

## TWO TESTS OF SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH: REPORT ON NEGATIVE RESULTS

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### ABSTRACT

Two eminent scientists with a strong interest in the question of survival after bodily death participated in tests of survival that are, in principle, more rigorous than any previously devised. Robert Thouless proposed a test with enciphered passages for which he alone would know the key words, and he enciphered two such passages. J. G. Pratt reset the combination to a padlock using random numbers (from which he devised a mnemonic) that he alone knew. Pratt died in 1979 and Thouless in 1984. Since their deaths numerous trials have been made with key words (possibly relevant to Thouless's enciphered messages) and with numbers (thought to be the combination of Pratt's lock). None of these has enabled the passages left by Thouless to be decoded or the lock set by Pratt to be opened.

Since the founding of the Society for Psychical Research some of its most prominent members have been keenly interested in the question of the survival of human personality after death, and they have sought means of improving evidence for survival. Some early tests with messages known normally only to the writer that were left in sealed envelopes proved flawed in two respects. First, although it was hoped that the writer of the message, after death, would communicate the hidden message through a medium, it remained possible for the medium to discern the contents of the message clairvoyantly. Second, only one trial of accuracy in obtaining the message could be made, because once the sealed envelope had been opened and its contents read the message would be known normally to numerous persons.

Robert H. Thouless, a President of the Society, devised a test that overcame both the disadvantages of the 'sealed message' type of test. Using key words known only to himself he enciphered two messages, which he then published (Thouless, 1946-49a, 1946-49b). He invited mediums or sensitives to try to learn the keys while he was living and stated his intention to communicate them, if he could, after his death.

Thouless hoped that other persons would also encipher messages that could be used in similar tests of their survival after death. However, the task may seem daunting to persons unfamiliar with cryptography, and only one other person is known to have published an enciphered message for this kind of test (Wood, 1949-52).<sup>2</sup> One of us (I.S.) adapted the principle of Thouless's test in developing

<sup>1</sup> Donald West and Emily Cook helped us to improve this paper. Thanks are also due to Arthur Berger for transmitting to the S.P.R. submissions that he received relevant to the Thouless enciphered messages. We also gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Peter Hallson, who handled much correspondence on behalf of the S.P.R. in connection with the Thouless enciphered messages.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. T. E. Wood, a solicitor, devised what appears to have been a rather complicated test, in that several languages were involved, using the coding procedure described by Thouless on pages 259-260 of his first paper. A.T.O. has been in touch with his son, who has had sittings with mediums and feels that he has probably received communications from his father; but he has explained that his father cannot remember the cipher test.

the 'combination lock test' (Stevenson, 1968, 1976). In this test the purchaser of a combination padlock resets the combination using numbers known only to the purchaser. Random numbers may be found first and a mnemonic fitted to them. Alternatively, a mnemonic may be chosen first and its letters transposed into numbers with the help of a published code (Stevenson, 1968, pp. 249–250). The numbers thus obtained are then used in resetting the combination to the lock. As with enciphered messages, mediums are invited to obtain a lock owner's mnemonic or combination of numbers from the lock owner while that person is still living or, supposedly, from the person as a communicator after death. The face of the dial on the padlock has 50 possible numbers, and each combination requires three settings with intermediate turnings of the dial. Thus the probability of the lock being opened by chance rotations of the dial is 1 in  $50^3$  or 1 in 125,000.<sup>3</sup>

The enciphered message test and the combination lock test are free of the disadvantages of the sealed message test. Any number of trials can be made with them until a lock is opened or a message deciphered. Also, it seems extremely unlikely (although perhaps not quite impossible) that a medium could either 'read' by clairvoyance the pins and levers in a lock or obtain by retrocognitive extrasensory perception the key to an enciphered message.

Thouless became interested in the combination lock test. He obtained and reset a lock using (as he wrote to I.S. in a letter dated 22 January, 1970) 'the numbers corresponding to the first six letters of the two-word key to the cipher message given in my second article, using your table for changing letters to numbers'.

