

BOOK REVIEW

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Is There Life After Death? An Examination of the Empirical Evidence, by David Lester. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005, 256 pp., \$39.95 pb (ISBN 0-7864-2116-9).

The words psychology and psychiatry mean respectively science and medicine of mind. So the study of the mind-body relationship, the source of consciousness and whether it survives bodily death, could be one of psychology's and psychiatry's greatest enterprises. Unfortunately, these scientific disciplines have understudied these topics. Usually, even considering the possibility of a source of consciousness outside the brain or its survival after death is considered heretical and raises doubts about one's scientific credibility. However, the question of whether the personality survives after death is one of the most important ones a scientist can pose.

Since ancient times, most religions and philosophies have tried to solve, or at least to discuss, that subject. In the last 150 years many scientists and scholars have tried using scientific tools to answer this burning question (Alvarado, 2003). Studies in these fields developed by some of the most important names in psychology and medicine, such as William James, Hans Eysenck, Carl Jung, and Charles Richet,

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were not enough to overcome the prejudice, and usually these investigations remained largely unknown by contemporary scientists.

Therefore, it is particularly admirable that a highly competent scientist and psychologist like David Lester has decided to write an entire book to examine the empirical evidence bearing on the old question: Does life after death really exist? Have scientists produced any evidence for or against it? Lester has a doctorate in psychology and another in social sciences, and has spent decades working on suicide prevention. A Professor of Psychology at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey since 1971, he has published dozens of books and hundreds of scholarly articles on death and dying. Lester assumes a skeptical, but humble and respectful, stance toward the studies and scientists who considered the survival hypothesis. This posture is both a scientific and admirable one, but rare among skeptics.

This readable book presents a vast bibliography and describes the results of the studies reviewed in an objective and fair way. The book is divided into five parts: (1) "Views on Life After Death," presenting some religious views and the profile of believers; (2) "Near-Death Experiences," a comprehensive review of the near-death experience (NDE), which comprises one-third of the book; (3) "Reincarnation"; (4) "Other Phenomena," including apparitions of the dead, hallucinations in widowhood, deathbed visions, possession, mediums, and poltergeists; and (5) "Conclusions."

The last page of this book concludes that "the research reviewed in this book fails to be convincing that there is life after death" (p. 214). However, some selection biases and epistemological theses present in the book weaken this conclusion's generalization. I will present a brief discussion about these two shortcomings, because they are very prevalent but remain usually unrecognized in discussions about survival research.

First, regarding selection bias, a comprehensive and unbiased search for studies is essential in any review work. A selection bias occurs when there is a systematic error in how studies are selected for inclusion (Cochrane Collaboration, 2001). Lester writes that his review was restricted to studies published in "reputable scholarly journals" (p. 6) in "the last thirty years. If the phenomena exist, there must be recent examples" (p. 4). The reasons given for narrowing the time range covered were that the earlier researchers "were not skilled in designing tests for the validity of the cases or in ruling out fraud" (p. 4), and "The investigators at the time were believers, and they made no effort to rule out fraud" (p. 198).

The major problem in using only recent studies, however, is that

the most fruitful period of the survival research was before 30 years ago, so most studies relevant to the subject are excluded. Excluded are not only the best and the most interesting studies performed by the Societies for Psychical Research (British and American branch, which carried out the largest scientific effort ever done to investigate the survival after death), but also many classic studies from the non-English speaking world, such as those conducted by Ernesto Bozzano, Alexander Aksakof, Cesare Lombroso, Gabriel Delane, and Charles Richet.

With few exceptions and for several reasons, survival research declined sharply after the 1930s. Dismissing hundreds of studies based on their age, without evaluating their quality separately, is questionable, considering that some eminent scientists regarded some of these old studies as high in quality. For instance, Eysenck, considered by some as one of the most influential psychologists of the last century, the man who made the study of personality a rigorous science, and the founder of a science-based clinical psychology (Farley, 2000), stated that the evidence available regarding the survival question (including the old studies) “is capable of scientific *consideration* and is of very high quality” (Eysenck and Sargent, 1993, p. 151).

