

EVIDENCE AND THE AFTERLIFE

STEVEN D. HALES

Interest in so-called paranormal matters such as out-of-body experiences, reincarnation, spirit mediumship, extra-sensory perception, possession and the like is generally shunted into a dark corner of the profession by mainstream philosophers, and considered part of a misguided, prescientific past. Well-known philosophers, such as William James, C.J. Ducasse, C.D. Broad, Antony Flew, and H.H. Price, who take seriously such matters are regarded as respectable but slightly nutty uncles whose excesses are to be indulged with a wink and a smile.¹ Yes, uncle, that's nice (we hardheaded skeptics say), now let's return to serious business like the pragmatic theory of truth, the nature of perception, or the justification of morality.

This attitude is a tactical mistake. There are two reasons why this is so. The first is that many non-philosophers are great believers in the paranormal, and if we hope that philosophy is to have a real value outside of the rarefied air of scholarly debate it is important to offer more to the general public than a lofty dismissal of their interests. Of course professional philosophers might offer detailed objections to paranormal views, but to do so is to take these beliefs seriously enough to refute them. The second reason is that scholarly treatments of, say, the evidence for postmortem survival, do so partly in the spirit of providing empirical evidence for traditional philosophical views like Cartesian dualism. As scientific-minded philosophers we should welcome this as an advance over the old a priori-style attempts to establish such theses. The data may be poor or flawed or unpersuasive, but at least it is something empirical that is offered. The opposition is meeting us on our own turf, and it is disingenuous merely to ignore their presence.

What I propose to do in this paper is to take seriously one such paranormal matter, namely the evidence for life after death, or the survival of a human person following the complete organic dissolution of their body. I will argue that even assuming that the best and richest cases offered to support this view are nonfraudulent and not obviously the result of sloppy investigative methodology, that nevertheless on their own they present no reason to believe in postmortem survival. I will also discuss what would be required to justify a belief in life after death.

The best set of arguments for the thesis that some people survive their deaths has been given by Robert Almeder in his recent book *Death and Personal Survival*. Almeder considers several cases of ostensible reincarnation, apparitions of the dead, possession, out-of-body experiences, and spirit mediumship, and argues that the most detailed and best investigated examples of these provide excellent evidence in favor of the view that there is some form of postmortem survival.² Indeed, Almeder argues that the evidence is so strong that upon recognizing it one would be irrational not to believe that there is life after death. This is a very striking claim. For ease of exposition, I will focus on Almeder's treatment of ostensible reincarnation, which he seems to think gives the strongest reasons to accept a belief in the survival of death. My criticisms can be generalized to other paranormal phenomena.

A.J. Ayer and Derek Parfit have independently stated the conditions under which we should believe someone to be the reincarnation of someone else.³ (Putting it this way highlights the recondite problems of personal identity that arise in this context, and indeed it is in considering issues of identity that Ayer and Parfit offer the evidential requirements for reincarnation. However, I will set this personal identity issue aside.) Let us look at the criteria Parfit provides ((Parfit 1984), p. 227): "There might, for example, have been evidence supporting the belief in reincarnation. One such piece of evidence might be this. A Japanese woman might claim to remember living a life as a Celtic hunter and warrior in the Bronze Age. On the basis of her apparent memories she might make many predictions which could be checked by archeologists. Thus she might claim to remember having a bronze bracelet, shaped like two fighting dragons. And she might claim that she remembers burying the bracelet beside some particular megalith, just before the battle in which she was killed. Archeologists might now find just such a bracelet buried in this spot, and

their instruments might show that the earth had not here been disturbed for 2000 years. This Japanese woman might make many other predictions, all of which are verified.”

Parfit appends the conditions that there is no physical continuity between the Celtic warrior and the Japanese woman, and that we discover several other cases like this one. He hastens to add that he believes we have no evidence of this sort required to justify belief in reincarnation ((Parfit 1984), p. 228). Ayer provides similar requirements; if someone had the verified memories one would expect of Julius Caesar that appealed to facts that were not items of public information, then we should conclude that the person is Caesar reincarnated ((Ayer 1956), pp. 193-4). Almeder accepts these criteria, and develops them in greater detail ((Almeder 1992), pp. 3-4).

Just what the satisfaction of these conditions would epistemically show is non-obvious. In ascending order of strength, we might reach the following conclusions:

1. Some evidence has been provided in favor of a belief in reincarnation.
2. It is not irrational or epistemically irresponsible to believe in reincarnation given the evidence.
3. It is irrational or epistemically irresponsible not to believe in reincarnation given the evidence.