J. G. Pratt also reset a combination lock. We now give the (up to now) disappointing results of the tests in which Pratt and Thouless participated.

### J. G. PRATT

J. Gaither Pratt died at a country home outside Charlottesville, Virginia, on 3 November, 1979. He was known to have some hypertension, but was considered to be in good general health. He died unexpectedly and suddenly, 'dropping dead' in the house of a neighbor whom he was visiting.

Pratt had devoted his entire career to psychical research (Keil, 1987), and although he was better known for his work in experimental parapsychology, he had a long-standing interest in the question of survival. One of his earliest contributions to psychical research was that of devising an improved method for

<sup>3</sup> An owner who begins with a six-letter word or the first six letters of a word (but not a six-word phrase) that he selects as a mnemonic from which, by transposition, he derives the numbers for resetting the combination lock, reduces considerably the odds against chance, *if* the attempts at the combination are similarly linked to words. This reduction occurs because only a small proportion of the 125,000 combinations of the lock can be generated from words. For example, no combination could begin with 26 or 27 because no English words begin with the 25 corresponding letter-pairs, such as Bf, Lp and Qz (for 26/76), and Vg and Gq (for 27/77). See the code for transposing letters into numbers given by Stevenson (1968, p. 249).

Although owners of locks can use mnemonics that are either a six-word phrase (the initials of the words to be used in deriving the numbers) or a six-letter word, there is no objection in principle to using the first six letters of a word or words containing more than six letters. This is what Thouless did.

evaluating verbal material in mediumistic communications (Pratt, 1936).<sup>4</sup> Soon after the combination lock test was proposed, he obtained a lock and reset its combination. Being a highly numerate person he preferred to select random numbers from a table for the new combination of his lock. He then obtained from them the corresponding letters (using the published code) and devised a mnemonic, using these letters as the initial ones of a six-word phrase. He attached more importance to his numbers than to his mnemonic and, aware that he might forget the numbers, he several times practiced opening his lock (when alone in a closed room). On one occasion, during and after an illness, he thought that he had forgotten his mnemonic, but afterward found that he had not (Stevenson, 1976, pp. 226–227).

Gaither Pratt's participation in the combination lock test was widely known among psychical researchers, at least in the United States. Following his death numerous persons sent to I.S. sets of numbers that they thought would open Pratt's lock. Forty-two of these were tried on his lock without success. There seemed to be some risk that by trying many combinations the odds against opening the lock by chance might be reduced to an important degree. Moreover, although all correspondents sending in claimed communications concerning the lock were serious, few had submitted any information about how they had derived the numbers<sup>5</sup> that they claimed would open the lock. For these reasons, I.S. called a halt to trying additional proposed combinations unless the complete context of how they were derived was stated by the person submitting a combination for trial. The last trial of a combination to open Pratt's lock was on April 6, 1984. Since then, no new combinations have been submitted.

In addition, I.S. had two sittings with mediums in London during 1981–82. At each sitting he had Pratt's lock in his pocket, but did not offer it to the medium. At one sitting a communicator suggestive of Gaither Pratt seemed to begin manifesting, but then did not develop further. No specific information about Pratt was forthcoming, and nothing suggestive of the combination to his lock or his mnemonic was communicated. The other sitting was also profitless.

#### ROBERT H. THOULESS

Robert H. Thouless died at his home in Cambridge on 25 September, 1984. His wife had died in the summer of 1984, and after this loss he became depressed and wished to die himself. He became physically weak in August and died after about six weeks of illness.

Thouless also had a long-standing interest in the question of survival after death. In addition to devising the test with enciphered passages, he wrote perceptively on the subject and his last published work was a monograph summarizing the evidence for survival (Thouless, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> We should mention that this early method of analysis was superseded by subsequent work by Pratt and others.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, of 42 trials made to open Pratt's lock all were made with sets of six digits that correspondents had communicated to I.S. One correspondent suggested letters, but his suggestions were not tried because Pratt had clearly stated that his mnemonic was not a word (or jumble of letters), but a six-word phrase.

