

EDITORIAL

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2019/1539>

Copyright: Creative Commons CC-BY-NC

I've recently found myself discussing apparitions with some SSE members and various other correspondents. And to my dismay I've discovered that many suppose, all too readily, that when apparitional cases require paranormal explanations, they should be viewed as instances of telepathic interaction. I addressed this topic quite some time ago (Braude 1997), arguing that the telepathic interpretation of apparitions is problematical—at least as an approach to apparitions generally. And back then I expected (admittedly, rather foolishly) that my trenchant and extended analysis would settle the matter decisively. So now that I've been humbled once again by this latest indication of my lack of influence, I'd like to revisit the topic briefly and review its essentials, in the hope that some might then adopt a more sophisticated and nuanced approach.

Apparitional phenomena have intrigued me for a long time. One reason is that they reach into all corners of the human population. Even hard-nosed, otherwise outwardly skeptical academics have confided their apparitional experiences to me and acknowledged they were baffled and impressed by them. That august group even includes an ex father-in-law (an anatomist at Ohio State) and my dissertation advisor (a distinguished and suitably hard-nosed philosopher).

From the earliest days of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), the dominant view, at least within parapsychology, has been that if apparitions aren't simply internally generated (e.g., exhaustion- or drug- or illness-induced) hallucinations, they can then be explained by appealing to various sorts of telepathic interaction. And I suspect that's still the prevailing view. So for example, according to this view we'd understand apparitions of the dead to result from telepathic interactions between a postmortem and an ante-mortem individual, and we'd explain apparitions of the living entirely in terms of ante-mortem telepathic interactions. Thus, a so-called "crisis apparition" would be understood as a kind of moment-of-death (or peril) telepathic reaching out from the agent to the percipient.

I understand why this view is seductive, but as a *general* approach to apparitions, it's simplistic, both methodologically and empirically. As I will explain below in more detail, 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. So even initially, it's not very promising to proceed as though apparitional phenomena must be united by anything deeper than a name. The evidence for apparitions consists of cases occurring both while awake and during sleep, perceived both individually and collectively, most of them visual but others not, some suggesting the persistence of consciousness after death, others suggesting only interaction with the living, some strongly suggesting the presence of localized objective apparitional entities, and others suggesting nothing more than telepathic interaction. Like the various somatic phenomena we designate generally as pains, different apparitional phenomena may require quite different sorts of explanations. In fact, even phenomenologically similar cases might demand different explanations, just as phenomenologically similar headaches might have different kinds of causes.

The most problematic cases for the prevailing view are *collective* apparitions, experienced simultaneously by two or more individuals (including animals). Of course, I concede that individual and collective apparitions might occasionally result from similar processes, telepathic or otherwise. However, it's notable that explanations that seem plausible for individual apparitions frequently (if not usually) seem implausible in collective cases, although the converse is rarely true. So I'd like once again to focus on the important theoretical challenges posed by cases of collective apparitions. In my view, those cases seem to take us in directions many will find surprising, if not disturbing.

Theoretical Preliminaries

A striking feature of the evidence is that apparitions tend to be collectively perceived when there is more than one potential percipient present. G. N. M. Tyrrell claimed that in about one-third of the cases where there is more than one potential percipient, the apparition is experienced collectively (Tyrrell 1942/1961:23). Hornell Hart's figures (Hart 1956) 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" (Tyrrell 1942/1961:204, emphasis added). 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.

For present purposes, we can ignore instances where apparitions seem merely to be internally generated hallucinatory constructs and consider only those puzzling cases that seem to demand a paranormal explanation. For that residue, explanations of apparitions have traditionally divided into two main groups: *telepathic* (or subjectivist) and *objectivist*. The former treat apparitions as constructs of inner experience having an external (telepathic) cause, while the latter take them to be spatially localized entities of some sort. And as we'll see shortly, telepathic accounts seem clearly to founder when it comes to collective cases.

Nevertheless, it must be said that telepathic explanations are not entirely without merit—at least for individual cases. Generally speaking, telepathic accounts propose (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. The reason this is at least initially plausible (as Price 1960 observes) is that telepathy is usually and reasonably considered to be at least a two-stage process. First, the agent telepathically affects the percipient; then the effect of that interaction manifests itself somehow in the percipient. And of course, this second part of the process presumably can 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 (e.g., “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.

The objectivist account raises different issues, and some might consider it to be far more radical than the telepathic alternative. In outline, it proposes that an apparition is a real, localized, entity, and not simply a subjective construct or hallucination of the percipient. Early proponents of telepathic explanations maintained that apparitional entities are nonphysical, although they bear certain similarities to ordinary material objects. To some extent (as we'll see), that claim rests on confusions over what physical objects are. In any case, it's not essential to the objectivist account that the apparitions be of a particular ontological kind, except for having the property of occupying a real position in space. 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.

F. W. H. Myers and Tyrrell were among those who argued that if apparitions are objective localized entities, they're nevertheless sufficiently unlike physical objects to be classed as nonphysical. The principal points of dissimilarity, as itemized by Tyrrell (Tyrrell 1942/1961:59), 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 C. D. Broad correctly observed (Broad 1962:234ff), various familiar spatial *physical* objects display these and related peculiar properties. For example, a *mirror image* is a physical phenomenon located in the region of space occupied by the mirror. But (a) it's 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 localized 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're more intensely localized in and perceivable only from certain locations. Indeed, they exhibit the anomalous properties of apparitions precisely because of the manner in which they're extended in space. The moral here, clearly, 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), and (vii).

