

IS THERE AN AFTERLIFE? A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE  
by David Fontana. Ropley, Hants, U.K.: O Books, 2005. Pp. 496.  
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This book is subtitled "A Comprehensive Overview of the Evidence," and in some ways it is just that: All the major areas of survival research conducted over the past century are addressed. In other ways, however, it is not comprehensive. Authors, of course, must choose and emphasize the areas that they consider most important, and no one can fault David Fontana for doing that. But his disproportionate emphasis on the areas of research and individual cases that he prefers means that persons coming to this book with little or no prior acquaintance with survival research—the audience for whom this book was apparently intended—will not get a representative and balanced picture of the scope and quality of much of survival research. Moreover, although there are many good summaries, especially of individual cases, the numerous errors and misprints in the book—some trivial, some not—may undermine, justly or unjustly, the confidence readers are likely to feel in the overall quality of the presentations.

Fontana begins by appropriately defending the importance of spontaneous cases and the general reliability of eyewitness testimony, and he dismisses "the myth of eternal progress" (p. 8), that is, the assumption that the more recent some piece of evidence or research is, the better it must be. Throughout the book he discusses the ongoing controversy about super-psi versus survival interpretations, but in the introductory chapter he points out (as others have before him) that the evidence for psi from experimental studies supports the survival hypothesis indirectly by demonstrating that mind can operate beyond the normal boundaries of time and space. Regrettably, his brief review of the experimental evidence

for psi suffers from a weakness encountered throughout the book, a lack of references to which readers can go for more information.

In the next chapter Fontana discusses apparitions, giving good summaries of some crisis cases, collective cases, and cases in which the apparition gives information not previously known to the percipient. Some of the cases are published, and some are more recent cases reported to Fontana (most of them previously unpublished). Similarly, in the chapter on hauntings and poltergeists, he concentrates on describing a few examples, particularly the interesting Cardiff case that he investigated. Unfortunately, in focusing on isolated cases, Fontana gives little indication of the volume and quality of the evidence from apparitions collected by the SPR, particularly as reported in *Phantasms of the Living*, in the *Census of Hallucinations*, and by Eleanor Sidgwick. Nor does one get a sense of the numerous reports of poltergeist and haunting cases, the complicated phenomenology of many cases, and the quality of some of the investigations, such as one finds in books such as Gauld and Cornell (1979), Owen (1964), Roll (1972), and Thurston (1953). Moreover, in these chapters we begin to encounter a problem that recurs throughout the book: There are frequent and irritating mistakes, including numerous misspellings of some of the most important names in psychical research. For example, on page 33 a citation to *Phantasms* reads "Sidgwick et al 1886" (it should be "Gurney et al. 1886"). Some citations in the text are missing in the reference list. The references for the *Census* on page 54 are to two brief preliminary reports by Sidgwick but not to the final and massive report by Sidgwick and his colleagues (Sidgwick et al., 1894); moreover, even the two references given are incomplete. Gurney becomes "Guerney," Frederic (or F. W. H.) Myers becomes "Frederick" (or "F. H.") Myers, Gauld becomes "Gould," Tyrrell becomes "Tyrell"; later McDougall becomes "MacDougal," and Michael Sabom becomes "Martin" Sabom. Even Fontana's own name is misspelled in the foreword!

In chapter 4 we find a sympathetic presentation of the Enfield poltergeist case, but there is practically no mention of the misgivings about the case raised not by uninformed and hostile critics but by highly informed, sympathetic, and experienced investigators such as Alan Gauld and Anita Gregory. Fontana may be right in his assessment of the case. I have no intention of entering into the fray myself, but a balanced presentation would seem to require some mention of the criticisms made by knowledgeable people.

The chapters on mental mediumship are more satisfactory. There are good summaries of the research on Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, and Mrs. Garrett. The cross-correspondences are illustrated by a description of the Palm Sunday case, and proxy cases by a good summary of the Bobbie Newlove case. The Edgar Vandy case, called by Fontana "one of the best examples" of a proxy case (p. 190), is indeed a great case, but not, for the most part, a proxy one. Drop-in cases are illustrated by descriptions of the

Harry Stockbridge and Runki cases. Fontana also includes a discussion of the Patience Worth case under the heading of drop-ins, although Patience Worth has never been identified as a real person. The case better illustrates the difficulty, which Fontana briefly discusses, of deciding whether and when material is coming from a real deceased person and when it is coming instead from the medium's untapped reservoirs of creativity or other latent capacities (for a more complete discussion of this case and this issue, see Braude, 2003, chapter 5). Fontana's discussion of drop-in cases becomes problematic for me, however, when he turns to what he calls "misleading drop-in communicators" (pp. 166-175). These are the numerous instances in which the communicator has not been identified because no attempt was made, or the material given was insufficient for an attempt to be made, or the information given was for the most part erroneous, with perhaps a few scattered correct details. Here and elsewhere in the book Fontana raises the possibility that such "drop-ins" may be "mischievous earthbound spirits" who need to be "encouraged to move on" (pp. 170-175). Such speculation seems at best highly premature.

