

Book Review
Materialism, Minds, and Cartesian Dualism

James G. Matlock¹

*Research Fellow,
Parapsychology Foundation, Inc.*

Materialism, Minds, and Cartesian Dualism, by Robert Francis Almeder. Hamilton Books, 2022.
Paper, 116 pages. ISBN-10: 0761872930, ISBN-13: 978-0761872931. \$32.99.

This short book by Robert Almeder purports to offer “a history of how philosophers and scientists have thought about the mind/body problem—especially as it concerns the question of consciousness after death.” Additionally, it “interrogates the last thirty years of scientific research on reincarnation, considering a series of case studies impossible to explain in any other way than persisting consciousness after death.” Although it “does not attempt to argue why or how some people reincarnate and how long they reincarnate, it argues that these case studies demonstrate in compelling ways that some people have indeed reincarnated,” and in so doing, “refutes the philosophical materialist position that only physical objects exist.” (Back cover.)

Almeder presents his argument in four chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1 covers “Basic Objections to Mind-Body Dualism Advanced by Reductive Materialists.” Chapter 2 treats “Evidence Favoring Cartesian Mind-Body Dualism and Reincarnation” and Chapter 3 takes up “Objections and Replies to the Minimalist View of Personal Reincarnation.” Chapter 4 asks, “Where are We Now?” The Appendix deals with “A. J. Ayer on Personal Reincarnation.”

In a Foreword, Almeder says that he wrote this book because he “firmly disagrees” with skeptics who see no “scientific way” to resolve the longstanding conflict between materialists, who insist that the mind is generated by the brain, and non-materialists, who understand mind and brain to be independent, yet interactive. Setting aside the vexed question of how two very different “substances” might interact, he contends that there is indeed a scientific path to the resolution of the mind-body problem—through reincarnation cases studied in the manner of Ian Stevenson (e.g., 1974, 1975).

Almeder has dealt with this problem for years, most notably in *Death and Personal Survival* (1992). However, in previous work he was exploring “a general form of the argument for personal reincarnation,” whereas he has come to believe that this is “less compelling” than the “minimalist view of personal reincarnation” he defends in this book. What Almeder means by a “minimalist view of personal reincar-

¹ James G. Matlock, Parapsychology Foundation, jgmatlock@yahoo.com

nation” is that some—but not all—people alive today have reincarnated from people who lived in the past. This position, he says, “roots solely in strong empirical data,” as opposed to logical reasoning or religious pronouncement, although he admits that “we do not know why or what causal mechanisms are involved” (p. xii).

As a reincarnation researcher with no formal training in philosophy, I come to this book from a different perspective than a professional philosopher, but my comments may be of interest for that reason. Almeder says that because *Death and Personal Survival* “elicited a fair measure of criticism,” in subsequent publications he sought to “expand the main argument to include more data and reflection on the issue in order to update Stevenson’s research, and thereby render more persuasive the general argument and its broader contours not treated in the earlier book” (p. xii). However, he apparently now thinks that this effort was misguided and that he is better off retreating to his “minimalist” stance. I have to wonder how well he has succeeded with this approach. The minimalist position has its own problems and I cannot see that he has addressed those, much less dealt with them persuasively.

David Ray Griffin (1997), also, adopted the view that reincarnation is a rare thing, involving some persons only. While it may be said that “the evidence, at best, suggests that only a *few* people have begun their lives as reincarnations of previous personalities” (Griffin, 1997, p. 186; his italics), Almeder and Griffin apparently assume that only those who recall previous lives have reincarnated, forgetting J. M. E. McTaggart’s (1906) demonstration that reincarnation might well proceed in the absence of remembrance. Indeed, research has shown that reincarnation cases include far more than apparent autobiographical memories—there may also be behaviors, emotions, and even physical traits linking past and present lives—and these signs may appear without supporting memory claims (Keil, 1996; Matlock, 2019). Moreover, neither Almeder nor Griffin confront the rather profound implications of allowing reincarnation for some persons, but not for all persons. Individual differences notwithstanding, all humans are essentially very similar, and no markers have emerged that would allow researchers to place persons who recall previous lives in one category and persons who do not recall previous lives in another category.

