

BOOK REVIEW

A Philosophical Critique of Empirical Arguments for Postmortem Survival by Michael Sudduth. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xv + 336 pp. £49.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-137-44093-8.

Psychical researchers have long recognized the difficulties posed for interpretation of ostensible evidence of postmortem survival by paranormal interactions and other psychological processes involving only living persons. Myers (1903, Vol. 1:8–9), for example, says

It became gradually plain to me that before we could safely mark off any group of manifestations as definitely implying an influence from beyond the grave, there was need of a more searching review of the capacities of man's incarnate personality than psychologists . . . had thought it worth their while to undertake.

Myers himself of course became convinced that he had obtained compelling evidence of survival, but others in his own circle, familiar with most if not quite all of the same evidence, remained unpersuaded. That early episode pretty much set the pattern for the subsequent history of the subject: Despite the advent of more and better evidence of types Myers and his colleagues already knew about, and additional kinds of evidence not as well-known or even unknown to them such as drop-in mediumistic communicators and cases of the reincarnation type (CORT), serious and open-minded students of the survival literature have remained deeply divided right to the present day as to whether the available evidence justifies rational belief in the possibility of survival, and if so to what degree.

The issues are at least in part philosophical, revolving around deep subjects such as the metaphysics of personal identity, and professional philosophers have made important contributions to the debate throughout its long history, from persons such as Myers's colleagues William James and F. C. S. Schiller through mid-20th-Century figures such as Curt Ducasse, H. H. Price, and C. D. Broad. The present era is no exception. Philosophers Almeder (1992), Carter (2012), Griffin (1997), Lund (2009), and Paterson (1995), for example, have published books strongly supportive of survival, while Stephen Braude (1997, 2003) has taken a more conservative approach which although also pro-survival in the end (just barely), emphasizes that survivalists have not yet taken as seriously as they should the potential

for living-agent psi (henceforth, LAP) to explain the existing evidence, particularly in conjunction with what we have learned both about psi itself and about the unusual potentialities revealed by associated psychological phenomena such as the savant syndrome and various dissociative and altered states of consciousness.

Now into the fray comes philosopher Michael Sudduth, who makes much use of Braude's work while driving toward a significantly more negative assessment of the overall state of play. In this important new book, Sudduth applies his skills as an analytical philosopher to a thoroughgoing examination of the *logic* of existing empirical arguments for personal postmortem survival, using concepts and tools provided by an emerging specialty in philosophy of science known as "confirmation theory," which attempts to formalize the process of inductive reasoning within a probabilistic framework. His primary focus throughout is conceptual, not factual, and his primary conclusion is that the two leading explanatory contenders, survival and LAP, are essentially stalemated, with *both* ultimately unsuccessful, and for the same reasons.

So how does he arrive at this negative view, and what shall we make of it? Let me begin by briefly outlining the book's contents. Chapter 1 sketches some history and introduces the basic structure of the classical explanatory arguments for survival. The core idea, which Sudduth can and will formalize later on and elaborate in various directions, is that there is some body of empirical data which appears to be satisfactorily explainable by the hypothesis of survival, but which is not explainable as well, if at all, by any competing hypothesis, whether naturalistic (outright fraud, for example, or faulty observation, recall, and/or reporting, etc.) or paranormal (especially, of course, LAP). Again identifying themes which he will develop in greater detail as the argument proceeds, he characterizes deficiencies in evidence assessment and deficiencies in the formulation of the survival hypothesis as two major generic problems in the existing survival literature, along with widespread failure to recognize the vital role played by auxiliary assumptions in constructing and evaluating scientific explanations. The chapter ends with a chapter-by-chapter sketch of the plan and argument of the book.

Chapter 2 provides a sampling of the very wide range of possible forms that postmortem survival might conceivably take, arguing for psychological continuity versus bodily continuity as the primary criterion of personal identity and emphasizing the degree to which such continuity would vary across the various survival scenarios he entertains.

Chapters 3 through 5 survey the main kinds of empirical observations produced by investigations of OBE/NDE cases, mediumship, and cases

of the reincarnation type, respectively, based on a sampling of classic cases which overlaps strongly with those of previous authors. Following a procedure widely used in analytical philosophy, Sudduth also generates, for each of 31 main types of data he identifies, a formal logical description to be used in his later analyses. I hasten to add here that Michael Sudduth, like the other philosophers mentioned above, and unlike the authors of recent anti-survival polemics such as Martin and Augustine (2015), clearly has studied a large amount of relevant literature with an open mind.

