

A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF EMPIRICAL ARGUMENTS FOR POSTMORTEM SURVIVAL by Michael Sudduth. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. xv + 336. \$100 (hardback). ISBN 978-137-44093-8.

Between the 1920s and early 1960s, several major philosophers (H. H. Price, C. D. Broad, and C. J. Ducasse, in particular) directed their attention to the material amassed by the Society for Psychological Research and similar organizations on problems related to the survival of consciousness and personality after death. The most significant philosophical treatments of the survival issue in recent years have been those of Griffin (1997) and Braude (2003), both of whom end up concluding that the data point toward the reality of postmortem survival. They have been joined by several others (e.g., Almeder, 1992; Lund, 2009; Weiss, 2012) who have been impressed by the evidence for reincarnation above all.

In this book, Michael Sudduth offers a dissenting view. He does it, however, not by addressing the strengths and flaws of select cases, but by analyzing the structure of the arguments that have been made by survival proponents, using formal techniques from confirmation theory. This is a useful exercise and if that were all Sudduth set out to do, he could have made a real contribution to the survival literature by exposing weaknesses and suggesting improvements in the way the debate has been carried out. But that is not all he set out to do. He moves beyond analysis of the existing positions to argue that even if survival is a fact, it cannot be proven to be so, in part because it is impossible to rule out challenges from its nearest competitor, living-agent psi.

The book has eleven chapters. In Chapter 1, Sudduth introduces the “classical empirical survival debate.” In Chapter 2, he outlines what he understands to be “the hypothesis of personal survival.” Chapters 3 through 5 are data-centered. Chapter 3 is on out-of-body and near-death experiences, Chapter 4 is on mediumistic communications, and Chapter 5 is on past-life memories. Chapter 6 analyzes “classical explanatory arguments for survival.” Chapter 7 tackles “Bayesian explanatory arguments,” which Sudduth associates with Broad and E. R. Dodds. Chapter 8 continues with “Bayesian defenses of the survival hypothesis,” especially those of Ducasse and R. W. K. Paterson. The last three chapters build toward Sudduth’s conclusions. Chapter 9 deals with “the problem of auxiliary assumptions” and Chapter 10 with “exotic counter explanations.” Chapter 11 is entitled, “The Classical Arguments Defeated.”

Sudduth observes that to date the survival debate has been essentially explanatory. Proponents seek to show that survival is a more compelling interpretation of the evidence than are rival possibilities. The “survival hypothesis” becomes more refined with the inclusion of Boolean constraints such as antecedent probability. Another way of looking at hypotheses is in terms of their predictive power, which Sudduth terms “likelihood.” Sudduth holds that all three sorts of survival arguments have fallen short—the explanatory arguments have not been able to prove that the survival hypothesis provides the best account of the evidence; Bayesian arguments have not established that survival is more probable than not; and likelihood arguments have not demonstrated that survival has greater predictive power than living-agent psi.

The antecedent probability and predictive power of the survival and living-agent psi hypotheses are a major consideration in the later chapters. Before I get to those topics, though, I want to say something about Sudduth’s notion of “hypothesis.” He uses “hypothesis” in the sense that psychology and parapsychology use “theory” and doesn’t have a way of talking about how theories are developed and deployed in these fields. Thus he says things such as, “survival is treated as an empirically testable hypothesis that . . . may be tested against the facts of experience, which in principle can confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis” (pp. 1–2). “Theory” and “hypothesis” are conflated in this statement. Later on, Sudduth introduces “auxiliary assumptions,” which at times sound like research hypotheses, at other times like theoretical premises, but mostly seem to be ad hoc propositions brought in to support the argument. Sudduth’s approach and terminology come from philosophy, not psychology, and that may be confusing to readers with backgrounds in the latter and related fields.

Another preliminary comment concerns the meaning of embodied vs. disembodied survival. This is a big issue for those (both proponents and detractors) trying to conceive of postmortem survival. In his classic treatment of the topic, Flew (1972) held that survival is intelligible only in the form of a subtle or

astral body, which would maintain form, contain personality and memory, and allow for socializing in the afterlife. Flew and others distinguish survival in an astral body from disembodied survival, but this is not the way that Sudduth conceives of the matter. For him, embodied survival means survival in a resurrection body (pp. 27–28), a concept absent from the survival literature in psychical research and parapsychology.

