

BOOK REVIEW

Matlock's Theoretical Offenses

Signs of Reincarnation: Exploring Beliefs, Cases, and Theory by James G. Matlock. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 408 pp. \$39 (paper-back). ISBN 978-1538124796.

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James Matlock's book, *Signs of Reincarnation*, is a recent addition to a seemingly endless stream of confused or superficial works on the topic of survival. Admittedly (and as one would expect), the case material is often of genuine interest. But when Matlock tries to make sense of that material, he demonstrates little grasp of the current state of the debate. Even worse, he seems unaware of the intellectually responsible strategies for challenging and criticizing positions opposed to his own.

Since Matlock criticizes what he says are my views throughout his book, and because this issue of the *JSE* features two comprehensive reviews of that book, I'll focus only on the principal respects in which Matlock misdescribes my position and ignores the extended discussions I've provided, not only in *Immortal Remains* (Braude, 2003), but elsewhere (e.g., Braude, 2005a, 2005b, 2014a, 2014b, 2020), explaining the problems with the tired and flawed lines of reasoning he endorses.

Some of Matlock's significant lapses in understanding concern my discussions of so-called "super psi" and what I dubbed the Argument from Crippling Complexity (CC). The problems are captured nicely in two of Matlock's glossary entries:

crippling complexity Complications so dense and convoluted that they defy all plausibility. The concept and term were introduced by philosopher Stephen Braude to describe the convoluted nature of

many *super-psi* explanations of the evidence for discarnate survival, including *reincarnation cases*. (p. 292)

super-psi In parapsychology, a hypothetical extrasensory ability that is either more extensive or more complex than regular *psi*. Because the limits of regular *psi* are unknown, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of an unusually extensive *psi* on theoretical grounds, but that is not true of complex super *psi*, for which there is no evidence. In this book, super *psi* denotes a hypothetical complex *psi* ability involving the acquisition of information in more than a single step, often requiring the integration of multiple sources, sometimes accompanied by psychokinetic (PK) actions on human bodies or on the material world in addition. (p. 305)

The errors here are egregious and painfully elementary, and so deeply intertwined it's difficult to know where to begin. Consider first Matlock's characterization of super *psi*, distinguished first of all by its obliviousness to several warnings I lodged in *Immortal Remains*, concerning the ease with which that term leads to conceptual confusions. Those pitfalls were the reason I've endorsed Michael Sudduth's much more satisfactory replacement in the context of the survival debate—*living-agent psi* (LAP).

I've noted, not only in *Immortal Remains* (Braude, 2003) but in many of my articles and books (e.g., Braude, 1997, 2017, 2020), several crucial and related points that Matlock simply ignores. That's all the more surprising because the relevant issues are actually straightforward and easy-to-understand. The most notable are (1) that we have no credible, general scale or measure of either *psi*-amazingness or *psi*-complexity. This effectively undermines the intelligibility of distinguishing "regular" *psi* from "more extensive or complex than regular *psi*"—not to mention between dandy *psi* and super *psi*; (2) that what impresses us about an ostensibly psychic achievement may not be the extent, magnitude, or seeming complexity of the effect, but its pinpoint refinement (e.g., accuracy or timeliness); (3) that impressive (and misleadingly labeled) super *psi* needn't be complex at all but may instead work like a magic wand (rather than through one or more series of transitive causal links); and [in the spirit of point #1] (4) Richet's sensible and oft-cited remark:

it is as difficult to understand the materialization of a living hand, warm, articulated, and mobile, or even of a single finger, as to understand the materialization of an entire personality which comes and goes, speaks, and moves the veil that covers him. (Richet 1923/1975, p. 491)

We'll return to some of these points shortly (I deal with them at great length in Braude 2020). But consider, first, how Matlock totally misses the related point about Crippling Complexity. My discussion of CC was not even superficially about the “convoluted nature of many *super-psi* explanations of the evidence for discarnate survival,” or about “complications so dense and convoluted that they defy all plausibility.” And that’s not simply because I left it open whether psi works like a magic wand, or because we have no clear standard for measuring the complexity or impressiveness of a psi phenomenon. On the contrary (and ironically), it’s because the argument for CC points out a potential limiting factor in psi of *any magnitude, and no matter the source*. It’s about the complexity, breadth, and density of the normal and paranormal causal activity—what I’ve called the *causal nexus*—presumably underlying *any* exercise of psi. It’s not about the complexity of the psychic event itself.

Incidentally, I dismiss in advance any effort from Matlock to claim that my discussion of CC was obscure. That’s not to say it couldn’t have been clearer. Probably all writing can be endlessly polished, and, besides, complex views inevitably undergo refinement with time. But my text in *Immortal Remains* was clear enough for others to understand very well what my positions are, and without the need for my personal tutoring.