It seems to me that Almeder and Griffin have gone astray by focusing narrowly on a few exemplary cases, treating them as thought experiments (and Almeder has thought experiments, properly speaking), rather than grappling with the totality of the evidence developed by reincarnation research. This research has been ongoing for a good deal longer than 30 years—it began over 60 years ago, when Stevenson made his first tour of investigation to India and Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) in 1961—and it involves much more than case studies (Matlock, 2019). Even if we confine ourselves to case studies, there are universal and near-universal patterns (Matlock, 2017, 2019) that should be included in any assessment of the evidence. These patterns provide a much more powerful argument for reincarnation than can be developed through a handful of case studies, no matter how closely examined, but to my knowledge they have never been considered by a philosopher dealing with reincarnation.

Almeder is right that if he can provide a convincing demonstration of reincarnation, he has shown materialism and physical reductionism to be mistaken, but if he has succeeded in this, he has opened the door to postmortem survival and reincarnation of all persons—and it is not clear what advantage his minimalist reincarnation concept has. Moreover, I cannot understand how merely establishing the fact of reincarnation

through case studies helps solve the philosophical puzzle of how reincarnation is intelligible in the first instance. If materialism is wrong, and Cartesian substance dualism is right, we are left with the question of how material and immaterial substances interact. Almeder is content to leave this critical issue unresolved. Griffin (1997) offers a solution that may not be compatible with substance dualism, but which will be obvious to any parapsychologist—that the connection to the body is made possible through the mind's psi.

Griffin (1997) proposes Whiteheadian process metaphysics as an alternative to substance dualism. Whitehead (1978) developed a view of consciousness as a series of experiential events. He thought that this experiential stream would persist after death, resulting in an “objective immortality” (1978, p. 351), but because he presumed that mental activity ceased postmortem, he cannot be said to have embraced personal survival. Reincarnation cases, however, imply, if they do not entail, personal survival. Griffin does not confront this issue (perhaps because he conceives of reincarnation to be a rare event), but I take it up in *Signs of Reincarnation*, where I argue that psi would provide a discarnate mental stream telepathic and clairvoyant inputs sufficient to keep it going (Matlock, 2019, pp. 248, 255). Furthermore, I hold that my neo-Whiteheadian process model handles the reincarnation case data better than Cartesian substance dualism does. In particular, Cartesian substance dualism posits an Ego unextended and unlocalized in space, which is belied by accounts of intermission experiences as well by mediumistic communications, apparitions, and other survival phenomena. It may be possible to tackle this problem within a Cartesian framework, but Almeder fails to do so, perhaps because he never gets deep enough into the case data to see the need. And this is a shame, because his superficial treatment of the case data gives the impression that the evidence for reincarnation is much more limited than it is in reality, unnecessarily undercutting his thesis.

These are not the only deficiencies of this book, which gives the appearance of having been hastily thrown together. Despite its brevity, it is repetitive in places, and would have benefitted from more careful editing and copy-editing. A philosophy student or professional, especially one not well acquainted with the material and issues Almeder confronts, might get more out of it than I have, however.

References

- Almeder, R. (1992). *Death and personal survival*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Griffin, D. R. (1997). *Parapsychology, philosophy, and spirituality: A postmodern exploration*. State University of New York Press.
- Keil, J. (1996). Cases of the reincarnation type: An evaluation of some indirect evidence with examples of “silent” cases. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 10(4), 467-485.
- Matlock, J. G. (2017). Patterns in reincarnation cases. *Psi Encyclopedia*. <https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/patterns-reincarnation-cases>
- Matlock, J. G. (2019). *Signs of reincarnation: Exploring beliefs, cases, and theory*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- McTaggart, J. M. E. (1906). *Some dogmas of religion*. London: Edwin Arnold.
- Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty cases suggestive of reincarnation* (2nd ed., rev.). University Press of Virginia.
- Stevenson, I. (1975). *Cases of the reincarnation type. Volume I: Ten cases in India*. University Press of Virginia.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1978). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology* (Corrected ed.). Free Press.