Then there is the question of “living-agent psi.” Sudduth dislikes the term “super-psi,” which he considers pejorative. His proposed “living-agent psi” is hardly an improvement, though. It is, in fact, a step backward, because it lumps together simple, regular psi, for which there is a great deal of evidence, with complex super-psi, for which there is little if any evidence. The issue here is the nature of super-psi. If super-psi were merely an extensive psi, Sudduth might have a point, but the psi that would be required to explain much of the reincarnation data, in particular, is often quite complex. It would involve not only the paranormal acquisition of information but the blending of this with psychokinetic activity. If “living-agent psi” is not intended to make super-psi seem more credible than it is, it will have that effect on the reader unaware of the paucity of evidence for complex super-psi. Apart from this problem, there is a conceptual distinction to be drawn between simple and complex psi operations. Toward the end of the book, Sudduth acknowledges this by introducing the term “robust living-agent psi” in the sense of super-psi, but if we need this concept, why not simply call it by its old and familiar name, rather than introducing an awkward new one?

Again and again Sudduth reveals that he does not appreciate what is asked of super-psi as an explanatory principle, especially in relation to reincarnation cases. His living-agent psi hypothesis, he tells us, “does not postulate unlimited psi, only psi sufficiently potent to accommodate the veridical features of the data” (p. 285). Fine, but in addition to veridical memory claims, there are emotional, behavioral, and physical aspects to the reincarnation cases. Children identify with the previous persons they speak about, they behave like those persons, they act in appropriate ways toward people known to those persons, and they may bear physical resemblance to or have physical traits in common with those persons. Physical features include birthmarks corresponding to fatal wounds but are by no means confined to them, as Sudduth seems to think (pp. 132–133). Nor do birthmarks invariably follow fatal wounds, as he implies. The behavioral and physical features of the reincarnation cases are a good deal more varied and extensive than Sudduth appears to realize (see Stevenson, 1997).

Another example of Sudduth’s limited appreciation of the facts to be explained is his statement that “the phenomena under discussion relate to ostensible evidence for survival that derives from patterns exhibited solely in embodied persons, none of which involve ostensible communications with the living that originate from discarnate persons” (p. 226). In a good number of cases there are what are called announcing dreams, which purport to be just this—communications from discarnate entities regarding their intentions to be reborn to the dreamer or a close relative of the dreamer. Apparitions are sometimes seen in the same role and there are instances of communications through mediums, where a similar intent is expressed. Sudduth asserts that “none of the data requires attributing to survivors any knowledge of this world acquired during a period of discarnate existence” (p. 226). In a footnote, he acknowledges that intermission memories—memories of the period between death and birth—present exceptions, but these are important exceptions, so why are they relegated to a footnote? He affirms that “ E_{CORT} (his summary of reincarnation case features) does not presuppose any period of conscious discarnate existence for living persons” (p. 226). True, but that is a characteristic of E_{CORT} , not of the data.

Sudduth picks up from Braude (e.g., Braude, 2003) the idea that reincarnation cases reveal greater motivation on the part of the subject than the previous person, and this becomes a piece of his closing argument (pp. 270–280). If this really were so, it indeed would suggest greater plausibility of a psi interpretation of the evidence relative to a survival interpretation. However, Stevenson (2001, p. 212) noted that in almost all of the cases he studied, the previous person died prematurely, often leaving some sort of unfinished business. There may be a desire to return to young children left behind, to collect or repay debts, to show widows where money is hidden, and so forth. There are several cases in which people stated before their deaths where they wished to be reborn, then apparently succeeded in carrying out their intentions. Intention and the prosecution of intention are apparent also in announcing dreams and intermission memories in which

children claim to have selected their parents. A motive for reincarnation—and control over where to reincarnate—on the part of the previous person or his postmortem counterpart is apparent in all 14 of the solved international cases and all 10 of the solved suicide cases known to me (Haraldsson & Matlock, in press).