For example, Sharon Rawlette (2019) recognized that my argument was about the density of the underlying causal nexus and its potential for interfering with one’s intentional psychic efforts. And she also knew exactly which quotes from me capture important steps in my argument—among them, “the super-psi hypothesis suggests that ESP faces *too many natural obstacles to be consistently successful*, at least to the degree required by the best cases of mediumship” (Braude, 2003, p. 90, emphasis added); and, “what makes the best cases so impressive is both the amount of correct material and the *consistency* with which subjects provide it” (ibid., p. 91).

Michael Sudduth (2009) also understands this very well. And unlike Matlock he clearly grasps the crucial point that “This [crippling complexity] will be a problem even if psi works like a magic wand, for the problem of crippling complexity is concerned with conditions that undercut psi functioning, whether psi functioning is simple or complex” (Sudduth, 2009, p. 182). That’s why crippling complexity might seem to be as much a problem for survival psi as for living-agent psi. For both, Sudduth proposes that psi must be neither too weak nor too strong—i.e. neither impotent nor self-defeating—what he calls “goldilocks psi.” Similarly, Sudduth (2014) notes that

even if the information flow from discarnate persons to mediums is less subject to interference from the causal nexus, the information flow from the world/other minds to discarnate persons is just as fragile as a flow of information from the world/other minds to the medium. (Sudduth, 2014, p. 60)

Adam Rock and Lance Storm (Rock & Storm, 2015) also understand these issues. They write, “Braude argued that the crippling complexity of the *psychic traffic* produced by the totality of embodied minds might serve as an obstacle to LAP in the context of the medium–sitter interaction” (Rock & Storm, 2015, p. 570, emphasis in original). And like Sudduth, they note correctly that the “Argument from Crippling Complexity applies equally to the LAP and survival hypotheses” (ibid.). Moreover, they identified a passage in *Immortal Remains* where I state this clearly:

. . . it should be as difficult for communicator and medium to create (say) a consistent, long-term impersonation as it would be for the medium to accomplish the same thing through clairvoyance and telepathy with the living. Both tasks would encounter inevitable obstacles from the bustling underlying nexus of psychic activity, and that underlying causal network would have to include attempts by the deceased to gather information and influence the living (Braude, 2003, p. 93). (Rock & Storm, 2015)

Likewise, Lee Irwin (2017) does a much better job than Matlock in grasping the point of CC. He notes,

Braude identifies the problem of “crippling complexity” and conjectures that the omniscient use of ESP . . . is questionable if interference or blocking can occur due to unconscious resistance, or even hostile ESP from others, and argues that lines of psychic connection and communication are so entangled with the intention of other minds that it “might be more remarkable for it [accurate psychic perceptions] to succeed than to fail.” *The more extensive the network of connections, the greater is the possibility of interference, blocking, or misperception.* The more sources required for information gathered, not just from living minds but from books, objects, places, or skill-based knowledge, the more likely the possibility of interference. *The more “super” the psi, the more difficult it may be to accurately attain the required information.* (Irwin, 2017, p. 376, emphasis added)

In any case, for those who found my discursive argument for crippling complexity in *Immortal Remains* too difficult to untangle, here is a stepwise, stripped-down version of the argument that I hope will clarify the essentials once and for all. (Readers can find detailed arguments for premises 1, 3, 5, and 6 in *Immortal Remains*.)

- (1) **Most (if not all) of our abilities or capacities are situation-sensitive—including ordinarily subconscious and involuntary capacities and even virtuosic abilities.**
- (2) **Therefore, it’s reasonable to think that the manifestation of psychic capacities would also be situation-sensitive.**
- (3) **The parapsychological evidence supports that conjecture.**
- (4) **Therefore, it’s reasonable to think that no matter how extensive, refined, or virtuosic psychic capacities might be, like other capacities they will also be subject to actual case-by-case limitations.**
- (5) **The hypothesis that humans have psychic capacities presupposes a vast underlying network of both normal causality and (typically covert) psi-processes initiated both consciously and unconsciously.**
- (6) **The more dense and extensive that network is, the more obstacles any particular psychic inquiry or effort must navigate in order to succeed (e.g., the more likely it is that each effort will be caught in the crossfire of underlying causal activity).**

- (7) *Therefore, the greater the range, pervasiveness, and refinement of psychic functioning (i.e. the more “super” we take it to be), the more vulnerable one’s psychic efforts will be to paranormal interference from within the causal nexus, and the less likely it becomes that any given psychic effort will succeed, much less that a series of such efforts will succeed.*
- (8) *Therefore, the more potentially wide-ranging and virtuosic we take psi to be, the less likely it becomes that a person’s psi could produce an extended and accurate trance persona, or provide all the detailed, intimate information found in the most astonishing survival cases—and even more so, to do these things consistently.*

