

## CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

I wish to thank professor Caroline Watt for taking the time to respond to my letter (in the Fall 2014 *JP*). Needless to say, opinions on the value of specific studies are bound to differ. Partly due to a misunderstanding Watt implied that I had not bothered to read her report carefully. The misunderstanding occurred due to my use of the expression “specific study” with which I did not mean to refer to meta-analyses or research overviews. It is admitted that Watt (2014) in her introduction wrote that “target feedback was rapidly given” (p. 116), yet to me it remained unclear what this meant in practice. In her response, Watt states that feedback was usually given within hours.

I appreciate her clarification, yet after having written my letter George P. Hansen made me aware of a potential problem. According to Watt’s report, her study consisted of 200 trials (preplanned as four trials each from 50 participants) and there were 64 direct hits ... giving a 32% hit rate. Using an exact binomial test, this result is significant,  $z = 2.21$ ,  $p = .015$ , *one-tailed*,  $ES (z/N^{1/2}) = 0.16$ ” (emphasis added, p. 120). This result is however not necessarily just due to psi, because 21 participants did not complete all four trials and the data from their trials were therefore discarded. The study did thus, in fact, consist of between 221 and 263 trials. The participants were not informed of the judges’ ratings after each trial but target feedback was given after each trial, and presumably participants who felt that they were not doing well were more prone to drop out.

If there are few hits in the discarded data, the actual hit rate, when all trials are included, is probably not significant, and then Watt’s reported hit rate was significant just due to a procedural oversight. This seems consistent with some of her puzzling results: “... there was no significant difference between the judges’ ratings of targets and decoys. Furthermore the ratings for targets that scored a hit were on average no more similar to the dream reports than the ratings for those that did not ...” (Watt, 2014, p. 123).

### Reference

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To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Chris Carter’s review of my book *Reimagining the Soul: Afterlife in the Age of Matter* in the Fall 2014 issue of this *Journal*.

Carter asserts that I suffer from intellectual timidity by kowtowing to the materialist belief system of mainstream science and neglecting the evidence for the survival of personality elements based on mediumship, near-death experiences (NDEs), and the rest of the usual suspects. I have been involved in parapsychology for over four decades. In the first three of those decades I largely devoted my time to critiques of parapsychological methodology, theories, and findings. These critiques address virtually all of the phenomena that Carter presents as supporting his own world view. I did not avoid these topics out of

timidity, but out of boredom and the desire to make progress in the field. I believe that my critiques over the decades have sufficiently demonstrated the weakness of the evidence for these “fringe” phenomena. I was not, as Carter implies, afraid of addressing these ostensible phenomena. I merely saw no point in beating a horse that in my view was already not only dead but had already made its pilgrimage to the glue factory. I refer the reader to my two previous books on parapsychology as well as my 750-page essay “Consciousness and the Physical World,” which has been freely available on the Internet since 2006. Carter states that he has written a 300-page book on NDEs and 369-page book on mediumship, as if this somehow validates his views. If length of verbiage is to be the arbiter of truth, I have beaten Carter by 81 pages.

Mr. Carter accuses me of intellectual cowardice. In 1974, with a newly minted Ph.D. in experimental psychology from one of the nation’s premier universities in hand, I walked away from the scientific establishment to join J. B. Rhine’s Institute of Parapsychology, knowing that there could be no return voyage and that I was leaving the cushy life of a nonthinking academic conformist behind me forever. Does that sound like the act of an intellectual coward? I have refused to enter the womb of organized pseudoskeptics because I have no respect for them. I have basically expelled myself from the world of traditional academic parapsychology, as in my view this is a field that has largely dried up in its present form. I wished to explore the nature of the afterlife in a way that is unfettered from formal religion and the traditional preconceptions of psychical researchers. Are these the acts of someone too timid to confront the orthodox intellectual establishment, as Carter charges?

Two of Carter’s favorite classes of phenomena suggestive of survival are out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and NDEs. However, reports of these phenomena have no direct bearing on the issue of survival, as they are provided by people with living brains. He also offers up terminal lucidity, in which dying brain-compromised patients become cognitively lucid just prior to death. I am intrigued by this phenomenon as well and am eager to see further research in this area. However, once again these reports involve subjects with living brains.

Carter also approvingly cites work by Rupert Sheldrake and Gary Schwartz as supporting his position. I have repeatedly pointed out systematic flaws in these authors’ methodologies and theories over the years. A critique of Schwartz’s work appears in *Reimagining the Soul* and critiques of both Sheldrake’s and Schwartz’s work are provided in my previous book *The Conscious Mind and the Material World*. Mr. Carter has even coauthored a book with Sheldrake. It appears that by “intellectual timidity,” Carter means the reluctance to endorse each and every crackpot theory and bogus experimental result that comes down the pike.

