise). Nevertheless, there is no sufficiently detailed comparative study of mediums and multiples to support the view that mediums are generally more robust as personalities than even the most fully developed alters.

In any case, the view is problematical. For one thing (as noted earlier), it is often very hard to tell which (if any) of a multiple's alternate personalities is historically primary—hence, which should be compared to the medium's personality. But even if the personalities of mediums were, on the whole, more well-rounded than any alternate personalities in cases of DID, that, too, needn't be understood as indicating that alternate personalities and mediumistic communicators differ radically in kind or origin. It might show only that mediums and multiples exemplify somewhat different dissociative processes.

Moreover, it is unclear how one could defend any sweeping generalization about the complexity or robustness of mediumistic communicators as compared to alternate personalities. It is difficult enough to evaluate the relative complexity of two ordinary personalities, but it is substantially more imposing to make such comparisons across *populations* of personalities. Besides, we must remember that the personality of a *non*-multiple may be restricted (even severely) in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Hence, even if we were to find suggestive limitations in the personalities of mediums and their communicators, we should not leap to the conclusion that mediumship is merely dissociative. As we noted in connection with the dissociation hypothesis, those limitations might result from

something other than dissociative depletion—for example, natural constraints of the process of communicating with discarnate entities.²²

(4) A rather different kind of comparison of mediums and multiples seems particularly questionable in the light of recent evidence. Broad²³ mentions the once familiar point that in cases of DID, personalities do not present themselves as discarnate entities. But that is clearly false; some alternate personalities do claim to be postmortem individuals. Granted, most of the examples of such personalities are described in reports written considerably after Broad's *Lectures On Psychical Research* (1962), but earlier examples can be found in the literature, even in the major cases Broad considers. For example, in the [Doris Fischer case](#), 'Sleeping Margaret' claims to be a surviving spirit.²⁴

(5) Another point apparently undermined by recent evidence is the following. Gauld claims 'that the number of distinct personalities which may control a trance medium during the course of her career greatly exceeds anything for which the annals of multiple personality provide a parallel'.²⁵ But this, too, seems plainly false, given the now relatively common reports of huge inventories of alters and fragments in polyfragmented cases of DID.

Of course, it is unclear what to make of recent evidence for polyfragmentation, due to the difficulty of accurately *individuating* alters—in particular, determining when one is dealing with two different alters as opposed to one alter assuming different names. Ironically, this is equally a problem for determining the actual number of communicators expressing themselves through mediums (whether they be dissociated parts of the medium's psyche or genuine postmortem individuals). If we count personalities and communicators simply on the basis of the number of *names* claimed or the number of separate identities claimed by or through the subject, then mediums and multiples have comparably extensive inventories. But because alternate personalities and ostensible communicators often exhibit only the most subtle behavioural differences (and differ primarily in what they *claim* about themselves), and because the appearance of counterfeit new personalities or communicators can sometimes be explained in terms of demand characteristics of the therapeutic or mediumistic situation, one can't be certain how large the actual inventories really are. Therefore, this sort of 'head counting' is unlikely to yield any useful information about the relationship between mediumship and DID.

(6) Gauld also says that he knows of no 'complete parallel for the simultaneous and apparently quite full manifestation of two personalities (one through the hand and one through the voice), which occurred quite commonly during one period of Piper's mediumship'.²⁶ But first of all, Piper's case is not unique in that respect, although it is uncommon. Another impressive case is that of [Pearl Curran](#), who could converse or write letters with one hand, while the other hand produced the Patience Worth scripts on the ouija board.²⁷ However, the Patience Worth case arguably provides no real evidence of survival, and can rather be seen as a case of dissociation with some psi abilities thrown in for good measure.²⁸

Moreover, and quite apart from the Patience Worth case, it is unclear the phenomenon Gauld mentions would count in favor of the survival hypothesis. The literature on DID contains numerous reports of submerged personalities expressing

themselves through automatic writing while another alter is in executive control of the body.