One of the most disappointing features of Matlock’s book is his frequent failure to engage in competent rational argumentation. As Sudduth also observes in his review in this journal issue, for Matlock’s rejection of others’ positions to have any teeth, it’s not enough simply to deny the claim objected to, or to cite someone else who denies that claim. However, my views—or rather, what Matlock often erroneously claims are my views, consistently receive such shallow treatment. Clearly, though, the only meaningful way to proceed is to state the *reasons* and *arguments* given in support of the rejected claim, and to explain where exactly therein the errors lie.

For example, Matlock writes,

Skeptical parapsychologists and parapsychologically sensitive philosophers downplay or ignore reported behavioral correspondences between a case subject and an identified previous person or else claim (with Braude, 2003) that the behaviors could have been shaped by psi impressions, when *there is no independent evidence that complex behaviors can be acquired via psi.* (p. 51, italics added)

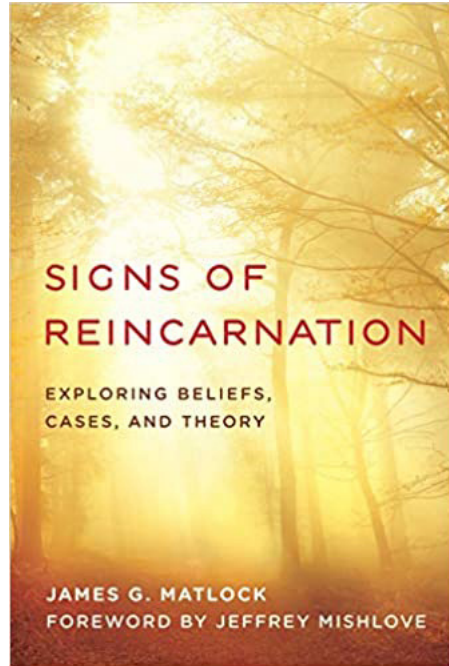
Similarly, he claims,

Braude argued that not only “knowledge that” but “knowledge how” (skills, including language skills) might be acquired by super-psi, although he could not explain how this would be possible, or muster any data in its support. (p. 213)¹

Each of these single sentences contains an impressive number of major mistakes. According to Matlock, I believe that complex behaviors (skills or abilities) can be acquired via psi or super psi. That's also a charge Ian Stevenson liked to make. But I've never said that. On the contrary, I've often challenged that entire way of framing the relevant issues. I've presented, in many places and over several decades, reasons for challenging Stevenson's claim, "if skills are incommunicable normally . . . , they are also incommunicable paranormally" (see, e.g.,

Braude, 2003, pp. 114ff). And the reason I've taken that position, as I've argued in gory detail, is that *communicating* or *acquiring* skills is not the issue, and that it's question-begging to express the issue in such terms.

All we know is that some individuals *manifest* anomalous abilities, and that it's a mystery *how* they got them. It's one reason I've focused on the anomalous and poorly understood appearance of astonishing skills in savants and prodigies, and the sometimes equally startling performances of good hypnotic subjects. It's one reason I've examined at length what we don't understand about the nature of skills (see, e.g., Braude, 2014a). And it's why I noted in *Immortal Remains* four crucial topics demanding our attention: (1) the extent to which people can express and develop seemingly latent skills by sidestepping their customary and resistance-laden modes of cognition (e.g., as in hypnosis); (2) the situation-sensitivity of all human endowments—even the most rudimentary involuntary capacities; (3) the apparently non-lawlike relationship between skills and practice; and (4) the difficulty in generalizing about skills or abilities, including the ability to speak a language. In fact, in *Immortal Remains* I even have a long discussion just



about the nature and varieties of linguistic proficiency, which doesn't rely at all on appeals to super, or any, psi.

So not only is it false that I claim that complex behaviors can be acquired by psi, one would never guess from Matlock's presentation that the issues here are both numerous and very deep and that I argued in great detail for my position.

Moreover, considering how often I've noted in my publications both that we have no credible objective scale of psi impressiveness and that for all we know so-called super psi may work like a magic wand, it's quite astonishing to see Matlock claim that I defend "a super-psi interpretation of survival phenomena, without drawing the distinction between an extensive and complex hypothetical ability" (p. 117). Of course I don't draw that distinction. I claim it's not even intelligible. Matlock misses the point entirely.