Stating that the old investigators were believers who did not have good research skills and made no effort to rule out fraud is also questionable. First, the Societies for Psychical Research have never held any corporate views and never reached any official position regarding the survival question. Many of their researchers were *not* believers and some of them were skeptics in the beginning and changed their minds during the studies, such as William Crookes, Lombroso, Richard Hodgson, and Frederic Myers. These early studies of quality also tried to rule out fraud. Hodgson was considered an expert in unmasking fraud; his strength was hostile and aggressive debunking. In studying the medium Leonora Piper, he introduced sitters anonymously or pseudonymously, used proxy sitters, made complete word-for-word records of séances, and took signed testimony from the participants. Hodgson even hired detectives to follow Piper. Society for Psychical Research investigators also took her to England, where she knew no one and was kept under strict surveillance and had her baggage checked (Eysenck and Sargent, 1993; Gauld, 1982).

In selecting only published studies, mainly in controversial areas, one is subject to another kind of selection bias: publication bias, in which the publication of research depends on the nature and direction of the study results. In good systematic reviews it is a standard procedure to look for unpublished studies, because they may have

different results from the published ones (Cochrane Collaborators, 2001). Because the mainstream scientific journals and even the parapsychological publications in some degree have been quite hostile to the survival hypothesis, we can reasonably expect that they will tend to avoid publishing papers on this subject and/or have a bias toward the publication of negative reports.

Stating that “if the phenomena exist, there must be recent examples” (p. 4) is also problematic. There are many contemporary examples of the experiences discussed in the book; however, today there may not be enough scientists interested in, and with the time and support to investigate, these phenomena. As the survival hypothesis is outside the currently accepted scientific paradigm, the large majority of mainstream scientists simply do not note these examples. It is usually very hard for someone to perceive something outside his or her accepted paradigm. As Thomas Kuhn asked:

Can it conceivably be an accident, for example, that Western astronomers first saw change in the previously immutable heavens during the half-century after Copernicus' new paradigm was proposed? The Chinese, whose cosmological beliefs did not preclude celestial change, had recorded the appearance of many new stars in the heaven at a much earlier date. (Kuhn, 1970, p. 116)

Probably because of the selection criteria adopted and the particular interest of the author, the experience discussed most thoroughly in the book was the NDE. In spite of NDEs being in recent years the most studied of the experiences included in this book, they are usually considered the least evidential ones regarding the survival question. Also lacking are three of the most recent and important review books on life after death, written by Robert Almeder (1992), Stephen Braude (2003), and Alan Gauld (1982). In summary, these selection biases may strongly influence the conclusions because they lead to the rejection of the large majority of the empirical evidence available and to focus on less evidential studies.

Second, regarding epistemological posture, it is also frequent in this field to assume certain epistemological theses that are unwarranted and not defensible according to the contemporary philosophy of science. The first assumption is that old studies are not reliable. If we rejected all experiments in physics and biology performed before 1975, almost all foundations of these sciences would be removed. The history of science contains plenty of examples of good studies that were at first ignored but later rediscovered and valued many years later. Gregor Mendel, the “father of modern genetics,” presented his seminal

paper in 1865, but it was ignored or dismissed at that time, and only in 1900 did Mendel's work receive the recognition it deserved.

The second assumption is the dismissal of qualitative data and the overemphasis on statistical analysis and quantitative data: "Convincing research that can be reproduced requires large samples of subjects, accurate measurements, and statistical analysis of the data" (p. 92). While I do not deny the crucial importance of quantitative research, the evidence for life after death provided by mediumship, NDEs, or reincarnation-type cases are usually qualitative in nature. One of the most important contemporary scientific paradigms, natural selection, emerged from qualitative studies performed by Charles Darwin. According to Alan Chalmers, people holding the idea that "if you cannot measure, your knowledge is meagre and unsatisfactory" fail to "realize that the method that they endeavor to follow is not only necessarily barren and unfruitful but also is not the method to which the success of physics is to be attributed" (Chalmers, 1978, p. xiv).

Many researchers seem to wait for the "crucial experiment," the definitive proof beyond any doubt that could not be explained in any other way. However, such definitive proof does not exist in any science (Chalmers, 1978; Popper, 1963). Most scientific experimental results can be explained in more than one way. It is not reasonable to dismiss studies and evidence because they are not perfect. In any science, the best we can do is to accumulate good, but not perfect, evidence in favor of some hypothesis and to test whether this hypothesis can resist falsification. Following Karl Popper (1963), the question of survival could be put in a different way: Is there evidence that falsifies the hypothesis that consciousness is generated by the brain and disappears with physical death?