Publishers are reluctant to publish long treatises, such as my above-mentioned 750-page essay. In *Reimagining the Soul*, I chose not to devote much space to these topics as the evidence for these phenomena is weak and I wished to use the available space to present a new and different approach to the problem of survival, rather than to reiterate my criticisms of most of the evidence for the survival of personality, which have already made their way into the academic literature on numerous occasions. This has been the new focus of my efforts over the past decade.

Given the overwhelming rejection of parapsychological phenomena by the scientific community, which is reasonable given the unconvincing evidence presented on their behalf, I thought it would be more interesting and productive to consider what forms of survival would be consistent with the materialistic worldview of modern science. Of course most modern scientists and parapsychologists would say “none.” But they are generally reacting to naive religious conceptions of the soul and the afterlife, in which the personality is assumed to survive death in an essentially intact condition. Incidentally, my rejection of personal survival is not a priori (before consideration of the evidence), but a posteriori (after consideration of the evidence). I could become convinced of the survival of personality elements if the evidence were stronger. Right now, the strongest evidence in my view is the reported memories of past lives, to which I devote an entire 28-page chapter.

Strangely, none of the reviewers of *Reimagining* have mentioned the mathematical argument I present showing that the results of meta-analyses purportedly demonstrating the existence of psi are in fact about what one would expect based on the assumption that psi does not exist and known rates of fraud and

data selection in the general research community. In my view, this undermines the experimental support for psi phenomena. I view this as one of the main contributions of my book. Perhaps the reviewers did not recognize the significance of this argument because of its mathematical nature.

It seems that Carter took the book review as an opportunity to present his own ideas and to neglect completely the main thrust of my book. Thus, the reader can gain no inkling of the main ideas presented in my book from his review. He does not even mention the fact that I have proposed a model of survival involving a hierarchy of centers of pure consciousness that does not rest on the assumption that psi exists. It is quite possible that this model could be investigated empirically (by someone younger than me). If Carter thinks my ideas are based on cowardice, we will see how quickly the academic community embraces my model. I am sure that many if not most of them would, after a nanosecond of thought (actually pretty long for them), immediately dismiss my model as homuncular. However, in the model I propose the apparatus of thought is ascribed to the brain system as a whole rather than being located in a singular center of consciousness, or homunculus.

Incidentally, Carter states that I believe that only “indeterministic systems are associated with consciousness, as conscious minds would be of no use to a mechanistic system.” This quotation is from David Hodgson, not me, as clearly cited in the text. It is hard to see how this view would be consistent with Carter’s statement that I am a panpsychist. (Perhaps this works if one doesn’t think about it at all.) In fact, my model of the soul and consciousness is quite compatible with billiard ball Newtonian determinism and does not depend on the existence of psi or indeterminism in any way.

Carter’s own world view is largely the same as that of most orthodox psychical researchers working in the area of survival. Perhaps he is the timid one, and is afraid to leave the nest of orthodox parapsychology, whereas I jumped out of that nest a decade ago.

Finally, *Reimagining* is written in a somewhat playful, nonlinear manner, with micropoetry and off-the-wall comments scattered throughout the text. Strangely, none of the reviewers have commented on that. (Perhaps just as well.)

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To the Editor:

I wrote a highly critical review of Stokes’ book *Reimagining the Soul: Afterlife in the Age of Matter*, to which the author has responded. Here is my rejoinder.

In my review of this book I criticized what I believe to be the book’s superficial treatment and cavalier dismissal of the evidence—from near-death experiences, mediumship, and terminal lucidity—that contradict the author’s repeatedly stated view that personality and memory depend upon a functioning brain and so cannot survive the death of the brain.

In the introduction to his book Stokes clearly stated that the central arguments of his book “will not depend on parapsychological evidence such as hauntings, claimed memories of previous lives, and ostensible messages from the dead provided by mediums or in dreams, *as these findings are not accepted by mainstream scientists*” (p. 5, emphasis added). Claims similar to this—“most scientists are skeptical,” “rejected by mainstream science,” etc.—are made repeatedly throughout this book, and that was what I meant by a “curious conformist timidity” of the author’s writing.

However, in the second paragraph of his reply, Stokes writes that “I believe that my critiques over the decades have sufficiently demonstrated the weakness of the evidence for these ‘fringe’ phenomena. I merely saw no point in beating a horse that was . . . already dead.” In my review I quoted his criticisms of the evidence from NDEs and mediumship. If these remarks dismissing the evidence from NDEs and me-

diumship are an accurate summary of his views, then he has most certainly *not* “sufficiently demonstrated the weakness of the evidence.”

Consider his treatment of the NDE: At the end of the 2½ pages Stokes devoted to the NDE, he casually concluded that “Various neurophysiological causes for such *hallucinations* have been proposed, including seizures to the temporal lobes of the brain, lack of oxygen to the brain, the release of endorphins in the brain, and the random firing of cells in the visual cortex” (pp. 120–121, emphasis added).