In the case of Thouless the combination lock was of secondary importance. It would be opened by obtaining the numbers for the combination through transposition once the two-word key for his enciphered message was obtained. In fact (probably because his participation in the lock test was little publicized), only two persons submitted sets of numbers said to be the combination to his lock and neither of these opened the lock.

Accordingly, our efforts have been concentrated on obtaining what purport to be communications from Thouless, through mediums, with a view to obtaining the keys to his two enciphered passages. These enciphered passages were both published in volume 48 of *Proceedings SPR*, but in different years. In his first article (July 1948) Thouless set two cipher tests, but he subsequently withdrew one because a cipher expert succeeded in discovering the key word. The key to the other enciphered passage in that article is a passage of literature of around 100 words in length. The key passage consists of 74 (or more) *different* words, and in practice this means circa 100 words in total. Also, the key passage *might* be part of a much longer piece of literature (cf. Thouless's use of Hamlet's Soliloquy in his sample encipherment in his 1948 article, pp. 259–260).<sup>6</sup> In his second article (April 1949) Thouless gave a further cipher test to replace the one withdrawn: its key consists of two words. The two enciphered passages comprising the test were considered by the cipher expert to be unbreakable in practice.<sup>7</sup>

One of us (A.T.O.) had already been having a series of sittings as a private research project and extended that operation to include sessions for contact with Thouless. Particularly for sittings with the medium Mrs. Marie Cherrie, a procedure had been established whereby A.T.O. would, say on the day prior to a sitting, silently express a desire to have communication with three specified individuals and then at the sitting would place on the medium's table something that had belonged to each of these three persons, or pieces cut from letters they had written. The medium received no information about the owners of these items. The medium would hold each of the items in turn, and she would decide the sequence between the three. For sittings with Marie Cherrie this became an established practice sometime after A.T.O. started on the Thouless Project late in 1985. Other mediums sometimes required alterations in this procedure, but in most cases the same small pocket magnifier that had belonged to Thouless was produced for the medium to hold.

Initial inquiries led A.T.O. to understand that some mediums do not like trying to get messages left as tests, because they say that they can never get the

<sup>6</sup> In the Hamlet's Soliloquy example Thouless made a slip either in deriving or in transcribing the key-letter series on page 260 of his 1948 article; the last letter should be W not U. That he could make such a slip illustrates how easy it may be to go wrong in manual encipherment.

<sup>7</sup> Here we should mention, for readers interested in details, that Thouless stated that the key to the enciphered passage in his first article is an 'identifiable passage in a printed work' (Thouless, 1946–49a, p. 261). Thouless also stated (Thouless, 1960, p. 30) that the 'continuous passage will be indicated by a title which is what I shall try to communicate'. From the key passage Thouless derived an effectively random series of 74 key letters which he used in conjunction with the Vigenère letter square to encipher his message. Of the key to the enciphered passage in his second article Thouless wrote only that it consists of two words. The original message was a 'meaningful passage (not a quotation)', enciphered by a double application of the Playfair system (Thouless, 1946–49b, p. 342).

answers, so three mediums, including Marie Cherrie, were asked whether they would be willing, for A.T.O., to try to get the answers to such a test. This later proved to be an unfortunate step, as those three were then trying to get quotations and so on at some of the early sittings.

A.T.O. knew Thouless to the extent of having spoken with him from time to time at meetings of the SPR Council and at conferences, but had never had personal discussions with him. The communications that supposedly came from him always seemed to be broadly in keeping with such a claim, but there was no strong evidence of identity. On the other hand, the sessions were comparable with others where there had been a much closer relationship and where there was in some instances strong private evidence of identity. With three parts in each sitting (each part, as mentioned, directed toward a particular communicator) this type of comparison was fairly regularly available.

The original papers in which Thouless published his tests gave sufficient descriptions or guidance towards finding the details relating to the methods used for coding. Reasonably enough, they left the reader to work out the steps required to reverse the process, which is what we need in decoding. To do this work manually would be slow, tedious, and liable to error, although such a procedure must have been envisaged in 1948-49 when Thouless's two relevant papers were published. In the changed condition of the 1980s it has become possible to avoid excessive manual work by writing programs to carry out the decoding on a computer.