If there were such evidence, Parfit thinks it would license at least (1), Ayer seems to think we could conclude (2), and Almeder explicitly endorses (3). I will argue that not even the weakest of these follows. Even if we have cases that satisfy all of the conditions listed, that evidence alone provides no reason at all to believe in reincarnation. Almeder's argument is a simple *modus ponens*. If there is such-and-such evidence, then we should believe in reincarnation; there is such-and-such evidence, therefore we should believe in reincarnation. It is the first premise, the conditional, that I will argue is false. I will not attempt to assess each of the cases Almeder offers in support of the second premise. This would be a heady empirical project beyond the scope of this paper. Assume for the sake of argument that there are cases like that of Parfit's Japanese woman, that there are several of these cases, and that the possibilities of fraud, cryptomnesia, and paramnesia have been rigorously investigated and eliminated as probable. Fraud is always a logical possibility

that can never been wholly discounted, but let us suppose that fraud is unlikely. We need to be careful and not presume that e.g. the Japanese woman knew where the bracelet was buried, or that she remembered burying it, as these are success-verbs that beg the question in favor of postmortem existence. Almeder is not always so careful. More neutrally we can say that she had a true belief about the location of the bracelet, and that she had a quasi-memory of burying it. Thus we leave open the questions of whether her belief is appropriately linked with the truth in a way that makes it knowledge, and whether her apparent memory is a genuine remembrance.

Antony Flew has objected that the evidence for reincarnation is not repeatable under scientifically controlled conditions.⁴ There is no laboratory experiment in which new statements reporting quasi-memories of events that are verifiable and not items of public information could be elicited. The evidence for reincarnation is anecdotal, and could never aspire to the level of scientifically acceptable data. Therefore we are not justified in believing that persons do sometimes reincarnate.

While Almeder's response to this objection is structurally correct, close attention to his reply reveals the epistemic crevasse that yawns beneath the claims of reincarnation. He argues that much scientific evidence is not repeatable in Flew's sense; for example, the evidence for the past existence of dinosaurs ((Almeder 1992), pp. 55-7). Previously undiscovered dinosaur bones cannot be produced at will, or under laboratory conditions. Still, he argues, there is a clear sense in which the evidence for the past existence of dinosaurs is repeatable – the continued discovery of new fossils, footprints, and eggs tends to confirm the belief. So too the continued discovery of cases like that of Parfit's Japanese woman or Ayer's Julius Caesar tends to confirm a belief in reincarnation. The elimination of probable fraud and rigorous evidential standards is of course required for both the dinosaur and the reincarnation evidence.

Unfortunately, the evidence for reincarnation is crucially disanalogous to the evidence for the past existence of dinosaurs. The past existence of dinosaurs is consistent with our best empirical theories about the world, whereas reincarnation is not consistent with either our best empirical theories or with our best philosophical theories about the mind. Antecedent to purported cases of postmortem survival, most contemporary philosophers regard the best theory

about the mind to be some version of materialism. Almeder is explicit that he regards reincarnation and postmortem survival in general to falsify materialism and support some form of Cartesian dualism ((Almeder 1992), p. 34). Thus the analogy to the belief in the past existence of dinosaurs is weak on the face of it.

Alone this difference is not enough to undercut Almeder's thesis. It is when we further recognize that the data for reincarnation is offered with no attendant theory that the problem truly crystallizes. Almeder does not offer even a sketch of a theory that would be able to account for all current data about the mind while also explaining how and by what mechanism human personality could survive bodily death and reincarnate. Moreover, he does not think that such a theory is required for the evidence supporting reincarnation to be compelling ((Almeder 1992), p. 35, cf. p. 129, pp. 260-1). In this he is mistaken. Sir Arthur Eddington once said that "one should never believe any experiment until it is confirmed by theory."⁵ While partly tongue-in-cheek, there is an undercurrent of truth in Eddington's remark that deserves exploration.

On the one hand we obviously do not want to summarily dismiss empirical data on the grounds that it does not square with accepted theory. This would prevent us from ever rejecting faulty theories and replacing them with better ones. On the other hand, it would be an equal error blindly to venerate data over theory, and it is this mistake to which Eddington points. Suppose one were to argue in the following way. If we are justified in believing theory T (e.g., materialism about the mind), and we know that T implies not-p (e.g. that there are no reincarnating Cartesian egos), then we are justified in believing not-p. Add to this, à la Almeder, that we are not justified in believing not-p, on the grounds that there is evidence in favor of reincarnation. Therefore, by *modus tollens*, we are not justified in believing that theory T is true.⁶

