

Is There an Afterlife? by David Fontana. O Books, 2005. 496 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 1-903-81690-4.

Discussion of an afterlife is by no means new. Indeed the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research in London in 1883 was connected with the topic and led to publications which have not been surpassed in degree of detail. Several previous publications may be mentioned. F. W. H. Myers, the most prominent of the Edward Gurney, Frederic Myers, and Frank Podmore team, came through via mediums some 28 years after his death and described the afterlife in some detail. Robert Crookall, who spent most of his career in geology, abandoned this in his fifties and spent the rest of his life examining what had come through from mediums who were alleged to be carrying descriptions from dead people. Emanuel Swedenborg, a most remarkable savant and polymath, worked for the Swedish government as a metallurgist but was also a scientist and inventor. Later in life he became a medium and author of works on the afterlife.

Two more recent books must be mentioned because they are directly in competition with this new book. One is by Alan Gauld (*Mediumship and Survival*, 1983; 287 pp.). This book is noteworthy for the high academic standard of the author. Then more recently is a book by Stephen Braude entitled *Immortal Remains* (328 pp.). This book projects a high standard but in view of the detail given in Fontana's book (467 pp.) must be regarded as the junior of the two leaders, Fontana and Braude.

Chapter 1 of *Is There an Afterlife?* focuses on the question of what remains unknown after all the investigations and books and articles. Thus, all the world's religions involve the assumption that there is indeed an afterlife to help the preparation for which is their main purpose. Historically, the first evidence of immortality came about 50,000 years ago. Remains were found carbon dated containing decayed bodies which were accompanied by indications that the original possessor of the bodies, though clearly no longer with them, would return: flowers, food, etc., were left to greet the returner. For the next 48,000 years until the end of the 19th Century, such (and other) indications of an afterlife were found until the spread of materialistic ideas associated with the growth of science.

In parallel with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there runs a less discussed account associated with those who call themselves Shamans. Another line of practice on the afterlife is mysticism, an unfortunate word because it is easily confused with mystery. Studies of immortality were active in mediaeval times (Thomas Aquinas, Saint Teresa of Avila). In modern times the Alistair Hardy Research Unit exists at the University of Wales, and there are the extensive recent studies by George Meek, an electrical engineer.

Religious statements concerning an afterlife have been met with increasing repudiation during the 20th Century corresponding to the growth of a materialistic science, and indeed some theologians began to deny the reality of what lies in the Bible to cast them as legends, thus stifling the historical

contributions to a knowledge of the afterlife. Indeed, at the moment, those who admit the reality of the topic, within the universities, are believed to be either insane or deluded by some form of fraud.

Dr. Fontana brings the reader, in Chapter 3, to modern Parapsychology. He touches on spiritual healing in which many examples are given. Healing occurs suddenly in a way not possible to interpret in terms of the modern scientific viewpoint. Thus, those who carry out psychic healing are often people of little general education and maintain they are vessels of possessing entities.

To get away from the Gurney and Myers theory that apparitions are the results of telepathy between the sender and receiver, collective sightings involving several people having a different perspective of the ghost are broadly exemplified. Apparitions which give verifiable information are powerful evidence for survival.

"Super ESP" as an explanation for verifiable messages and descriptions coming through mediums allegedly from an afterlife is discussed in some detail beginning on page 81. The medium has obtained the hidden information not from an entity already dead but from the telepathic contact of the medium with other living beings who contain the intimate information.

The evidence against this hypothesis requires a detailed study of each case. A powerful defense against the ESP theory is the drop-in communicator. Thus, when the medium in trance is giving answers to questions from sitters, as alleged contact with the dead loved ones, there sometimes intrudes an unrecognized voice, whose possessor describes himself as unknown to sitters and to the medium. He answers questions. But in such cases, when the medium does not know where to find information by means of telepathy, not knowing the drop-in, she would have no idea where to seek the information from his friends.