Chapters 6 through 10 comprise the heart of the book and its principal novelty—the systematic analysis of existing empirical arguments for survival using terms and methods derived from confirmation theory. Particularly from this point forward the book is hard reading, packed with formal logic, but Sudduth generally writes very clearly and does a good job of helping readers find their way by means of judicious repetition of crucial points and frequent translations of key logical expressions into ordinary-language equivalents.

Chapter 6 first reviews the pro-survival arguments of Richard Hodgson, James Hyslop, and Ian Stevenson, based on individual classes of evidence, and the extension to cumulative-case form by Almeder. Sudduth then begins the process of formalizing these arguments, focusing initially on the probabilistic concept of the *likelihood* of observational evidence given a hypothesis, and the use of likelihoods to assess the relative ability of competing hypotheses to predict or explain the same data. He ends the chapter by pointing out that *evidential favoring* does not by itself guarantee *net plausibility*.

In Chapter 7 Sudduth addresses the issue of net plausibility by extending his approach to the more ambitious Bayesian model, which takes into account the prior probability of a hypothesis and provides for estimation of its posterior probability in light of additional evidence. Here he focuses mainly on the work of C. D. Broad and E. R. Dodds as early and mostly informal examples of Bayesian-type considerations at work. Both regarded full-fledged personal survival as a priori very unlikely in light of the apparent dependence of mind on brain, but their responses to this took very different forms, with Broad advancing his insentient “psychic factor” theory of survival, and Dodds becoming a major early proponent of LAP. Dodds is credited in particular with recognizing the need to flesh out the bare or “simple” survival hypothesis with auxiliary assumptions in order for it to generate any expectations or predictions whatsoever (p. 183).

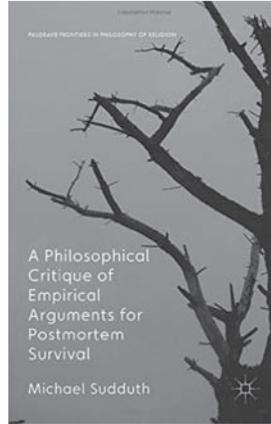
Chapter 8 moves on to Bayesian-style *defenses* of the survival hypothesis, focusing primarily on the work of C. J. Ducasse and R. W. K. Paterson. Sudduth takes special pains to examine Ducasse’s famous analogy

between the case of antemortem survival from a plane crash and that of postmortem survival following actual bodily death, arguing that Ducasse had implicitly and unjustifiably relied on a large number of auxiliary assumptions regarding the latter situation. What emerges here, from a Bayesian point of view, is that the bare survival hypothesis has to be “bulked up” to a “robust” form in order to enhance its explanatory power, but doing so using inadequately justified auxiliary assumptions can drastically reduce its prior probability. The situation is analogous to that of fitting mathematical functions to observed data, where additional parameters yield better fit, but at the expense of decreased plausibility of the fitted models. Sudduth goes on to argue that the same sorts of issues infect Paterson’s cumulative case extension of Ducasse’s original argument.

Chapter 9 develops what Sudduth calls the auxiliary assumption requirement (AAR) and the problem of auxiliaries (PoA) more systematically, attempting to specify the auxiliary assumptions needed in order for the survival hypothesis to predict or explain the various categories of evidence systematized in Chapters 3 through 5, and arguing that all or most of these are not independently justifiable.

Chapters 10 and 11 then introduce and defend the LAP hypothesis in greater detail as a legitimate and serious explanatory challenger to the survival hypothesis, particularly in robust forms of the sort advanced in Braude’s earlier work. Here Sudduth also pays particular attention to survivalist *critiques* of LAP, arguing that they make numerous unwarranted assumptions about how psi processes operate and what sort of limits they might have, and more importantly that the traditional “super-psi” argument against LAP is ultimately self-defeating because the survival hypothesis itself entails psi functioning of essentially the same scope, magnitude, and refinement. We know that psi exists, but beyond that we are largely ignorant of its properties, and this at present poses a fundamental problem for *both* survival and LAP models.

Chapter 11 ends with a brief summary of the book’s central arguments and claims. Sudduth is very clear about what he thinks he has accomplished, which is mainly to demonstrate on logical grounds that the classical empirical arguments for personal survival, in all their existing forms, fail to make the case. He has not *disproved* survival, however, or *proved* LAP, and did not set out to attempt these things. Indeed, lest anti-survivalists take too



much encouragement from his book he ends by explicitly suggesting that belief in survival might be rationally justifiable on various other grounds, possibly in tandem with empirical arguments of the sorts he has examined.

Before proceeding further I must add that the foregoing brief summary hardly begins to do justice to the richness of this remarkable book, barely capturing some of its main themes and highlights. In any case, having now described its contents as best I can in the space available, I must next go on to say what I think about it.