This sort of reasoning leads to an extreme skepticism; it implies that we are not justified in accepting any empirical theory about the world. Physicist Steven Weinberg has written that "There is no theory that is not contradicted by some experiment" ((Weinberg 1992), p. 93). There will always be experimental anomalies for any theory of wide application, and virtually every view, even amazingly plausible ones, will have counter-evidence. Moreover, there is no a priori way of deciding which anomalous evidence is really just flawed data, which can ultimately be explained by the current theory in a yet

undiscovered way, and which are important anomalies that undermine the theory. One can always continue investigating the quality of the evidence or try to make it fit with the accepted theory. The real nail in the coffin of an old theory is a replacement model that explains the anomalies. Indeed, anomalous data alone is not enough to jettison an otherwise highly justified theory. Sometimes we can know that a surprising fact is true without knowing why it is true; for example, we can know from observation that the Tortoise outran Achilles without knowing how it is possible for him to do so. This cannot be generalized, however. In the case of a very excellent theory, we cannot be justified in believing that it is false without any account of why it is false.

To suppose otherwise is to endorse an unreasonably strong requirement for being justified in believing the truth of a theory, viz., no theory is justified if there is unexplained evidence against it. This would imply that we are not warranted in accepting any theory about medicine, physics, or biology. Such a position is the mark of an overly simplistic empiricism. Theories draw their power from not only agreement with new experiment, but from their ability to retrodict prior data, their congruence with other theories, their prediction of novel phenomena, and aesthetic qualities such as logical elegance and internal symmetry. Raw outlier data lacks these features. The interaction between theory and experiment is far messier than the logician's clean world in which a single universal generalization is proven false by the first counterexample. If we are faced with experimental data or evidence E that is genuinely inconsistent with the whole of some theory T, there are a host of things we might conclude. For example, we might conclude that the most probable thing is that T is false. But we could instead decide that it is likelier E is the result of inadequate data collection, or that theory T is incomplete.

If T is in all other respects a truly excellent theory, it is more reasonable to conclude one of these latter things than it is to rule that T is false. Evidence E may have been carefully collected, nonfraudulent, rigorously analyzed, and still contradict the prevailing theory. If the theory is right, the evidence is faulty for reasons we may not yet understand or are unable to discover. The theory may be wrong, of course, and the anomalous evidence good, but the data on their own are not enough to justify the rejection of a theory that is otherwise highly warranted.

Perturbations in the precession of the orbit of Mercury was not enough to jettison Newtonian mechanics; it took such data along with the theory of relativity to do so. In the case of materialism about the mind, one might argue that it is not such a good theory anyway, but then the arguments against materialism come from other sources than evidence for postmortem survival. Without a theoretical explanation of the cases Almeder presents, it is more rational to believe either that there must be something amiss with the data, or that there will ultimately be a materialist explanation of it, than it is to believe that materialism about the mind is mistaken.

So far all that has been argued is that Almeder is mistaken in holding that it is irrational or epistemically irresponsible not to believe in reincarnation given the evidence, and that Ayer is also mistaken in thinking that if there were cases of the sort discussed that it would not be irrational or epistemically irresponsible to believe in reincarnation. I have not yet shown that Parfit is in error in drawing the weakest conclusion, viz. that such cases would be some evidence in favor of a belief in reincarnation. Here is the argument against Parfit.

Suppose that we have several cases like Parfit's Japanese woman, and in fact the cases are non-fraudulent and the data they contain accurate. Thus, having stipulated that it is good data, we need to develop a theoretical explanation of it. In formulating competing hypotheses to explain the cases we need to keep in mind the desideratum of conservatism: any hypothesis that explains the data in a way consistent with our best theories is, *ceteris paribus*, superior to any explanatory hypothesis inconsistent with our best theories.⁷

To illustrate the use of this desideratum, consider the hypothesis that electric bulbs do not really emit light but instead suck dark. This hypothesis successfully explains much of our evidence about electric bulbs, or "dark suckers".

Take for example, the dark suckers in the room where you are. There is less dark right next to them than there is elsewhere. The larger the dark sucker, the greater its capacity to suck dark. Dark suckers in a parking lot have much greater capacity than the ones in this room. As with all things, dark suckers don't last forever. Once they are full of dark, they can no longer suck. This is proven by the black spot on a full dark sucker. A candle is a primitive

dark sucker. A new candle has a white wick. You will notice that after the first use, the wick turns black, representing the dark which has been sucked into it. If you hold a pencil next to the wick on an operating candle, the tip will turn black, because it got in the way of the dark flowing into the candle. Unfortunately, these dark suckers have a very limited range. There are also portable dark suckers. The bulbs in these units can't handle all of the dark by themselves, and must be aided by a dark storage unit. When the dark storage unit is full, it must be either emptied or replaced before the portable dark sucker can operate again. If you break open one of these filled canisters, one will see that there is indeed a great quantity of stored dark on the inside.⁸

We do not accept the dark sucker hypothesis for two reasons: it is inconsistent with our best physical theories, and there is a competing hypothesis consistent with our best theories that explains the evidence we have about electric bulbs at least as well. Similarly, if there is some other hypothesis that explains the cases ostensibly suggestive of reincarnation as well as the reincarnation hypothesis, and if this other hypothesis is consistent with materialism about the mind, and other well-established theories, then we should prefer it.