Apparitions are met in hauntings, i.e., ghosts who are observable at a certain place and time connected with an emotional event which assailed the communicator when he was alive. Perhaps he had to fight in the Civil War under difficult circumstances—a foggy road, overwhelmed by the enemy, etc. The circumstances may give rise to a repetition of the scene year after year, some cases into centuries.

Poltergeists are vividly described. They involve in particular the transfer across the room of some heavy objects which often travel horizontally and slowly, and may in some cases stop over the heads of people in their paths and appear to drop down upon them. However, at the last moment the objects stop and avoid inflicting any harm. There are an unusually rich number of cases given in a field difficult to subject academically.

The principal source of evidence for survival comes from the mediumistic phenomena. A medium, usually in a trance state, seems controlled by a director who, at the request of a sitter, then says that she will find the communicator concerned and try to bring him to speak. When she is successful, the voice produced is judged by those present to be that of the relevant person when alive.

"Super ESP" has been the major reason allowing scientists to reject the evidence for survival from mediums, but there is another problem: in some cases when a medium's power seems to wane and she is discovered to be cheating, the credibility of the phenomenon receives a great blow.

The presentation of mediumship covers Chapters 5–13 and is the essence of the book. It consists of one of the more detailed accounts of mediumistic phenomena yet written down. The beginning of this mammoth account deals with the work of three of the greatest mediums on record, Mrs. Piper (1859–1950), Mrs. Leonard (1892–1960), and Mrs. Eileen Garret (1893–1970). There is no doubt that the veridicality and extent of the information delivered by these women in trance is more impressive than any other in the literature.

Mrs. Piper's work is outstanding because her material was given at a time when investigations of mediums' messages were particularly intense. Mrs. Piper herself was examined by Myers and by Oliver Lodge, two of the greatest pioneers of the wave of communicators who spoke around 1900.

Mrs. Leonard experienced psychic power in her childhood: she worked in collaboration with a control, Fedá. Book tests are used for the first time. A voice from the medium tells the sitter to look in the bookcase in his drawing room, third drawer down, fourth book from the left-hand side and there he will find, etc., etc. Several of these tests worked out satisfactorily and it is difficult to interpret them in any other way than that they came from an individual whose life involved the books, etc., and who has now passed away.

Mrs. Eileen Garret is most well known for being the medium through which the captain of the ill-fated British airship R101, Carmichael Irwin, spoke. Shortly after the famous accident, the captain broke into some other work which Mrs. Garret was doing and gave a remarkable statement about the state of the airship after it had left its mooring and whilst it crossed the channel into France before it ran into a low hill and caught fire killing all on board, except four people. The Eileen Garret–Lieutenant Carmichael Irwin work is a strong factor in favor of afterlife.

The Cross Correspondence is another interesting piece of the case for survival and in fact it is not fully mined out though it has occupied many volumes of the *Journal of Psychical Research*. Thus, in 1906 some messages began to come through in certain mediums and they were found to be connected in subject matter. They generally involved Greek legends and poetry (Myers was a professor of Greek at Cambridge University) and the material brought through from one medium formed a continuity with the material obtained from another, although the first medium might have been in India, the second in the United Kingdom, and the third in the United States. Extremely difficult to explain in any way but they were all reacting to the same entity who had been alive and knew the Greek material, relating it after he has died. Correspondingly the material about Patience Worth (pp. 161–164) is fascinating. Here is great material often constituting several books and all of it unknown to the medium. Remarkable is the excellent English and the skill in the poetry writing. From where did it come?

A surprising aspect of the behavior of the elements expressing themselves through mediums is the matter of playful deceit. In an example, the spirit leads the investigator to a remote church which he alleges is the church at which he lies buried. All clues which he gives lead to a certain remote church and its chapel but it turns out that there is no grave there. Psychic laughter!