(7) Perhaps a point about etiology will fare somewhat better. It concerns the different degrees to which alternate personalities and mediumistic communicators make sense in terms of the subject's life history. Generally speaking, we can understand why alternate personalities develop and why they have their distinct sets of attributes. We can understand their functions relative to traumas or other incidents in the multiple's history, and we can see how they fit both into a larger personality system and also into the multiple's ongoing efforts to cope with everyday problems. By contrast, mediumistic communicators seem to play no comparable role in the medium's life; they seem to be *psychodynamically fortuitous*. But then, perhaps they are not simply created by the subject and are instead genuine discarnate communicating entities.

It should be clear by now that this suggestion can be challenged for reasons considered earlier. While it might be true that mediumistic communicators do not play the same role in the medium's life as alters play in the multiple's life, it would be rash to conclude that they play no role at all. As Eisenbud's analysis of the Cagliostro persona reminds us, mediumistic communicators might simply serve a different kind of function. Granted, communicators might not be created in response to traumas, either directly or as a by-product of what eventually becomes an habitual dissociative coping technique. But dissociative processes might serve a wide variety of needs and interests, and their role in the life of a medium might be far more subtle than in cases where subjects experience major traumas, and in which alternate personalities are clearly trauma-specific.

(8) Of course, partisans of the survival hypothesis would argue that mediums sometimes display abilities or knowledge for which there is no parallel in the case of ordinary multiplicity, and which seems explicable only in terms of the persistence of consciousness after bodily death. This is probably the only sort of difference which—if it could be defended—would clearly favor the survival hypothesis over the dissociation hypothesis. Unfortunately, however, it is the difference we can least afford to examine in detail here, since to do so we would have to grapple with most of the central issues concerning the evidence for survival—especially the apparent stand-off between the survival and living-agent-psi hypotheses.

Nevertheless, based on the foregoing considerations, it seems safe to say that the comparison of mediumship to DID does not offer any particular support to the survival hypothesis, at least over and above whatever relatively independent support comes from examining the unusual knowledge and abilities occasionally displayed by mediums.

The Intrusion Hypothesis

That brings us, finally, to the intrusion hypothesis, the claim that some alternate personalities are really discarnate entities passing themselves off as mere fragments of the person's psyche. This hypothesis differs in important respects from the other two. First, it has relatively few advocates. And second, it is seldom

supported by means of the comparative method. It is also the easiest of the three to evaluate. In fact, it can be fairly easily evaluated whether or not one accepts the hypothesis of survival. Indeed, even those sympathetic to survival tend to reject the intrusion hypothesis. The reasons are relatively straightforward.

(1) As McDougall observed,²⁹ in cases where integration of personalities seems to have occurred, it is not especially plausible to interpret alternate personalities as postmortem individuals. Integration, he argued, is presumably a form of making whole again or reintegration. Hence, it suggests a process of simply putting back together elements that previously had formed a whole. But *ex hypothesi*, postmortem individuals were not parts of the subject to begin with.

Unfortunately, this line of argument commits what Braude has termed the 'Humpty Dumpty Fallacy'.³⁰ There is little if any reason to think that alternate personalities (or their correlates) were originally parts of the person's pre-dissociative psyche, rather than something created post traumatically. In fact, multiples often integrate (at least partially) and then split again along novel functional lines—again, for reasons that make good sense in terms of the continued stresses or traumas in the multiple's life.

(2) A more promising line of argument is the following. It is generally clear how alternate personalities fit into the multiple's life history and how they together form a kind of personality *system*. That is, it is generally clear why multiples develop the kinds of personalities they display and what role those personalities play in the life of the patient. But in that case, the intrusion hypothesis seems unnecessary and un-parsimonious.

In fact, that seems to be true even in cases where alternate personalities claim to be postmortem communicating entities. For example, Cutler and Reed³¹ discuss a case of DID in which the patient had one personality claiming to be from the eighteenth century and another from the twenty-first century. The patient's other personalities were transparently—and quite typically—adaptive; their roles concerned types of behaviour and situations she had difficulty handling, especially those involving her sexuality. But the temporally-displaced personalities likewise seemed clearly adaptive. They, too, appeared to have an important function in the patient's overall emotional and psychological makeup.

Of course, not all personalities in a multiple's personality system have clearly identifiable functions and reasons for existing. But that hardly warrants treating those alternate personalities as discarnate spirits in disguise. A more reasonable conjecture is that not enough is known about the multiple to be able to identify the personality's role and causal history.