Indeed, there are indefinitely many such hypotheses. One is that there are intelligent, technologically advanced extra-terrestrials who regard humans with great amusement, and secretly monitor and occasionally interfere with our lives.⁹ One thing they enjoy is performing super-advanced psychosurgery on select humans that provides these humans with quasi-memories of having lived past lives, verifiably true beliefs about where ancient bracelets are hidden, and previously non-existent linguistic or musical talents. Unlike a Cartesian evil genius, the ET hypothesis is perfectly testable by empirical means – if the aliens were to land and reveal themselves and their techniques, this would serve to confirm the hypothesis. If we were to completely survey the universe and find no such aliens, this would falsify it. Moreover, the ET proposal is entirely consistent with materialism about the mind, and explains the cases as well as the reincarnation hypothesis. Even better, the probability of there being some sort of extra-terrestrial life is quite high, given the large size of the universe (it contains about 10^{22} stars) and the conditions needed for life to arise.¹⁰

Just as it is epistemically preferable to reject the dark sucker hypothesis in favor of the hypothesis that electric bulbs emit light, it is epistemically better to take cases like that of the Japanese woman as evidence for the ET hypothesis than it is to take them as evidence of reincarnation. This follows directly from the desideratum of conservatism considered earlier. I do not endorse the ET option, and do not think that it is true. Rather, the point is that even a far-fetched explanation like mind-controlling ETs is superior to reincarnation. The reincarnation hypothesis is much closer to a belief that electric bulbs are dark suckers than it is to the belief in the past existence of dinosaurs.

Thus the cases provided by Almeder and others better support the ET hypothesis than they do reincarnation. Since the same data cannot simultaneously confirm two inconsistent hypotheses, even given the cases, we have no reason to believe that some persons survive their deaths through reincarnation. Similar arguments can be employed against all paranormal claims that are inconsistent with what are antecedently considered the best theories of the world; out-of-body experiences, spirit mediumship, apparitions of the dead, and all the rest have the same epistemic vices.

To sum up the dialectic: I assume that materialism is the best theory we currently have about the mind. Almeder and like-minded survivalists are likely to charge that this assumption begs the question, since they take the reincarnation evidence to refute materialism. My reply is that such a charge misses the mark. I am assuming that, in advance of ostensible survivalist cases, (almost) all parties come to the table thinking that some form of materialism is the best theory going about the mind. Then the anomalous data arrives, and we have to decide what to do with it. Such data takes the form of examples like that of Parfit's Japanese woman, cases that have been rigorously investigated and seem legitimate. Conservatism advises that hypotheses that explain the data in a manner consistent with materialism are epistemically superior to those that are inconsistent with materialism. The survivalists fail to heed this desideratum; instead they conclude from these cases that we have excellent evidence for reincarnation, which is not consistent with materialism.

Considered in isolation, apart from other theories antecedently held, the ET hypothesis and the reincarnation hypothesis are equally plausible. In this respect they are analogous to the contrasting hypotheses that either electric bulbs suck dark or they emit light. There is no reason to prefer one to the other

if they are to be evaluated independently from other things we justifiably believe. However, it would be epistemically irresponsible to opt for the dark sucker hypothesis given our wealth of knowledge about light, and the compelling theories we have about electromagnetism. Our highly justified background theories give the “emits light” hypothesis a higher prior probability. Bayesian considerations come into play with respect to reincarnation as well, and the ET hypothesis gets a higher prior probability than the reincarnation alternative.