Another very important point I've made repeatedly is that survivalists are in no position to object that LAP explanations of the data are too complex or otherwise astounding to be taken seriously. And the reason I've said that is that survivalists are committed to a comparable level of survival-psi amazingness. This point, like others mentioned earlier, is also easy to comprehend. Yet Matlock fails to do so. Consider, for example, how he botches his discussion of the fascinating Maróczy chess case, in which a deceased Hungarian grandmaster, Géza Maróczy, ostensibly played a very high-level game with the thoroughly alive Russian grandmaster Victor Korchnoi, apparently transmitting his moves through a medium (Eisenbeiss & Hassler, 2006). Matlock describes my position as follows.

[Braude] thought that the medium would have been able to achieve these things by the exercise of his psi alone, although as always with super-psi propositions, it is difficult to understand how the psi of a living agent (the medium, in this case) could account for all the elements on display. (p. 242)

Now first of all, I've taken no stand on whether the LAP explanation must be solely in terms of the medium's psi. It doesn't take much digging into my writings to see that I routinely acknowledge the potential paranormal contribution (and perhaps subconscious

collaboration) of both central and peripheral persons in a mediumistic scenario. (See, for example, my [actually, Jule Eisenbud's] discussion of Mrs. Chenoweth's Cagliostro persona [Braude, 2003, pp. 39ff]). Concerning the possibility in the Maróczy case of telepathic leakage from a sitter (or other interested parties), I've written,

the subject was playing chess with an opponent who had grand-master skills; the idiosyncratic moves of the deceased were verifiable and therefore available through ESP to both players; and both the grand-master opponent and others were aware of the deceased's presumed ignorance of chess strategies developed after the deceased's death (in particular, a strategy used to counter an opening variation attempted by the medium). (Braude, 2014a, p. 172)

But the main error here, quite apart from Matlock's aforementioned anachronistic reliance on the defective expression "super psi" and his confusions about psi complexity and amazingness, is his blindness to what we can call *the parity of psi explanations* in survival cases. Matlock simply regurgitates the old and defective argument that a living-agent-psi interpretation presupposes an implausible degree or refinement of psychic functioning and (in particular) *more than would be required by the survivalist*. I've explained very clearly the flaw in this line of argument.

[In the chess case] the survival hypothesis *requires* virtually the same degree of psychic functioning as is posited by the living-agent alternative, and this is not a difficult point to grasp. According to the survivalist, the persisting intelligence of the deceased communicator is causally responsible for the forty-seven chess moves in question. But for that to occur, the deceased would need extended, accurate ESP (either telepathy with the medium or an onlooker or else clairvoyance of the chessboard) to know what the state of play is and then ongoing and effective ESP (presumably telepathic influence on the medium) to convey the desired next move. (Braude, 2014a, p. 172)

For an impressive case like this chess case, or the consistently striking "hits" of Mrs. Piper over her long career, appeals to non-

psi explanations in terms of what I've called the Usual and Unusual Suspects seem out of the question. Instead, there seems to be notable psi happening no matter which side of the ontological divide you consider. So rather than whine about the apparently extreme psi posited by advocates of LAP interpretations of the data, survivalists would do well to heed Ben Franklin's imperative, "Clean your finger before you point at my spots!" Sadly, none of this is breaking news in the survival debate, and Matlock's failure to attend to these well-worn points is simply inexcusable.

But enough from me about the ways in which Matlock fails to engage in competent critical discourse and misrepresents both the state of the survival debate generally and my views in particular. For additional pertinent commentary, I encourage you to read this issue's other two reviews of Matlock's book.

NOTE

- ¹ This passage occurs in the midst of a shallow and question-begging discussion of the Uttara/Sharada reincarnation case, which also falsely attributes to me the claim that "[previous personality] Sharada's detailed knowledge of Bengali geography and customs was retrieved by Uttara through a 'motivated psi' or super-psi in her altered state of mind" (p. 212). My position on this case is much more nuanced than one would guess from Matlock's account. For one thing (and as Sudduth correctly observes in his review in this journal issue), I never argue for the superiority of my analysis over a survivalist interpretation. I claim merely that the survivalist accounts have been psychologically superficial and have done little or nothing to rule out my approach. Moreover, I never said Uttara needed psi of any kind to behave like a Bengali of times past. She already spoke some Bengali and was an ardent student and admirer of Bengali culture (and was disdainful of her Marathi culture). In light of what little we understand about savants, prodigies, the varieties of linguistic proficiency, and hypnotic and dissociative liberation of latent capacities, who knows how far Uttara could have run creatively with what she already knew, while also benefiting from the hopeful perceptions of others that Uttara was displaying signs of reincarnation rather than mental illness?

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