By Chapter 10, Professor Fontana has addressed the most important subject of testing of mediums' statements for their reality. Thus, critics have reasonably suggested that some mediums' statements are too trivial or too general to be taken as evidence for survival. They are not contentful in a way which makes a sitter take notice. "But that is just how Uncle Ben talked." A number of techniques for testing the reality of mediums' statements are given. Thus, if there are 12 sitters and No. 8 asks a question about Uncle Ben's will, the answers that the medium gives can be examined by each of the 12 but is found to be not specific and relevant except to No. 8's question.

Independent voice phenomena are presented in the book in depth and in numbers not before seen by this reviewer. For example, the Detroit Etta Wried produced voices who spoke in various European languages, duly checked out by people whose native language was that being spoken by the medium, although Wried herself did not have any knowledge of these foreign tongues. There are convincing oddities. A soldier claiming to have been killed in WWI speaks a peculiar type of German, and this is suspicious at first, but when he says what part of Germany he comes from, it turns out exactly that his type of German was that spoken in this place.

Some mediums produce materialized people who are known to have died. They speak and converse with the sitters. They are "made" in a cubicle on stage. Witnesses can be invited into the cubicle and report that the first sign of a new being is materialization from the floor of a vaporous figure, growing up to the normal-sized being. This growth happens in front of the sitters. The materialized being may stay around for as much as half an hour. It is possible to touch the materialized figures, hold their hands, and feel the warmth as though they were completely normal beings.

Sitters frequently recognize the materialized figure. "It's my daughter, Rosa." When the dead person has been known to the sitters as a child, materialization, say, 10 years later shows the appropriate degree of development. Of course, materializations are associated with the presence of a medium, and it is most interesting to see how the phenomenon exhausts the medium who often, after a successful sitting, cannot regain ability to materialize figures for a week, due to exhaustion.

The remarkable case of Helen Duncan is considered in detail. She was the last person to be dealt with by laws connected with witchcraft, repealed in 1951 at the urging of Winston Churchill among others.

Another series of phenomena contradicts any person who thinks spiritual manifestations are things of the past. I refer to the stunning phenomena described from the goings on at Scoble, a small town in Norfolk in the United

Kingdom. David Fontana was one of the members of the Scole team and gives an impressive account of the remarkable happenings occurring in modern times. Thus described, the Scole investigations are the most extensive psychical investigations of recent years. The phenomena at Scole begin with the so-called "spirit lights" often seen at seances. When one of the lights entered the water Fontana was drinking to cure a cough, the cough improved at once. Passage of the lights is a peculiar interest, particularly when they enter one of the sitters and can be seen glowing inside his chest. Extremely interesting were effects tantamount to the dematerialization of a crystal when the light entered it. Apports are found at Scole and a request for payments brings "half a crown" clanking down on the floor following the request. A copy of the *Daily Mail* of April 1, 1944, seems to appear during the happenings. It is interesting to note that the *Daily Mail* which seemed to have been materialized contains an account of the Helen Duncan trial. Rachmaninoff's music was found also as well as some poems in German.

Darkness? Of course the most frequent objection to mediums and their statements is that they usually work in the dark, particularly in respect to the materializations. One has a suspicion that this darkness may cover things which the medium does not want the sitters to see. One way to get around this would seem to be the use of infrared viewers, but these have been rejected by many of the people concerned, even in the present day phenomena in Scole.

Hands are frequently materialized. Voices are heard coming from just in front of the face of a new investigator. For example, frequently the hands of investigators are shaken by the spirit hand.

There is then a chapter on the receipt of messages from spirit entities through radio or other electronic means. Much more of this work goes on in Europe than here; in particular, Maggie Fischback, a citizen of Luxemburg, presents the view of "Technician," an entity who has never experienced incarnation. He has much to say which is of direct interest to our striving interests in the world to where we shall be going.

