

## Correspondence

To the Editor:

I was saddened to learn of John Palmer's retirement from his position as Editor of the *Journal of Parapsychology* (*JP*). John has served in this capacity for many years, and he has conducted his duties in this role with grace, fair-mindedness, and toughness. The field will sorely miss him in the Editor role. He is truly one of the giants of parapsychology. I am glad that he will continue to serve in the capacity of Associate Editor. John has been my main contact in the field of parapsychology for many years, and I have worked closely with him as a referee over the years. I respect and admire John and look forward to working with him in his new role.

That said, in his article "Survival and the Mind-Body Problem" in the Fall 2016 issue of *JP*, in the section entitled (ironically) "Offensive Ad Hominem Language", John asserts that I have been "whiny" about the fact that the authors of *Beyond Physicalism* did not cite any of my three books on the subject. Actually, I am not whining about the lack of citation, but rather about their failure to address any of the counterarguments to personal survival presented in my books as well as in the writings of a vast host of authors, among them the contributors to the compendium *The Myth of the Afterlife* (MOA), edited by Michael Martin and Keith Augustine, which was reviewed in the same issue of *JP*. In his review of MOA, James Matlock (2016) states that:

The fact is, neuroscientists have never been able to discover where in the brain memory is stored, despite decades of effort directed at the problem. [Karl] Lashley (1950) spent 30 years trying to locate memory "engrams," but he finally gave up, concluding that memory was not recorded in the brain after all. There is no doubt that the brain becomes engaged when things are remembered, and different types of memory activate different parts of the brain (Gauld, 2007), but all that is evidence for is a correlation between memory retrieval and neural activity, not the reconstruction of memory from traces stored in the brain. The lack of evidence for the trace theory of memory led Pribram (1991) to advance the theory that memory is represented holonomically and distributed throughout the brain, but that proposition has failed to gain widespread acceptance. Given the uncertainty among neuroscientists about whether memory is engraved in the brain, psychical researchers seem to me justified in considering other possibilities, especially inasmuch as their data tell them that memory cannot really be there. A currently fashionable idea is that memory is preserved in a subquantum "Akashic field" (Laszlo, 2007, 2009), from which it is retrieved by psi (p. 242).

In citing Karl Lashley's celebrated failure to find localized memory traces in the brain, Matlock is going back to work conducted in the 1930s, when the field of psychology was in its infancy. Pribram's work is a quarter of a century out of date. Matlock states that a currently fashionable idea is that memories are preserved in a subquantum Akashic field. This idea is anything but fashionable among contemporary neuroscientists, and will do nothing to enhance the credibility of parapsychology. There has been a vast evolution in neuroscientific evidence and theories over the past half-century, which is somehow totally overlooked by today's "paraneurologists".

Think of “Jennifer Aniston” cells and “place cells” that fire in sequence as a maze-running rat’s memory is consolidated during dreams. Think about the fact certain hippocampal structures must remain intact if new declarative memories are formed and stored. The list goes on almost literally *ad infinitum*, and much of this research is discussed in MOA.

Matlock’s conception of the soul is close to my own. He sees the “self” (his term for soul) as being analogous to a riverbed through which a stream of conscious experience flows. I see the soul as a center of pure consciousness which undergoes a succession of conscious experiences. Thus far, the primary difference between our views is largely metaphorical. Matlock sees streams of consciousness as coming to and flowing through a fixed “riverbed” whereas I envision souls as centers of pure consciousness that may travel from one physical system to another even before death. I posit that multiple souls may inhabit a single body. Both of us reject the assertion that centers of consciousness do not exist, as espoused by some Buddhist sects and philosophers such as Daniel Dennett, who disparages such centers as “Cartesian theaters”. We both reject the view that consciousness itself does not exist, as espoused by eliminative materialists, who themselves verge on a well-earned extinction this point.

Matlock and I also share the view that one cannot have streams of conscious experience without conscious experiencers of some kind, as proposed in Whitehead’s “occasionalism,” and that such centers of consciousness persist over macroscopic time intervals. I am directly aware of myself as such a center of consciousness and as the experiencer of a stream of consciousness. This knowledge is to me directly given. Centers of consciousness seem to get stuck in material systems such as brains from time to time, much to our chagrin, which suggests that such centers have physical aspects, such as locations in spacetime. Of course, the physical world might itself be a mathematically-generated collective dream.

Where we part company is that Matlock proposes that aspects of the stream of consciousness, such as memories, may be dragged along with the self or soul after death, and thus such personality traits may survive death. I agree that this is a logical possibility and thus such survival of personality elements should not be dismissed on an *a priori* basis. However, the existing empirical evidence is insufficient to conclude that such survival has been demonstrated, and a large corpus of neuroscientific evidence suggests that such survival is unlikely, in view of the intricate dependence of conscious experience and personality traits on brain activity.

### References

Matlock, J. G. (2016). Whose prejudice? A response to the replies of Augustine, Smythe, and Larsen. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 80, 235- 250.

Douglas M. Stokes  
424 Little Lake Drive, #3  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103 USA  
Dstokes48103@yahoo.com

## Volume 81 Reviewers

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