Fontana's primary interest, clearly, is in physical phenomena, and 150 pages are devoted to these. There is first a chapter on the direct voice phenomenon, with descriptions of four mediums for whom the phenomenon was claimed. The emphasis given this phenomenon—although understandable in light of its connections with the electronic voice phenomenon, also of great interest to Fontana—seems unwarranted. Despite some interesting and puzzling details that have emerged during direct voice sittings, there is little compelling evidence for direct voice itself, as far as I am aware. Fontana says (p. 233) that "we have a large number of audio tapes of the [direct] voices" of Leslie Flint, but unfortunately he doesn't say who "we" are, where these tapes are, and who has listened to and evaluated them. And I am unaware of any other such recordings. More importantly, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the origin of the voices without instrumentation that might help pinpoint this. Fontana refers (pp. 235-236) to a test in which a throat microphone was used and purportedly ruled out that Flint's vocal chords were involved in the production of the voices. Again, however, he provides no reference to any report of this test. There is also no good documentation for any of the claims that foreign languages have been spoken under these circumstances. Fontana would have done far better in this regard to discuss such xenoglossy cases as the Sharada case—a case that *has* been heavily documented and moreover does far more to support the survival hypothesis than these direct-voice cases do. Nowhere in the book, however, is the Sharada case even mentioned.

In two additional chapters on physical mediumship, Fontana describes the well-known cases of D. D. Home, Eusapia Palladino, Florence Cook, Stella Cranshaw, Mina Crandon, Helen Duncan, and Indridi Indridason (whom Fontana calls "Indrid"), and he ends with a long summary of an investigation in which he participated, that of the Scole

circle. In some of these cases, it seems likely that something paranormal was going on, but is any of this evidence for survival? There is little evidence linking the phenomena to a known deceased person, and claims of materializations, whether of known or unknown persons, are questionable at best. Occasionally information is given that apparently goes beyond the knowledge of the mediums or others present, but this is mental mediumship. Fontana's primary argument for the relevance of physical phenomena to survival seems to be that because the physical phenomena produced at seances are not seen under other circumstances in the medium's life then "the phenomena were produced by energies other than her own" (p. 286). This argument seems spurious to me since it is likely that the atmosphere as well as the expectations generated at a seance are much more conducive to paranormal phenomena, including PK, than are most other circumstances in the medium's life. Fontana further argues that because the makeup of the group sitting with the medium usually varies, then the phenomena were not likely to have been generated by any individual sitter's PK abilities. Thus, the idea that they were generated by deceased persons "is not an unreasonable one" (p. 286). There is no mention, however, of Batchelder and his suggestion that the success of his sitter groups in generating physical phenomena was not because of one individual but because of the group dynamic, a dynamic that can continue despite variations in who is present.

Fontana provides long discussions evaluating the pros and cons in cases of physical mediumship that have aroused much controversy, such as that of Mina Crandon ("Margery") or of Helen Duncan, and long discussions defending the paranormality of many individual events and phenomena, particularly in the Scole case. I must admit, however, that I have grown quite tired of and exasperated by such debates. They seem to get us nowhere and simply solidify the opposed positions. What is needed is not more debate over previous observations but better, and better documented, evidence. Fontana admits that he and his coinvestigators in the Scole case were unable to introduce the control conditions they wanted, such as infrared cameras, because "their [the circle members] primary purpose was not to satisfy us" (p. 326). The usual excuse given—that light is somehow damaging—raises suspicions and has also become quite wearisome to me. If Home could do it in good light, why not others? Fontana also laments the suspicion of those—like me—"who have never experienced these phenomena for themselves" (p. 327). That, however, is exactly what science is for—to provide evidence sufficient to convince those who have not experienced something for themselves, whether that be a bending spoon or the Big Bang.

The chapter on electronic voice phenomena (now often called Instrumental Transcommunication, or ITC) is similarly inconclusive. The criticisms Fontana himself makes seem to summarize the current state of this research: First, experiments have not been carried out under conditions suggested and controlled by outside observers, and second, the available reports usually lack the details about procedures and results necessary for

an informed conclusion. Perhaps the most pressing need is for independent observers to listen to recordings—without, of course, being told what is purported to be on the tape—and report what they hear.

The chapters on NDEs, OBEs, and reincarnation research seem almost an afterthought. They are brief, and virtually none of the citations in the text of the NDE and OBE chapters have corresponding items in the reference list, so readers new to these areas and wishing more information will have a difficult time. The short chapter on reincarnation research is also strangely skewed. Seven pages are devoted to hypnotic regression cases, but Fontana fails to point out that, although there are a few evidential and impressive regression cases, the vast majority lack any verified, or even verifiable, details. There are as many pages devoted to the single case of Jenny Cockell—a decidedly weak case, I think (for reasons there is not room to go into here)—as to the 45 years of research of Ian Stevenson. With regard to the latter, again the reader gets no sense of the vast quantity and quality of the research; for example, there is no discussion whatever of the important and large body of birthmark and birth defect cases documented in Stevenson's *Reincarnation and Biology* (1997).

The final chapter addresses the question of the nature of the afterlife, and for this Fontana draws on information he has derived from mediums, the various spiritual traditions, NDE experiencers, and ITC recordings. He may be right in concluding that there is a “marked degree of consensus” across the various accounts, although I suspect that the picture is far more complicated than this brief chapter suggests. Even if there is such consensus, however, it would seem that much more study and analysis must be done before we can conclude that the consensus derives from some reality above and beyond the known physical world rather than from the milieu or “zeitgeist” in which mediums and others operate, or from the interactions and influences of the various traditions on each other.

I do not mean to be unduly critical, and despite my harsh comments there is much to admire in this book. Survival research is a vast subject with an enormous literature, Fontana has clearly immersed himself in that literature, and in many areas he presents good and useful summaries of cases and lines of research. The gaps, the errors, and the lack of references will unfortunately make it difficult for readers new to the topic to judge the overall quality of survival research for themselves. For that they might consult, among many possibilities, Braude (2003), Gauld (1982), or Hart (1959).

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