With regard to hallucinations as an explanation of the NDE—whether caused by temporal lobe seizures, anoxia, or drugs—neuropsychiatrist Bruce Greyson, editor of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, wrote: “Without exception, every report of a large study of NDEs published in a mainstream medical journal has concluded that these phenomena cannot be explained as hallucinations. Such unanimity among scientific researchers is unusual and should tell us something. Why is it that scientists who have done the most near-death research believe the mind is not exclusively housed in the brain, whereas those who regard NDEs as hallucinations by and large have not conducted any studies of the phenomena at all?” (Greyson, 2007, p. 140, emphasis added). “The major advantage of the hallucination model is its compatibility with the materialistic worldview favored by a majority of neuroscientists (though not by a majority of physicists). The major disadvantage of the hallucination model is that it fails to account for the phenomenon [accurate perceptions], and is plausible only if we discredit or discount much of our data. As astronomer and spectroscopy pioneer Paul Merrill quipped, ‘If you eliminate the data that do not agree, the remaining data agree very well.’ But disregarding disagreeable data is the hallmark of pseudoscience, not science” (Greyson, 2007, pp. 141–142).

Stokes added: “Reports of these phenomena [NDEs] have no direct bearing on the issue of survival, as they are provided by people with living brains.” While I do agree that the NDE provides at most only suggestive evidence of survival, that was not the point of mentioning NDEs in my review. They were mentioned only as providing “evidence that the mind, complete with memories, may exist in the absence of a properly functioning brain.” Reported memories of lucid experiences which seem to have occurred during periods in which there is every medical reason to believe that the subjects’ brains were either severely impaired or entirely nonfunctioning (that is, during a state of clinical death) most certainly are evidence contrary to Stokes’s stated belief in the dependence of memory and personal identity on a properly functioning brain.

Stokes then mentions that I approvingly cite work by Rupert Sheldrake and Gary Schwartz. In my review Schwartz’s name was only mentioned once in passing, and I quoted only a purely logical argument by Sheldrake with regard to loss of memories from brain damage, and what that does or does not imply for that hypothesis that memories are stored in the brain. I also did not “coauthor a book with Sheldrake”—he wrote the Foreword to one of my books. Sheldrake’s theories are nonorthodox yet testable, insofar as the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its testability. A list and results of his published papers and empirical findings can be found online at <http://www.sheldrake.org/research>.

Stokes then writes: “Given the overwhelming rejection of parapsychological phenomena by the scientific community . . . I thought it would be more interesting and productive to consider what forms of survival would be consistent with the materialistic worldview of modern science.”

However, if Stokes had read the book that I “coauthored” with Rupert Sheldrake, he would have learned that it is a myth that most scientists reject the existence of psychic phenomena, and also that the worldview of modern science is no longer materialistic. Two surveys of over 500 scientists in one case and over a thousand in another were made in the 1970s. Both surveys found that the majority of respondents considered ESP “an established fact” or “a likely possibility”: 56% in one (Evans, 1973) and 67% in the other (Wagner & Monet, 1979). In the study by Evans, 53% of the “ESP is an impossibility” responses came from psychologists, although psychologists made up only 6% of the total sample. Only 3% of natural scientists considered ESP “an impossibility,” compared to 34% of psychologists. Since Stokes is a psychologist, I suspect that his experience with “the scientific community” may be heavily skewed.

As for the “materialistic worldview of modern science,” this is also a misconception, and one that is common among psychologists. The great psychologist Gardner Murphy (1969), president of the Ameri-

can Psychological Association and later of the American Society for Psychical Research, urged his fellow psychologists to become better acquainted with modern physics.

. . . the difficulty is at the level of physics, not at the level of psychology. Psychologists may be a little bewildered when they encounter modern physicists who take these phenomena in stride, in fact, take them much more seriously than psychologists do, saying, as physicists, that they are no longer bound by the types of Newtonian energy distribution, inverse square laws, etc., with which scientists used to regard themselves as tightly bound. (p. 527)

Matter is not even considered in remotely the same terms in modern physics as it was in classical physics. Atoms are no longer thought of as “solid, massy, hard, impenetrable moveable particles,” as Newton described them, but rather as potentialities, possibilities with a wavelike structure that can interfere like waves. Possibilities that become fully real only when observed are more like ideas than like tiny, observer-independent billiard balls. The classical idea of substance—self-sufficient, unchanging, with definite location, motion, and extension in space—has been replaced by the idea that physical reality is not made out of any material substance, but rather out of events and possibilities for those events to occur. These possibilities, or potentials, for events to occur have a wavelike structure and can interfere with each other. As the celebrated philosopher of science Karl Popper frequently remarked, materialism has transcended itself.

In conclusion, I stand by my review of Stokes’s book. I did admire parts of it, although I disagreed with most of the conclusions.

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