One obvious objection to the ET hypothesis is that it is ad hoc; it does not follow from observation, is not entailed by theory, and seems specifically tailored to answer the ostensible cases of reincarnation. This diminishes its explanatory value. On the other hand, the reincarnation hypothesis is not so ad hoc, and fits well with the cases without needing special modifications. Reincarnation does not fare well by the test of conservatism, but is easily the victor by the ad hocness test. My reply is that the ET hypothesis is similar to adding epicycles to Ptolemaic astronomy. Tweaking the Ptolemaic model with epicycles may be unlovely and ad hoc, but (to some degree) it makes the model work. For a long time, the most rational thing to do was to keep geocentrism, warts and all. Indeed, it was not until Kepler recognized that planetary orbits are elliptical rather than circular that the heliocentric theory could explain the observation of “retrograde motion” without using epicycles. This is not to suggest that scientists before Copernicus should have been satisfied or complacent about geocentrism; they should have been actively trying to solve the problem of retrograde motion under Ptolemaic rules in a more elegant way than using epicycles, trying to show that the observational data was flawed, or attempting to devise a new and better theory of celestial motion. The success of any of these strategies would have been an improvement over epicycles and, of course, the last of these proved victorious. Yet it would have been epistemically wrong-headed to abandon geocentrism and its epicycles without its Copernican (and perhaps Keplerian) replacement.¹¹

It is basically a Quinean point that sensory evidence underdetermines theory, and so we should not be too surprised that the sort of cases that Almeder and other survivalists cite fails to directly establish that some persons survive their deaths. No hypothesis is entailed by data alone. It could be that materialism about the mind is wrong, or even that other excellent theories like evolutionary

biology or the germ theory are mistaken and will ultimately be supplanted. However, what it will take to show these things is more than just unexplained data inconsistent with these theories. To be rationally persuaded that materialism is wrong and that we are Cartesian egos that at least occasionally survive bodily corruption, we will need not only empirical cases, but a theory in which these cases are embedded. This theory will require all the same virtues (predictive power, data retrodiction, elegance, coherence with other physical theories, etc.) possessed by materialism as well as a capacity to explain the nature and properties of the Cartesian self. This is not a dogmatic rejection of postmortem existence. If we are presented both with high quality evidence satisfying the conditions laid down by Parfit, Ayer, and Almeder, and a theory that explains it of the sort described, then it would be epistemically permissible – and perhaps even obligatory – to believe that we might survive our deaths. Until then, we should remain skeptics.¹²

BLOOMSBURG UNIVERSITY
BLOOMSBURG, PA 17815
USA

REFERENCES

- Almeder, Robert. 1992. *Death and Personal Survival: The Evidence for Life After Death*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Almeder, Robert. 1996. Recent Responses to Survival Research. *The Journal for Scientific Exploration* 10 (4):495-517.
- Ayer, A.J. 1956. *The Problem of Knowledge*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Broad, C.D. 1953. *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Broad, C.D. 1962. *Lectures on Psychical Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Ducasse, C.J. 1961. *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life After Death*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas.
- Flew, Antony. 1953. *A New Approach to Psychical Research*. London: Watts.
- Flew, Antony. 1976. Parapsychology Revisited: Laws, Miracles, and Repeatability. *The Humanist* 36:28-30.
- Hales, Steven D. 1995. Epistemic Closure Principles. *The Southern Journal of Phi-*

osophy 33 (2):185-201.

James, William. 1961. *William James on Psychological Research*. Edited by G. Murphy and R. O. Ballou. London: Chatto and Windus.

Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Price, H.H. 1949. *Psychical Research and Human Personality*. *Hibbert Journal* 47:105-113.

Price, H.H. 1967. *The Problem of Life After Death*. *Religious Studies* 3:447-460.

Quine, Willard Van Orman, and J.S. Ullian. 1970. *The Web of Belief*. New York: Random House.

Weinberg, Steven. 1992. *Dreams of a Final Theory*. New York: Pantheon Books.

NOTES

¹ Cf. (James 1961), (Ducasse 1961), (Broad 1953), (Broad 1962), (Flew 1953), (Price 1949), (Price 1967).

² (Almeder 1992).

³ (Ayer 1956), (Parfit 1984).

⁴ (Flew 1976).

⁵ Cited in (Weinberg 1992), p. 128.

⁶ I am ignoring issues about closure. For more on this matter see (Hales 1995).

⁷ Cf. (Quine and Ullian 1970) pp. 66-67.

⁸ "Dark Sucker Theory," <http://www.cs.nmt.edu/~reality>, accessed 10 July, 1997. I have been unable to locate the original source for this document.

⁹ Almeder addresses the ET hypothesis in (Almeder 1996), where he kindly acknowledges its provenance. Almeder there claims that the ET view is not as plausible as reincarnation. It should be clear why I disagree.

¹⁰ For example, cosmologist George Smoot regards the probability of extraterrestrial life as 1.

¹¹ Along similar lines, some have said that before Darwin, the Argument from Design warranted belief in a divine architect.

¹² Thanks to Richard Brook, Susan Hales, and Steven Rieber for criticisms of earlier versions of this paper. Special thanks to Robert Almeder for his attempts to correct my understanding of his work.