With this in mind, at an early stage following the death of Thouless, B.M. wrote a comprehensive program to run on the SPR computer (using the CP/M operating system) to handle the decoding for the two cipher tests, and she proceeded to check all suggested keys sent in to the SPR by members of the Society and members of the public. In addition, she volunteered to check all suggested keys received by Arthur Berger in the U.S.A. (He had invited persons to send submissions for the Thouless test to him.) At a later stage A.T.O. wrote separate programs for the two decoding methods, to run on his computer (using the Microsoft DOS operating system), and sent a copy of each of the programs and sample decodings to B.M. for validation to ensure that both computers were producing identical answers.

It may be necessary, when a suggested key is received, to decode using several variations on it. For instance, with a two-word key it may in some cases be desirable to check with either word coming first. When checking longer extracts from books or poems there is always the problem of deciding where to start. The part recalled might not include the beginning of the selected passage. For this reason we have several measures of the tasks we have performed; in the main we have the number of suggested keys received and the number of resulting keys checked. The task was further complicated by the failure of many respondents to observe the requirements for the form of the keys, as published in parapsychological journals and the press. However, some 60 usable responses were received by B.M. via the Society and another 40 received through Arthur Berger. Some 80 variations on the basic responses were also tried. About two-thirds of the submitted keys related to the two-word test. The total number of keys checked by A.T.O., mainly as a result of sittings with mediums, has been about 142 for the first test and 87 for the two-word key.

So far, none of the decoding operations has produced evidence that the correct key has been given. The criterion for judging the outcome is that the decoding should make sense. So far all the decoded sequences have resulted in a meaningless jumble of letters. In most instances A.T.O. has, for the first test, decoded some ten or twelve letters of the enciphered passage, because this has appeared to A.T.O. to be sufficient for judgment of the outcome. B.M. has preferred to decode a rather longer string, in case there might have been an error in Thouless's encipherment.

A.T.O. received a communication through Marie Cherrie in February 1986 in which it was said that trying to remember the code is like trying to remember something you did in a dream.

In September 1987, T., an elderly medium who was one of the three A.T.O. originally asked about working on this project, produced a wide variety of quotations, but sandwiched into the discourse a suggestion that we should drop the whole project. This point was not followed up at that sitting, but A.T.O. asked about it at a sitting with Marie Cherrie in October. The outcome of that discussion with the communicator suggestive of Thouless was that he seemed to be getting further and further from his memories of his life on earth and felt it was increasingly unlikely that he would be able to remember the keys. At earlier sittings the same communicator had in general been hopeful of succeeding at some stage.

We must assume that all the many quotations that have been received have originated from unknown sources, possibly including the unconscious of the medium, the sitter, or what have been referred to as 'false communicators'. That obviously calls in question the reliability of everything else that has been said in these sessions, even including the suggestion to drop the project.

The reference to a similarity with trying to remember something in a dream can be compared with similar references to the dream-like nature of memories of earth life described, for example, in Paul Beard's book *The Barbanell Report* (Beard, 1987, p. 28, p. 165), but Marie Cherrie was also the medium for Paul Beard's sittings from which his book derived. In this connection we think it worth mentioning that 'G.P.', a communicator through Mrs. Piper, who gave as good evidence of his identity as perhaps any communicator has ever done, referred to his confusion and forgetfulness in the discarnate state and said in one sitting that he felt 'shut up in his [discarnate] body dreaming as it were and trying to help Science' (Hodgson, 1898, p. 363).

A.T.O. feels that there is strength in private evidence received from some of the communicators in other sessions in this same series of sittings and that the communications purporting to come from Thouless do not appear to differ in their general form from those others. It is possible that there is a tendency in most such sittings for incomplete concepts genuinely received to be rounded off or completed on a seemingly plausible basis by some part of the total mechanism that is involved. This may be a safer conjecture than that of 'false communicators' which carries an implication of deliberate deception.