Moreover, we should note that many multiples have various alters who appear 'stuck' in time—often child personalities representing specific traumatic periods or episodes in the multiple's past. It would clearly be foolish to assume that those alters are remnants of individuals who lived at those times. Their claiming to belong to another period is straightforwardly explainable in terms of the multiple's history and the problems in living which that history has created. We ordinarily (and quite properly) treat the temporal displacements of alters as part of an overall

creative adaptive strategy that the multiple adopts in order to cope with painful events occurring at earlier times. But *prima facie*, the same is true of many central features of alters, such as their sex, chronological age, body image, sexuality, and (presumably) whether or not they claim to be a discarnate spirit.

Moreover, the type of individual an alter claims to be may also be a function of the culture in which the multiple lives. Significantly, multiples in Brazil frequently manifest alters claiming to be spirits. But these conform closely to rather idiosyncratic spiritist belief systems widely held only in Brazil.³² Reported cases of DID in India and among Hispanics likewise exhibit what appear to be culture-specific characteristics.³³ And Ross claims that 'personalities of different races are similarly culture bound. I bet there are far fewer black alters in yellow bodies in China than there are black alters in white bodies in the United States.'³⁴ He also asserts,

I predict that the frequency of demon alters varies with geographical area in North America, with more demons in the 'Bible belts'. DID patients as individuals are probably more likely to have demon alters if they belong to a fundamentalist church, irrespective of geographical location.³⁵

(3) But perhaps the most important objection to the intrusion hypothesis generally concerns the psychological utility of apparent alters claiming to be discarnate entities. Considering how much those alters resemble ordinary alternate personalities in their clinical presentation, we should ask: Why might it be important for a multiple to regard certain alternate personalities as temporarily embodied spirits? Three reasons in particular stand out.

First, as Ross observes, the alter might simply 'represent a clear-cut identification' with some individual close or important to the subject.³⁶ For example, if the personality is identified as a dead relative, and if the patient's

identification is with an abuser, the alter will be a persecutor. If it is with a nurturing grandmother, it will be a protector ... One patient had an alter that was a seagull named Jonathan. Not surprisingly, this alter soared in freedom above the patient's troubles, much like Jonathan Livingstone Seagull.³⁷

Second, when the ostensibly postmortem communicator serves the function of a helper personality, the patient might feel as if his guidance and cure are directed by something transcendent, something inevitably more powerful or wise than the patient feels himself (or his therapist) to be. Therefore, since helper personalities appear in many (if not most) cases of DID, it seems reasonable to suppose that the ostensibly discarnate communicators among them are merely a subset of the set of helper personalities. They would be those helpers who, for reasons of deep psychological importance to the patient, claim to be entities who possess the wisdom gained from higher plains or from the experience of a former life.

Third, in cases where the ostensibly postmortem alter is not a helper, the patient might benefit in a rather different way. Unlike part of one's own fractured self, an ostensibly invading entity would conveniently deflect responsibility for behaviour (or simply thoughts or emotions) away from the patient and onto the spirit realm.

The patient would not have to feel personally responsible for behaviour (thoughts or emotions) that would normally be provocative or psychologically risky. Interestingly, some sceptics of the genuineness of DID³⁸ think that every alternate personality results from a kind of role playing and offers similar advantages to the multiple. Although that more extreme view seems to be indefensible,³⁹ it is clear that by assigning risky thoughts, feelings, or behaviour to a discarnate entity, the subject can deflect responsibility to a greater degree than would be possible by assigning them to another part of oneself (such as an alter).

Conclusion

These last considerations lead us back to mediumship. Obviously mediumistic communicators might play a role similar to that of a multiple's apparently intruding discarnate alters. In fact there are two major reasons why a medium might prefer (at least unconsciously) to regard communicators as genuinely discarnate, rather than as elements or creations of her own psyche.

First, quite apart from the social utility or appealing notoriety some might find in being a medium, there is considerable psychological value in believing that the messages emanate from something other than a mere mortal. The medium might neither trust nor respect words of wisdom, comfort, guidance, or even bits of mundane information, if she felt they came from her own mind. And of course, the medium's sitters might share and reinforce that point of view.