The initial and conspicuous advantage of the objectivist approach is that it seems to account for collective apparitions more easily than the telepathic alternative. If (as subjectivists maintain) apparitions are internally generated hallucinations created in response to a telepathic stimulus, it's not clear, first, why more than one person would *simultaneously* have such an exceptional experience, and second, why the content of the various hallucinations would correspond at all, much less in the manner of the ordinary impressions of physical objects. This issue seems especially acute when we recall that telepathy must be at least a two-stage process and that

the second stage may be both delayed and contaminated by idiosyncrasies of the percipient's psychology. (More on this shortly.)

Another problem for telepathic accounts is posed by so-called *reciprocal* cases, the prototype of which is as follows. Agent *A* experiences an OBE (out-of-body experience) 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's also sensed aurally and tactually.

The difficulty presented for telepathic accounts 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. But of course, *B* is not located at that position, although he's in the general vicinity. The problem, then, is that according to subjectivists the apparition of *A* is *B*'s hallucination. It's supposed to be something *B* creates in response to a telepathic stimulus from *A*. Therefore, it's 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 will be further compounded in collective cases, in which more than one percipient experiences *A*'s apparition.

One last difficulty for telepathic explanations 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*.

Collective Apparitions

Telepathic explanations of collective apparitions have taken various forms, and in all of these the explanatory hurdles mentioned briefly above emerge very clearly. One of the earliest theories was proposed by Edmund Gurney (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886); I call it the *Shotgun Theory*. According to this theory, agent *A* telepathically influences percipients $B_1 \dots B_n$, *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 idiosyncratic 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.

Another problem is posed by the well-known phenomenon of *telepathic deferment*. For example, 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. 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 ongoing background events or the subject’s state of mind. For example, many cases indicate that the subject’s response is delayed until a time of repose or relaxation, or at least to a time when surrounding events are not particularly distracting. But then it seems unlikely that different people, affected by the same telepathic stimulus, would hallucinate at the same time.

Indeed, 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 internal causal processes *independent* of those producing the stimulus—in particular, processes *idiosyncratic* to the subject.

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’s 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 $B_2 \dots B_n$ are affected telepathically by a person at their own location, rather than by a remote agent.

Of course, the spatial proximity of B_1 to $B_2 \dots B_n$ 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 $B_2 \dots B_n$, 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's notoriously a process in which the story or phrase tends to change, often dramatically.

Moreover, as Myers noted, if the Infection Theory were on the right track, we'd expect to find cases of *non*-telepathic hallucinations (e.g., arising from purely intra-subjective causes) spreading by telepathic infection to others in the vicinity. But, as Myers also observed, there are no clear cases of this.

The only other major telepathic explanation is the one proposed by Tyrrell, which I've called the *Extravaganza Theory*. Tyrrell claimed that collective percipience could be accounted for in terms of requirements for *dramatic appropriateness*. He suggested that the apparitional drama is something a telepathic 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. 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. Moreover, 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.

There's no need here to go into further detail about this approach, because the Extravaganza Theory seems to combine elements of both the Infection and Shotgun theories and shares their inability to explain plausibly the similarity and simultaneity of the percipients' experiences. This is especially clear in light of Tyrrell's avowed sympathy with Gurney's notion of telepathic deferment. (But for a discussion of some interesting side issues that don't in any way help the Extravaganza Theory, see Braude 1997.)

The Virtues of Objectivity

The alternative approach I've argued for, particularly for collective cases, is that apparitions in these cases are products of living-agent, or possibly postmortem, PK, continuous with (if not similar to) other reported examples of ostensible materialization. Clearly, an objectivist approach handles the troublesome issues of simultaneous and concordant experiences with no strain whatever. If the various percipients are responding sensorially to an object located in the region of space apparently occupied by the apparition,

then it's easy to understand why their experiences would occur at the same time and correspond in content. After all, ordinary sensory responses to objects in one's environment seldom (if ever) display the dramatic forms of deferment noted in telepathic cases. Moreover, if the objects observed are less like solid bodies and more like colored wisps of gas, rainbows, mirages, or electromagnetic fields, it's no mystery why only some potential percipients report experiencing the apparition. The major mystery, of course, would concern the precise nature of the apparitional objects and their means of production. But since PK is no better understood than telepathy, that nagging mystery poses no problem unique to objectivist accounts.

And it's not just collective cases that may be particularly amenable to an objectivist interpretation. Reiterative cases are also easily explained in terms of the persisting presence at a location of some kind of entity. Of course, it's no easy matter to say what that entity is, and accounts may have to vary between apparent postmortem cases (i.e. ghosts) and ante-mortem cases. But if it seems unparsimonious to posit an enormously complex and arguably miraculously 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. I suppose we 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.

As you might expect, there are subtleties to all the issues surveyed here which go beyond the scope of this Editorial, but which I've addressed at length elsewhere (Braude 1997). For now, I hope this brief introduction to the topic encourages readers to examine the issues in greater depth.

—STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

References Cited

- Braude, S. E. (1997). *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science, Revised Edition*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Broad, C. D. (1962). *Lectures on Psychical Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. [Reprinted by Routledge, 2011]
- Gurney, E., Myers, F. W. H., & Podmore, F. (1886). *Phantasms of the Living*. London: Society for Psychical Research.
- Hart, H., et al. (1956). Six theories about apparitions. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 50, 153–239.
- Price, H. H. (1960). Apparitions: Two theories. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 24:110–125.
- Tyrell, G. N. M. (1942/1961). *Apparitions*. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books.