We can also conjecture that one or other of the keys was received and not recognized, or received and wrongly checked, perhaps by reason of a wrong starting point in the case of a passage of text. Subject to this, the present conclusion must be that the keys have not yet been received. A.T.O. has not now

had a session with the communicator suggestive of Thouless since November 1988, but he intends to seek such sessions from time to time.<sup>8</sup>

#### COMMENT

In view of these negative results, it may seem idle to conjecture about factors that could have contributed to failure. Still, in an effort to use every scrap of information that might lead to positive results with other persons willing to participate in such tests, we will put into the record two possibly relevant personal observations, one concerning Pratt and one concerning Thouless.

As mentioned, Pratt selected random numbers first and derived a mnemonic from them. In this he ignored the advice that one of us (I.S.) had given him, which was to choose first some word or phrase that was significant and likely to be memorable to him, and from that derive the numbers for resetting the combination. During and after a relatively mild illness Pratt passed through a period when he thought that he had forgotten his mnemonic. In fact, he had not forgotten the mnemonic but had forgotten the instructions about how to dial the combination correctly in order to open the lock. However, the mere fact that he had doubts about remembering his mnemonic raises the question of whether it is not better for a person using the combination lock test to start with a meaningful mnemonic that he will be more likely to remember than to devise one that is artificially contrived from a set of randomly selected numbers.<sup>9</sup> Any transition at death must, to put it mildly, be much more extensive than the mental changes that accompany a minor illness. Can we not conjecture that, if we survive death, memory will depend as much on meaning and emotion after death as we know it does before death?

During Robert Thouless's terminal illness, I.S. was in Cambridge and visited him in his home and at the hospital at least once a week. As mentioned, Thouless did not 'drop dead' as Pratt had done; instead, he sank slowly over a period of about six weeks. On one occasion when I.S. went to see him in the hospital Thouless's first words to I.S. (whom he recognized) were: 'I do not think I can carry out my program.' This remark took I.S. so much by surprise that at first he did not know to what Thouless was referring. He soon realized, however, that Thouless was talking about his plan to communicate his key words after his death. During his last illness he was intermittently delirious and, in his more lucid moments, he evidently began to doubt whether he would remember his key words if he survived death.

<sup>8</sup> In February 1988, a close friend of Thouless entered this arena, from Australia, and after meeting A.T.O. he had a sitting with Marie Cherrie. He has very kindly given A.T.O. a typescript of that sitting and the outcome raises fresh hope for a possible solution to the tests. In the opinion of A.T.O. this, the friend's first private sitting with a medium, shows more promise than any of A.T.O.'s many sessions that have seemed to include communications from Thouless. It looks as if this sitter's closer association with Thouless may be the critical factor. He hopes to be in the U.K. from time to time and to have further sittings with a view to obtaining the keys.

<sup>9</sup> Against I.S.'s view of this matter Pratt and Thouless both argued, not unreasonably, that when a person starts with a word or phrase that is especially meaningful to him, the selected mnemonic and its significance for him may be known to his friends and even more widely. Other persons might successfully infer what the chosen mnemonic was. This would tend to vitiate the rule that the key words, lock combination, and mnemonic must be strictly private to the participating person.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the disappointing results we have had to report, these tests are not necessarily concluded. We would be glad to receive and consider for testing further submissions that readers of this report, or other persons, may send to us. However, we think we should add the following comments, which may be taken as stipulations.

Simple guesses, such as 'Maybe the word is "Eureka"', appear to have so little chance of being right that we may not consider them worth testing. More useful would be ostensible communications, whether in dreams, through mediums, or coming otherwise, in which the communicator *both* establishes his identity *and* gives a message indicating that particular words, phrases, or numbers (which he communicates) refer to the test (enciphered message or lock) he left behind. Anyone making a submission of this type can be sure that we will take him seriously, and we only ask that, in addition, the respondent be ready to tell us full details about how the communication was received.

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