Another step which is coming along is TV images of the dead. As far as the method goes: simply gazing at the screen whilst the electronics have been placed on a space without a program is effective. In the presentation of this material the author brings forth a pastoral scene representing perhaps some aspect of the next world.

The author describes the various planes in the afterlife, and these are more or less as described originally by Myers many years ago and again by George Meek in recent times.

Fontana's book is the most detailed in the field. It makes it difficult for those who study and understand this material to avoid the conclusion—the very counterintuitive conclusion—after the crematorium, e.g., Mom—is yes—still in Being in spite of the fact that the shell we cuddled and loved has succumbed to chemical oxidation.

But, then, that is where Fontana's book and all the other books on survival stop. They do not try to answer those questions which we want to ask because the

answers are still beyond our comprehension with the limiting laws which present science has put up. We cannot begin to answer even the question of the form in which we shall find ourselves. Astral bodies? But bodies with characteristics so different from anything we know (they can begin as vapor, solidify, exist—yet fade away again.) Eat? Of course not. Energy is a pretty basic idea we have but it does not seem to play much part in the afterlife. But one does hear about sleeping, so there may be some relation to our own concepts and experience.

When we read a book like Fontana's, we tend to put it down, finally, with an "Ah! Hmm . . ." We have at present no idea at all as to how we can fit such a gigantic change into our thinking within present science. But make no mistake, belief in an afterlife to be lived by some version of our present selves, with our memories and personal trends, is a realization of what, for 100 years, the "educated" among us have regarded as illusions. I suppose one has to admit that the conclusion so well (scientifically) argued by Gould, by Braude, and now by Fontana gives considerable support for that basic content of all the religions, for their basic concept is that the body is a carrier and that something called a "Soul" lives on.

But all this is *so* different, *so* inconsistent with the models in biology—indeed in physics itself—we had better take a hard look and ask, once more, do we have to accept the model which contradicts all we have known since the mid 19th Century and humbly agree that it has been a fine trip to freedom but wrong?

Well, yes, there is perhaps a chink of light which might allow us to maintain the scientist's position. I refer to the possible existence of "super ESP," and this is well dealt with by Fontana. Briefly, we find that mediums' utterances sometimes come from living people. It is supposed that, in such cases, the medium's ability is less than her power to contact the dead but rather telepathically to enter the minds of living people. It is there—so the alternative theory goes—that mediums find the answers to questions sitters put to communicators. If Jack calls Jill a special loving name in private, it is quite possible Jill told her sister the loving name—and Jill's sister is still alive—so, without assuming astral bodies which can avoid the crematorium and carry with them all the memories of the last life, one has to accept telepathy with the living and, in principle, the mystery of "communication with the dead" is solved.

Or is it? One has to think. Telepathy has been long established but it is not a switch-on thing under control. If Jack thinks of Jill, he still has to use a mechanical telephone and wires to talk to her, albeit that sometimes, unexpectedly, he gets a telephone call from her, just after he had been thinking about her. But telepathy is not, or not yet, a controllable switch on means of communication. Further, were it so, the medium who answers all the sitter's questions ostensibly because she harbors the temporary presence—or contact with—a deceased in astral body would have to know instantly who telepathically to call up (if she could do that at all) and get answers without pause. Further, she has to be able to do it dozens of times in a single interaction with extremely fast speed of response.

Then there are the direct voice phenomena. The sitter is confronted with his dead father's voice, emanating from what seems to be a space of 12 inches away and 3 inches below him. And the father speaks in the sitter's little used native language, Welsh. The medium would have to find the associates of the father, generally learn to pronounce the Welsh words which he is getting by telepathy from those who knew the father when he was alive, and find some ventriloquistic way of projecting the sound 12 inches in front and 3 inches below the level of the sitter's face.

