

REPLYING TO MATLOCK

By Ingrid Hansen Smythe

In replying to James Matlock's review of my paper, "Objections to Karma and Rebirth: An Introduction," I'd like to dive in with the one insurmountable problem that essentially renders all other considerations moot, which can be stated like this: Matlock's entire elaborate metaphysical postmortem schema is built on the notion of the soul, which he imagines (and I use the word "imagine" with intent) as "a stream of consciousness" that differs from what he calls "body consciousness" because, unlike every single other thing that lives, without exception, *it survives death*. He then proceeds to speak knowledgably about this alleged death-surviving stream of consciousness, sometimes employing impressive-sounding jargon—it has a "supraliminal as well as subliminal strata" (JM, p. 200), it is "sensual but not fully sentient" (JM, p. 200), it has a "capacity for attention, intention, will, and memory", it has no need of an astral body, it begins "at the inception of biological life and death" (JM, p. 200), and "return[s] in new bodies" (JM, p. 200) by force of habit—on and on it goes, until one might well have forgotten, as Matlock appears to have done, that the entire idea was just sheer dreamt-up, made-up, knocked-off speculation in the first place—what, in actual fact, we would normally call fiction. I use the word "fiction" with intent, too, and reading Matlock on souls, I could well imagine that I might be reading a Wiki page on the topic—they're immortal, intelligent, they have attention, intention, will and memory and so on and so forth—but all that can be said about Dementors (Rowling, 1997), or the Deep Ones (Lovecraft, 1928), or any one of a number of things that people have just made up. The point is that, epistemologically speaking, souls, Dementors, and Deep Ones (froggy fish-people who worship Cthulhu, the undersea Dark Lord of Madness) have *exactly the same epistemological status*. They're fictions and there's not one single datum of evidence for any of them.

So if souls aren't real (and let's not pretend to have proven what hasn't been proven) then it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to get worked up about what happens to them after we die. It's like if I ask you to imagine that you've got a billion dollars, and then we conveniently forget the fact that it's imaginary and spend the rest of our lives planning how we're going to spend it. You can *imagine* that you have a billion dollars, or a soul, but to construct a life, or an afterlife, around it seems premature at best, and positively destructive at worst.

So this is how Matlock begins—with an unproven assertion—from which he spins out his elaborate conclusions. Interestingly, the no-evidence problem doesn't seem to bother survivalists in the way that it bothers skeptics, and here I think we have a fundamental difference between believers and nonbelievers. Matlock gives it away in a different context when he mentions Norman Cousins, who claimed to have cured himself of ankylosing spondylitis with laughter and vitamin C. Matlock accepts Cousins' claim at face value, in presumably the same way that he accepts the claims of those who say they remember their time

as slaves or kings in ancient India or Egypt or some other exotic locale. The skeptic, however, immediately puts the claim to the test and asks, “What other explanation might there be for this extraordinary claim?” The word “misdiagnosis” will probably pop into the mind of the skeptic unbidden, because it’s by far the simplest explanation and ever so much more likely (particularly if you understand what ankylosing spondylitis *is*) than Cousins’ fantastic assertion.

It seems to me that believers tend not to look very hard for other explanations. (I note that Matlock uses the phrase “otherwise inexplicable” on his website; Matlock, 2016a) and seem more dispositionally inclined to believe the mysterious, complicated, supernatural explanation than the slightly more (possibly disappointing) plain old natural one. They tend to be more impressed by anecdote than skeptics are, and especially by an accumulation of anecdotes that seem to point in the same direction. A million people may claim that their guru can levitate, for example (see Sai Baba), and those million claims will add up in the mind of the believer to be somehow more convincing than just one—whereas the skeptic will likely conclude that the probability of defying the law of gravity is so low that there must be another explanation (optical illusion, strings, some other form of good old-fashioned deceit), and a million claims don’t make it a million times more believable. They don’t make gravity a million times less powerful. Yes, on the one hand the guru *may* be levitating (and souls may be reincarnating) but—on the other hand—there could be an explanation that doesn’t defy everything we know about the nature of reality.

Skeptics, it might be said, simply have more respect for that other hand.

It’s evident that the skeptic simply demands a higher standard of evidence than the believer. There’s a higher bar to clear—as high as it would be, say, in a normal court of law. But sadly for survivalists, all they have in their arsenal are speculation, anecdote, and faith. That’s it. And because there’s no hard evidence, faith is really the beginning and end of the argument where souls are concerned, and here it’s instructive to keep Peter Boghossian’s (2013) superb definition in mind: “Faith is pretending to know things you don’t know” (p. 10). That’s why the skeptic remains unimpressed and asks, simply, for the actual evidence. This seems only fair. If I tell you, for instance, that I’ve got a thing (of some sort), which I define as (whatever you like), but I can’t produce it and have zero hard evidence for it, and further make sensational claims about it (it’s immortal!), you’re surely right to be entirely underwhelmed and to drift away, ultimately uninterested, until such time as I can give you a little more to go on. Until I can do that, it’s only sensible that the jury should remain out.