Sudduth's response would undoubtedly be that allowing for these factors adds to the number of "auxiliary assumptions" that the "survival hypothesis" must bear. Each auxiliary assumption carries its own antecedent probability, which Sudduth presumes to be low, and the more auxiliaries that are accumulated, the more unlikely the survival hypothesis becomes. Against this tendency he thinks living-agent psi fares well, but how can it fare well when it becomes more and more challenged as the complexity of the phenomena for which it is asked to account increases? Braude (2003) calls this "crippling complexity," and the crippling complexity faced by super-psi explanations is the main reason he ended up favoring a survival interpretation of at least some of the data (2003, p. 306).

Moreover, is the probability of survival really so low? The existence and attributes of psi (regular psi) suggest what many parapsychologists have come to call "nonlocal consciousness." To the extent that this phrase has meaning, it implies that consciousness exists independently of the body; and if consciousness exists independently of the body, the door is wide open to its survival after the body's demise. I am not contending that the opened door presumes the persistence of memory, personality, and other psychological features after death, but it does make it conceivable. It is risky for Sudduth to use living-agent psi as a counter explanation for the survival data, because psi and survival share a fundamental auxiliary assumption, namely, that consciousness is not generated by the brain but rather exists independently of it. But perhaps Sudduth is on the side of the materialists here. He acknowledges that his arguments do not include "the alleged force of considerations from philosophy of mind and cognitive neuroscience that imply that consciousness or certain mental functions depend on a functioning brain" (p. 295). If his sympathies lie with the materialists, he has a completely different, and entirely unexplored, obligation to show how living-agent psi is a product of neural activity.

An important line of independent support for the survival hypothesis and several of its key auxiliaries comes from the quantum theory of Henry Stapp. In Stapp's view, quantum mechanics requires attention, intention, and will to be intrinsic properties of consciousness (Stapp, 1999). Stapp has shown that the survival of personality and identity is not incompatible with quantum mechanics (Stapp, 2009) and he has said that reincarnation would require only minor tweaking of its mathematical formalisms (Stapp, 2015). Stapp's theory is built on the standard or "orthodox" version of quantum mechanics endorsed by a plurality of physicists and is not to be dismissed lightly. Nothing of the kind exists for robust living-agent psi (super-psi), so the survival hypothesis has an advantage over the living-agent psi hypothesis in this respect. The antecedent probability of survival is relatively high and the problem of increasingly crippling complexity means that living-agent psi will never be its match, quite the opposite of what Sudduth contends.

Now, Sudduth claims not only that he has shown that the survival hypothesis cannot win the game, but that "*the classical arguments are unsuccessful in showing that there is good evidence for personal survival*" (p. 281, emphasis his). He says this because he thinks that the classical arguments depend on auxiliary assumptions that are not well supported. "To account for any of the strands of evidence, the survival hypothesis must enlist auxiliaries that are lacking independent support/testability, whereas . . . at least some of the psychological auxiliaries required by the [living-agent psi] hypothesis are independently plausible" (p. 295). I can't agree. The same psychological auxiliaries utilized by the living-agent psi hypothesis are drawn upon by the survival hypothesis. Because he is not as familiar with the data as he might be, Sudduth overlooks their psychological dimension and underestimates the psychological consistency of the survival hypothesis. Reincarnation and past-life memory are nothing if not psychological processes (Haraldsson & Matlock, in press).

I do not see how one can fairly charge that the classical survival arguments have failed to show that survival is the best interpretation of the evidence as a whole, but Sudduth is correct when he says that explanatory arguments are not enough. We have a considerable amount of data, and many ideas about what these data mean. We need to move beyond the exploratory stage in survival research and begin to construct proper theories of survival, reincarnation, and past-life memory, producing testable hypotheses that can

confirm or disconfirm the theories. Properly constructed theories, with well substantiated premises, will do much to address Sudduth's concerns about unsupported and ad hoc auxiliary assumptions and they may help us finally to settle the question of whether survival or super-psi provides the better accounting of the evidence.

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