

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE
by David Lester. McFarland, 2005. Pp. 250. \$39.95 (paperback).
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The back cover of this book informs us that the book objectively examines the large body of empirical research devoted to answering the question of whether there is life after death. This is professedly done by

drawing together the observations of social science regarding such phenomena as reincarnation, near death experiences, deathbed visions, cases of possession by dead spirits, and apparitions of the deceased. It considers possibilities including survival of consciousness and survival of personality, and reflects on the logical problems inherent on any model of post-mortem survival.

Exclusive of notes, bibliography, and index, the book numbers 214 pages, of which the first 26 are preface and expositions on religious views of life after death, and who in fact believes in life after death. The next 63 pages are devoted to the near-death experience, followed by 53 pages devoted to the task of examining the case for and against reincarnation. The last 50 pages are all about assessing the relative strength of empirical data associated with apparitions of the dead, (16 pages), widow hallucination (3

pages), deathbed visions (5 pages), possession (10 pages), mediumship (6 pages), poltergeists, (2 pages), and a concluding section entitled "Is there Life After Death?" (7 pages).

The author asserts that the major empirical sources of evidence for life after death are from near death experiences and research on reincarnation. Based on his analysis of both evidential sources, he concludes that the research reviewed fails to provide convincing evidence for the belief in life after death.

The lion's share of the work is devoted to assessing the relative merits of the empirical research associated with the near death experience and the research on reincarnation. The author, in his skeptical conclusion, asserts that both appear to be affected to a large extent by cultural factors and that both sets of research were instigated a long time after the events. He thinks this seriously weakens the results of the studies. With regard to reincarnation he is also skeptical because nobody has explained what the surviving personality does between reincarnations, how it can happen, and by what mechanism and for what purpose it happens. He also thinks the evidence from near-death experiences seriously undermines the hypothesis of survival because, among other things, the medical condition of the subject affects seriously the nature of the experience.

This is certainly not the place to enter into a detailed and critical assessment of the author's conclusion and the arguments offered for it. However, for several reasons, I found the work disappointing. The author has not read enough on either reincarnation or near-death experiences to focus on the best cases available. Nor are his analyses probing or careful. He has also misconstrued or ignored too much of what others have said about the force of the reincarnation and near-death cases. For example, the objections he raises to both major bodies of research have been posed and painstakingly answered elsewhere, and there are more interesting objections that have found their way into the literature (see, for example, Braude, 2003, and Almeder, 1992) but which are here neglected. In fact, some of the alternative explanations posed for the reincarnation data (Braude's super-psi hypothesis or Hales's ET hypothesis, for example) are considerably more interesting and important than any he brings up, and they are carefully discussed in the literature. This book does not advance the discussion of the evidence from either reincarnation or near-death experiences.

Very few will take seriously the author's objection to reincarnation based on the assertion that we do not know how or by what mechanism it occurs, or where the deceased personality goes in between reincarnations, or what exactly survives. One can frequently know that something occurs without knowing how or why. As for what survives, it is what is essential to a human personality (however we may ultimately characterize it) without being directly or indirectly reducible to some neuro-biological state or any other property of the brain. Moreover, the evidence does not imply

anything about what personality is or that everybody in fact reincarnates. Nor does the evidence show why or how reincarnation occurs. It does not imply any form of karma. In addition, the author's so-called *cultural objection* to near-death or reincarnation evidence clearly does not apply in cases known to have occurred in America, England, or Australia. The author is also simply wrong for thinking that many others from different cultures have not reported cases similar in strength to the best cases offered by Stevenson and others. Further, with respect to the near-death experience, he might have instead taken a close look at the literature wherein near-death experiences co-relate with demonstrable knowledge the person has of events taking place elsewhere while he or she is in that state, knowledge that could not possibly be explained by the hallucination hypothesis. Finally, the evidence is actually quite strong in voluntary out-of-body experiences as, for example, in the experiments performed by Osiris and McCormick (Almeder, 1992).

This is neither a scholarly work nor a probing work. But, doubtless, some people will find it engaging as a readable description of much of what goes on in these two basic areas, bypassing the fact that the data are seriously incomplete and in spite of the fact that the author is not equipped to analyze with any logical rigour the various crucial objections and replies in the wider discussion of the data.

REFERENCES

- ALMEDER, R. (1992). *Death and personal survival*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
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