The other thing that the skeptic (hopefully) keeps forever in mind, which the believer somehow conveniently forgets about, is basic human nature and the fact that human beings are so profoundly flawed when it comes to even basic mentation. The alarmingly long list of cognitive and social biases that apply to *all* of us, believers and skeptics alike, to a greater or lesser degree, is humbling to say the least, and surely it must be considered when assessing anecdotal claims. Humans are a storytelling species after all. We’re given to motivated reasoning, exaggeration, suggestibility, sensationalized story-telling to gain attention and status, lying to please others, self-deception, memory distortion over time, outright false memory, herd behavior, confirmation bias, commitment bias, the illusion of truth effect, selective perception, wishful thinking, imagining patterns where no pattern exists—one might be forgiven for thinking that unintentional (or even intentional) distortion is essentially the modus operandi of the human mind. That’s why the skeptic is extra vigilant, relying on the scientific method and demanding facts and hard evidence when assessing claims. It’s because the trouble with people is that they’re people—not faithful, unbiased recorders and regurgitators of the unsullied facts.

People are also highly culturally conditioned and this further muddies already muddy waters. The idea that crackers turn to flesh during digestion, say, or that small winged horses are intermunicipal transport systems for prophets, or that ancient aliens flew what look for all the world like DC-8s into hydrogen-bomb-exploding volcanoes, or that there’s a thing called a soul that (a) actually exists! and (b) survives the demolition of its rental property, or that the foreskin of Our Lord ascended into space and formed Saturn’s rings—some subset of people believe one or more of these things, despite the lack of evidence, but it’s possible that one of them (let’s say the soul idea) may stand out as being somehow more likely than the others. I’d suggest that the believer consider the possibility that the soul is a living hypothesis as opposed

to a dead one (per William James) and thus the gut feeling that souls exist has a lot more to do with early cultural imprinting than with truth.

Knowing how human minds really operate also leads to a criticism of Matlock's opener—that there are paradigmatic thinkers as opposed to data-led thinkers, and quite naturally (according to Matlock) skeptics of the afterlife belong to the first group and believers to the second. But these are surely absurd caricatures—abstract and impossible types—because everyone who isn't insane is a combination of both. Nobody is exclusively paradigm-driven or data-driven. Without a paradigm, your data are numbers and noise—values without meaning. And if all you've got is a paradigm, until such time as data can be slotted in all you've got is speculation, and possibly just wild fantasy unmoored from reality entirely. All of this exists on an open scale, with some people more or less of either. The question is, to what extent is a person examining data that *doesn't* reinforce his or her own worldview? That's what *MoA* is all about and it's curious that Matlock dismisses this out of hand, claiming that the authors are mere paradigmatic thinkers, not data-led thinkers, like survivalists. This is wrong (and a fine example of another bias—the illusion of superiority). The authors—including me—have examined the evidence and found it lacking, that's all. We all await further evidence with heady anticipation.

However, let's take for granted, as Matlock does, that souls are real and that they survive death and are reborn in new bodies over and over. The question then becomes, *how* do souls do this? What is the mechanism? Here Matlock is missing a scientific theory entirely,²⁸ but in any serious scientific inquiry one has to deal with the *how* question, and the answer has to be an actual mechanism, not just more speculation. Thus, even if the no-evidence-for-the-soul problem were overcome, the proponent of reincarnation still has the *how* problem to deal with before the skeptic can be fully satisfied.

I end my reply to Matlock with a couple of lesser points, which refer specifically to my paper. Matlock says that I deal “with a generalized concept of karma unrelated to any specific tradition, despite the sometimes considerable variations among the conceptions of different traditions” (JM, p. 197). That's true, but might raise suspicions—are there kinds of karma that might pass the test if only I'd considered them? The answer, to relieve the suspense (!), is a flat no. I acknowledge in my paper's very first footnote that I'm using Karl Potter's CKTI (classical karma theory of India) as the standard model (Potter, 1987, pp. 109–110)—this was intentional—but the question is, what does Matlock consider to be a “considerable variation” and are the variations relevant? Karma has a definition, after all, and there are elements that all traditions have in common. Does it make any difference to the arguments against karma that, for example, some traditions allow karma, like some form of metaphysical cash, to be transferred, and other traditions believe this idea to be obviously preposterous? Not at all, because the salient point regarding any form of karma is that (like the soul, and here we go again) there is precisely no evidence for it whatsoever. Karma is like a unicorn in that way. It doesn't matter if it's the Indian unicorn or the lesser Southeast Asian unicorn—there is *no* variation of said unicorn for which there is a shred of evidence. Likewise karma.

“[R]eincarnation does not entail karma,” says Matlock, and adds that, “[u]ndoubtedly part of Smythe's purpose is to undermine the idea of reincarnation by linking it to karma” (JM, p. 197). No, I think what undermines the idea of reincarnation is not the karma problem but the zero-reason-to-believe-we-have-souls problem. Without a thing that reincarnates, reincarnation's a nonstarter. It's like imagining a spinning wheel that keeps on spinning long after the wheel itself has ceased to exist. Karma's just an added fantasy, and an example of yet another bias—the just world fallacy, which states that we all get what we deserve in the end. Matlock doesn't believe in this punishing form of karma but claims instead that souls are reborn in accordance with their disposition or character—what we might call charma as opposed to karma. This he bases on otherwise inexplicable behaviors and phobias and so on in the reincarnated individual, but whether the deciding factor is charma or karma makes no difference, just as it makes no difference if our billion dollars is in bills or in coins.

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²⁸ “Fundamentally, a theory in science is not just a whim or an opinion; it is a logical construct of how we think something works, generally agreed upon by scientists and always in agreement with the available observations” (Sellers, 2016).