But there is a coup de grace for the "super ESP" theory: The Drop-in Communicator. He just turns up in the medium's communications. Let us say it is Mrs. Eileen Garret telling us what Lieutenant Carmichael Irwin said about the low lifting power of the R101, and in the middle of the session an unknown person interjects and says he used to be an ambulance worker in Baghdad but was killed in an explosion in the city. (He goes on to tell us when and where and etc.) So, now the "super ESP" case is very difficult. The medium knew Lieutenant Irwin but is ignorant of the ambulance driver and who he is. And how would she know where to find the people who saw him being killed yet are able to know his thoughts up to the last minute and communicate it all to an entranced lady in Boston (in Arabic)?

Fontana discusses "super ESP" with complete rejection, and although I appreciate his case, there is no doubt that some mediums *can* access the mind of living people and obtain information from them. So, "super ESP" is a threat to credibility and—as Stephen Braude does in his book—each case of alleged mediumistic communications has to be argued through to make a 99% sure case that we *are* dealing with the dead.

The last three chapters in Fontana's book concern, respectively, Near Death Experiences (NDEs), Out of the Body Experiences (OBEs), and Reincarnation. They really are additions to Fontana's main case, evidence for an afterlife based on information coming from the alleged dead.

But it is important to remember that if we have to meet challenges from an advocate of "super ESP" who seeks to maintain the structure of the present science—no afterlife—one is tempted to forgo the toil of building up a New Science, taking into account the medium's message. Then one can obtain support for the new view from the rather rare experiments on OBEs in which sensitives can obtain information whilst asleep from a place outside their reach. The NDEs, too, help because there are now so many of them and they are fairly internally consistent (although I would much like to find papers on NDEs from cultures far from the modern Western ones, e.g., from the Australian aborigines or from the Eskimos, for most of NDE evidence is from white, Anglo-Americans). As to reincarnation, the monumental work of Professor Ian Stevenson provides an impressive case for survival, independently of the rest.

So, I think we can say that Fontana's book writes a final and (99%) conclusive case for a positive answer to the book's title. Now, one has to see how many

people read it—and perhaps ask Dr. Fontana to produce a popular version, not more than 200 pages in length, less detailed.

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Meta Math!: The Quest for Omega by Gregory Chaitin. Pantheon Books, 2005. 240 pp. \$26.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0-375-42313-3.

This is the latest (number 9) of Gregory Chaitin's books on algorithmic information theory (AIT) and its implications for and his thoughts on the meaning of randomness. Chaitin writes in a refreshing way, with lots of first person, and does not hesitate to add autobiographical supporting context. One could therefore assert that these books are "non-technical" accounts of his work. I am not so sure. When I first (long ago) met pure mathematics, beginning with a course out of Landau's *Foundations of Analysis*¹ (with its precise German script), I marveled at the precision of set theory, issues of axiom of choice needed or not, the competing ways to describe completeness of the real number system, all that. Here was a way to get rid of the fuzziness of engineering parlance and the jumping to conclusions of physicists, which had been my previous experience. Only much later does one realize the practical limitations of the axiomatic method. Therefore, to really explain mathematics, it is then better to put it in first person, and even autobiographical, context. You can publish your technical papers in pure technicalese and with as much rigor as you can muster, or wish to muster. But the overall or final accounts should be in human context. Chaitin appears to be a romanticist who believes in his mission: that most of mathematics as we know it is true by accident. The axiomatic method touches only a tiny fraction (I don't mean here: a rational number) of mathematical truth. Therefore we should be more like physicists, allow more intuition into our mathematical lives. As Chaitin states on page 115, "Why should I believe in a real number if I can't calculate it, if I can't prove what its bits are, and if I can't even refer to it? And each of these things happens with probability one!"

When I first received a precopy of this book to review, I started writing down some notes, also on related matters, and soon the scope grew into an examination of the whole philosophy of science, with subchapters on the various notions of complexity, randomness from the AIT as compared to meaningful randomness in quantum mechanics, a chapter on exactly where Chaitin's views place him within the various religions of mathematical logicians, how his