On the positive side, there is certainly a great deal to be admired. Sudduth has definitely carried the historical contest between LAP and survivalist interpretations of currently available evidence to a new level of analytical sophistication, with numerous useful results. Echoing Steve Braude, I wholeheartedly endorse his call for abandonment of the pejorative “super-psi” terminology in relation to LAP, which really is a red herring, and I agree with both of them that there is much more evidence of high-grade psi in non-survival contexts than survivalists have generally been willing to acknowledge, especially in the non-experimental literature regarding phenomena such as psychometry (Barrington, Stevenson, & Weaver 2005) and macro-PK (Grosso 2016). It also is certainly the case that our understanding of altered states of consciousness and their associated potentialities is currently rudimentary at best, and further developments in that area seem likely to catalyze and perhaps constrain the refinement of LAP models generally. It also seems to me indisputable that Sudduth’s formal analysis of the existing arguments for survival has enabled him to expose the crucial importance of playing fair by comparing robust LAP models against robust survival models, and the likelihood that the choice between these may well come down to evaluation of the rival auxiliary assumptions they require. He has certainly militated effectively against further “lazy testing” of the survival hypothesis and against premature triumphalism about the strength of the positive case for survival.

At the same time, I must also point out some aspects of Sudduth’s presentation that I find potentially problematic or otherwise unsatisfactory in some way. First and foremost among these is his reliance upon confirmation theory, which he simply adopts without discussion or justification as though it’s the known and universally agreed-upon “gold standard” for investigations of the sort he is undertaking. This is surely not the case *descriptively*, inasmuch as neither I nor any other of the working scientists I’ve consulted had ever heard of it before. Perhaps this is just another example of the evils of academic specialization, but it also is not at all clear or obvious to me that his use of this theory should be seen as appropriate *prescriptively* or *normatively*, either. His characterization of what it means

to “expect” or “predict” or “accommodate” or “explain” observational data in a manner approved by confirmation theory seems to me much more appropriate to hard-science contexts than to those dominating psychology and the behavioral sciences generally, and his descriptions sometimes come across as unrealistically precise, a bit like including an unwarranted number of digits in the estimate of some statistical quantity such as a mean or probability value. There is a strong emphasis throughout the book on movement by means of logical inference *from* adequately detailed survival or LAP models *to* the analytical descriptions he has created of the data needing explanation, and on decisively *ruling in* or *ruling out* such models on logical grounds versus patiently accumulating data that appear to support them differentially. Surely LAP and survival hypotheses need not be mutually exclusive, and either or both models might ultimately enter into a full understanding of any individual case. Similarly, he verges at several places on suggesting that there must be some single best survival model which incorporates an optimum amount of detail that will enable it to cover explanatory successes and failures of the survival hypothesis *in general*, but it seems to me much more likely that survival, if it occurs at all, might take pretty much any of the forms canvassed in Chapter 2, depending on circumstances we know essentially nothing about.

The book’s central arguments are extremely abstract and proceed at a great distance from the raw empirical observations, sometimes leaving me with the odd sense of looking through the wrong end of a telescope. By contrast, most survival investigators, historically speaking, have begun with the detailed data of intensively studied individual cases, and attempted to guess, “abductively,” what sort of model might in a relatively rough common-sense or folk-psychological manner account best for their observed properties, i.e. without presuming such a narrow and formal concept of scientific explanation. What I take Ducasse to have done, for example, is to posit the postmortem persistence of more or less intact *minds* as the source of the most challenging observed data—a single and in some sense “simple” survival hypothesis which already incorporates most if not all of what Sudduth treats under the heading of auxiliary assumptions. See incidentally the remarkable early essay by F. C. S. Schiller (1927), for similar reservations about attempts by contemporary Oxford logicians to dictate scientific practice.

Secondly, although I agree with the contention that pro-survivalists should attempt to flesh out their models in more detail than they have in the past, I also have the distinct impression that both Sudduth and Braude are inclined to go rather easier on robust LAP models in this regard, perhaps with a view to redressing the rhetorical imbalance in the existing

literature. One example concerns the appeal to sudden emergence of *skills* in dissociative states of the sorts we find in trance mediumship. That this can happen has been demonstrated, yes, but why in the mediumistic context should the skill that appears happen to be one that had been possessed by the relevant deceased person? Are we prepared to suppose that there are no limits on the variety and quality of skills that can be summoned in this way, by a single person?