Second, a belief in one's mediumship psychologically takes the medium off the hook, with regard to successes as well as failures. Since a medium believes that she is merely an intermediary for communications and information provided by postmortem entities, she never has to feel responsible when a séance goes awry (that is, when no phenomena, or only disappointing phenomena, occur). And perhaps more important, when successes occur (when good information is communicated), the medium needn't fear the extent of her powers, particularly when the séance is over. She does not need to attribute successes to her own ESP, which for a first-rate medium would raise the terrifying spectre of omniscience—or at the very least a degree of psychic functioning that most people find deeply frightening.⁴⁰ And when we consider the profound psychological needs that the communicator's information or behaviour might satisfy—needs that we might be reluctant to acknowledge—how convenient, then, if the information or behaviour is provided by a third party, a communicator for whom we can feel (say) contempt. Once again, the medium herself can feel blameless for anything the sitters find objectionable. (And again, the reader could profit from examining Eisenbud's essay on Cagliostro.⁴¹)

Of course, these considerations do not rule out the possibility that some mediums really do provide good evidence for survival. But as we deepen our grasp of the etiology and dynamics of multiplicity, we inevitably see how the underlying dynamics of mediumship might also be more complex than they have seemed. (That is hardly surprising; after all, cases of mediumship are seldom given the sort of depth-psychological scrutiny accorded cases of multiplicity.) As a result, it becomes easier to make conjectures about the ways in which dissociative

phenomena might manifest in forms appropriate to a mediumistic séance. Indeed, that seems to be a major irony in the parapsychological study of DID. Ever since the founding of the Society for Psychical Research, many have expected the study of dissociation to help strengthen the case for survival (for example, that seems to have been Myers's view). But in fact, it only furnishes deeper—though still far from conclusive—reasons for treating mediumship as one of many possible forms of dissociation, albeit one that often demonstrates paranormal capacities of the living.

Stephen Braude

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) For detailed and comprehensive accounts, see Gauld (1992) and Dingwall (1967).
- [2.](#) See, however, the *Encyclopedia* entry on [Postmortem Survival](#).
- [3.](#) M. Prince (1905).
- [4.](#) W.F. Prince (1915).
- [5.](#) e.g., Salter (1930); Troubridge (1922).
- [6.](#) Broad (1962), 267.
- [7.](#) See also Gauld (1982), 112.
- [8.](#) Broad (1962), 268.

- [9.](#) See, e.g., Braude (1995); Putnam (1989); Ross (1997).
- [10.](#) Cory (1919); Litvag (1972); W.F. Prince (1927/1964).
- [11.](#) Hyslop (1917).
- [12.](#) Braude (1995).
- [13.](#) Flournoy (1900).
- [14.](#) Soal (1925).
- [15.](#) Eisenbud (1992).
- [16.](#) For more on the relevant issues, see the *Psi Encyclopedia* entries on [postmortem survival](#) and [super psi](#).
- [17.](#) Broad (1962); Gauld (1982).
- [18.](#) Gauld (1982), 113.
- [19.](#) Broad (1962), 267.
- [20.](#) Eisenbud (1992).
- [21.](#) Gauld (1982), 112.
- [22.](#) See Braude (1995), chapter 9, for additional related considerations.
- [23.](#) Broad (1962), 268.
- [24.](#) W.F. Prince (1915/16), 1264.
- [25.](#) Gauld (1982), 112.
- [26.](#) Gauld (1982), 112.
- [27.](#) Litvag (1972); W.F. Prince (1927/1964); Braude (2003); Cory (1919).
- [28.](#) See Braude (2003).
- [29.](#) McDougall (1905).
- [30.](#) For details, see Braude (1995), chapter 4.
- [31.](#) Cutler & Reed (1975).
- [32.](#) Krippner (1987).
- [33.](#) Adityanjee, Raju & Khandelwal (1989); Steinberg (1990); Varma et al (1981).
- [34.](#) Ross (1997), 155.
- [35.](#) Ross (1997), 155.
- [36.](#) Ross (1997), 155.
- [37.](#) Ross (1997), 155.
- [38.](#) e.g., Kenny (1986).
- [39.](#) See Braude (1995); Putnam (1989); Ross (1997).
- [40.](#) For more on the fear of psi, see, e.g., Braude, (1997; 2008).
- [41.](#) Eisenbud (1992).