There is also a trend to minimize the importance of studies conducted by investigators who are open to the survival hypothesis: "Unless researchers into these phenomena get skeptics ... to participate in their research design, they are not going to convince skeptics that the phenomena are real" (p. 204).

Chalmers regarded as inappropriate the focus on the beliefs of individuals for understanding science:

We are barely in a position to know much about the degree of belief a scientist has in the theory on which he or she works, nor do we need to know if we are concerned to characterize and evaluate the scientific character of that work

My characterization and evaluation ... stand or fall on consid-

erations of claims made, arguments offered and experiments performed rather than on considerations concerning the beliefs of the scientists involved. (Chalmers, 1990, p. 89)

Furthermore, convincing all skeptics may not be a feasible task. The history of science has shown that scientific revolutions did not triumph because the new paradigm was able to convert all skeptics and leaders of the opposition. Many skeptics were not persuaded even after taking a look through Galileo's telescope or Louis Pasteur's microscope:

The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced. Lifelong resistance, particularly from those whose productive careers have committed them to an older tradition of normal science, is ... an index to the nature of scientific research itself. The source of resistance is the assurance that the older paradigm will ultimately solve all its problems ...

... [A] generation is sometimes required to effect the change ... Though some scientists, particularly the older and more experienced ones, may resist indefinitely, most of them can be reached in one way or another. Conversions will occur a few at a time until, after the last holdouts have died, the whole profession will again be practicing under a single, but now a different, paradigm. (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 151–152)

Finally, I propose two more general considerations. The importance of fraud is often overemphasized, as is the importance of transcultural differences. Even when the investigators assessed fraud in a meticulous manner and there was no reason to suppose it, fraud is still considered as a possible explanation: "The existence of fraud in some cases, of course, raises doubts about all cases ... Perhaps the cover up is better in these apparently authentic cases" (p. 108). This is an unfalsifiable assertion and there are no fields of human activity that have not seen several examples of fraud. Last year, *Science*, one of the world's most prestigious scientific journals, published stem cell research that was later unmasked as fraudulent (Kennedy, 2006). Skeptical organizations also have been the target of several claims of unscientific procedures (Keen, 2003; Leiter, 2002). It does not follow that we should raise doubts about all scientific reports. Of course we need to keep in mind this possibility, but, as Eysenck and Carl Sargent wrote about parapsychological research:

we are faced with an abundance and quality of testimony which cannot be ignored. At some point we have to trust human testimony. After all, even scientific reports are the output of recording devices (of whatever kind) *as viewed by human eyes*. (Eysenck and Sargent, 1993, p. 28)

Second, there is an assumption that if the phenomena are real they cannot have transcultural variations: “If near-death experiences are evidence for life after death, they should be the same in every culture” (p. 96); and “If reincarnation really occurs, then there should be no cultural variations at all” (p. 153). If we adopt these criteria in psychiatry, there would be no “real” mental disorders, because all of them have a large transcultural variation in their manifestation and even in their clinical course. Any human experience will be perceived and reported differently among different cultures.

Three of the most relevant phenomena presented in this book are NDEs, reincarnation, and mediumship. The most substantial part of the book discusses NDEs, and contains a comprehensive review that embraces the most relevant studies. There is a good description of NDEs and of explanations that have been proposed in the literature. Unfortunately, it does not include two recent review papers precisely on the relevance of NDEs to survival and to the understanding of consciousness, published by some of the most important authors in the field: Sam Parnia and Peter Fenwick (2002) and Pim van Lommel (2004). Both papers argue against the brain-mind identity hypothesis. The book also ignores Michael Sabom’s report of an NDE with verified observations occurring during a brain surgery and with a flat electroencephalogram (EEG) (Sabom, 1998).

One of the most important and burning questions about NDEs received only one mention in a short paragraph (p. 95): namely, how patients could be clearly conscious and aware of their surroundings during a cardiac arrest while their brains were not functional due to anoxia.

Even though Lester recognizes the high quality of the prospective studies on NDEs (Greyson, 2003; Parnia, 2001; van Lommel, 2001), there is little discussion about some of the principal conclusions of these authors:

Our results show that medical factors cannot account for occurrence of NDE Psychological factors are unlikely to be important as fear was not associated with NDE

... It is remarkable that people could recall their NDE almost exactly after 2 and 8 years. (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001, p. 2043)

[T]hese findings did not provide any support for physiological models of the etiology of near-death experiences. (Greyson, 2003, p. 274)

There appeared to be no differences on all physiological measured parameters apart from partial pressure of oxygen during the arrest which was higher in the NDE group. (Parnia, Waller, Yeates, and Fenwick, 2001, p. 149)

Lester offers an in-depth criticism of excessively speculative physiological and psychological explanations for NDE. He also proposes several useful guidelines for future good studies in NDE: use of reliable and valid measurements before and just after the NDE; interviews of consecutive or randomly selected patients who have had NDEs in some hospital setting; use of large samples, including a control group and comparison of the elements reported using sound statistical techniques; uniform samples, from one type of source; avoidance of leading questions; and medical experts assessing the closeness to death. All these proposed guidelines were fulfilled by the three prospective studies described above. It is worth noting that these three rigorous studies were performed by different research groups in different countries and found similar results: around 10 percent incidence of NDEs among cardiac arrest patients, and no or little influence of medication or sociodemographic or psychophysiological variables.

The reincarnation section is the second largest of the book and provides a good overview on cases of children who claim to remember previous lives. However, birthmarks and birth defects, considered by some to be the best evidence for survival, receives only 9 lines in the book (p. 119). Ian Stevenson's latest and most comprehensive work (Stevenson, 1997), containing 2080 pages with detailed studies of more than 230 cases on birthmarks and birth defects from around the world, is not listed in the references. All these cases are dismissed stating that "the presence of the birthmark may have influenced the story the child told of previous incarnation" (p. 119). Undoubtedly, birthmarks may foster fantasies in children's minds about their origin; however, fantasies do not explain the many verifiable statements the children make, the unlearned skills they demonstrate, or the correspondence of birthmarks and birth defects with autopsy records.

In analyzing the cases of xenoglossy, the author writes that the evidence is not convincing because the subjects made occasional grammatical mistakes, mispronounced some words, and did not show a vocabulary of thousands of words in the foreign language. In other words, he would consider a case of xenoglossy to be convincing only if the subject exhibited a complete and perfect fluency in a language without having been previously exposed to it. This is a respectable option. However, it is also a plausible hypothesis that the process of

reincarnation into another body could impair the skill of speaking a language in the same way that it impairs the memories.

Even if one does not consider it as a xenoglossy case, how can one explain a subject with no previous contact with Swedish having passed twice a polygraph test involving questions about whether she had had any previous contact with any Scandinavian language, indicating that she was telling the truth; having a very low score at the Modern Language Aptitude Test indicating that she would have to work hard to acquire command of the language; six native-born Swedish speakers, including a professor of Swedish, testifying to the occurrence of responsive xenoglossy; words pronounced with a Scandinavian and not an American accent; and 60 words introduced into conversation first by the subject, not previously used by interviewers, excluding doubtful words and English cognates (Stevenson, 1974)? Besides some general criticism about the poor quality of studies, this book does not provide a convincing alternative explanation of the most evidential and well conducted reports.

Unfortunately, only six pages are dedicated to mediumship, one of the most, if not the most, relevant experiences to the survival question. Only a few mediumistic cases are reported, most from the investigators Stevenson and Erlendur Haraldsson, who are categorized as not being “sophisticated researchers who know how to detect fraud and verify information accurately” (p. 200).

Some of the best recent investigations on mediumship were not included in the book. These studies adopted some important methodological safeguards that Lester also proposed, such as recording the statements during the sessions, use of controls, and statistical tests. Gary Schwartz (2002) has published several controlled studies to assess the accuracy and replicability of mediumistic communication. Archie Roy and Tricia Robertson (2001) have conducted studies that tested and disproved the skeptical hypothesis that the statements mediums make to recipients are so general as to be accepted by nonrecipients.

In spite of the limitations discussed above, this book is a good review of NDEs and reincarnation. Lester deserves our esteem for keeping a respectful approach toward investigators with whom he disagrees. His book is a good opportunity to raise the crucial debate about the mind-body and the survival questions, as well as to stimulate us to start in-depth studies in these highly exciting and controversial fields.

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