Another example concerns the repeated claims by both authors that the survival hypothesis entails exercise by discarnate persons of psi capacities essentially *identical* in scope and power to those attributed to the medium by the LAP hypothesis. I don't think we have any realistic basis for quantitatively precise parity assertions of this sort, which again flow from a very abstract argument remote from real data. Mrs. Piper's GP control, for example, recognized all and only the 30 anonymous sitters that GP had actually known in life, and for many of these delivered copious amounts of intimate personal detail with great verisimilitude, while showing only relatively modest amounts of knowledge about ongoing world events above and beyond what might plausibly have been gleaned directly from the medium. I continue to feel that the survival hypothesis has an edge in cases like this: First, it seems "simpler," in the sense that nearly all the information needed to support the performance of the GP persona can plausibly be imagined as resident in the discarnate mind of GP himself, should it exist; second, it obviates what still seem like excessive demands of the LAP hypothesis on the psychic capacities of Mrs. Piper, and their ability to overcome the problems of "crippling complexity" identified by Braude (2003). More generally, the admission that high-grade psi exists outside the context of ostensible evidence for survival narrows but does not automatically close the gap between the LAP and survival hypotheses; what needs to be shown by defenders of LAP is that psi of the requisite scope and power exists not just generically, somewhere, but in the specific persons who are required to exercise it under LAP interpretations of particular cases.

I must also say that I feel more hopeful than Sudduth apparently does that we are not really stalemated, and that there exist significant possibilities of various kinds for further advance. One example especially important to me arises in the context of his treatment of OBE/NDE cases. There he focuses almost exclusively on the ostensible "separation" aspect of such cases, concluding—correctly, in my opinion—that we do not yet have compelling evidence to support this as an element of the empirical case for survival. I happen to think that much more can potentially be done experimentally in this area, but more importantly the information we already have bears on the issue of survival in a quite different and very powerful *theoretical* way. I'm

thinking specifically here of NDEs occurring under extreme physiological conditions such as deep general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest. There are many such cases, and as argued for example in Chapter 6 of *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, & Greyson 2007), they conflict sharply with the current neuroscientific consensus as to physiological conditions necessary for conscious experience, *and* with the impoverished physicalist metaphysics which undergirds that consensus. In fact, together with other “rogue” empirical phenomena such as psi phenomena generally, extreme psychophysiological influence, unexplained properties of memory, secondary and overlapping centers of consciousness occupying the same physical organism, creative genius in its highest forms, and mystical-type experiences—and supported by more modern developments in physics itself as well as by recent philosophical literature on consciousness and the mind/brain relation—such experiences contribute to demonstrating clearly, I believe, that the classical physicalism of the late 19th Century sort which dominates contemporary psychology and neuroscience is not simply incomplete but *false*.

This has immediate and profound ramifications for the survival debate, because if that sort of physicalism were true, survival would be impossible, period. Survival-deniers Martin and Augustine (2015) make that negligible prior probability a cornerstone of their own quasi-Bayesian approach to the survival question, devoting a large part of their book simply to repetition of the familiar standard arguments supporting the prevailing physicalist account of brain/mind relations. (Schiller [1927] clearly anticipates this strategy, by the way, and more generally the deliberate use of low priors as a means of preventing accumulation of evidence favoring any opinion one happens not to like.)

That physicalist account is of course grounded in the strong correlations, which nobody denies, that are normally observed between mental events and physical events in the brain. Physicalists interpret these as demonstrating that physical events in some mysterious way *produce* or *constitute* all of our conscious mental life, but in Chapter 9 of *Irreducible Mind* we showed—convincingly, I believe—that the alternative “filter” or “transmission” or “permission” interpretation of mind/brain correlation advanced by William James and many others, in which mind is functionally distinct from brain even though normally operating in close conjunction with it, is at least equally compatible with leading-edge developments in both neuroscience and physics. This clearly creates a new opening for survival: Earlier scholars such as E. R. Dodds, C. D. Broad, and Gardner Murphy had viewed the apparent success of classical physicalism as *the* major obstacle to acceptance of positive evidence for survival—an “immovable object,” as

Murphy put it—and reducing that obstacle correspondingly weakens the a priori case against it. This is just one example of how new developments on the *theoretical* side could significantly alter the logical and probabilistic landscape of the survival debate (see also Gauld 1982:264).

There should also be possibilities for further advance on the *empirical* side, for example in the form of intensively studied cases in which competing explanations can be more sharply contrasted in terms of their relative ability to account for case details. Sudduth (p. 307) seems to think that such empirical advances may be possible, and like Braude (2003:283–288, 2013:31–34) he provides examples of “ideal” mediumship (pp. 74–77) and rebirth (pp. 110–113) cases which he apparently thinks *would* alter the landscape if they or close approximations to them could actually be found. It would perhaps have been especially instructive and illuminating had he revisited one or both of these to explain more completely, in light of the fully developed probabilistic framework, why he would view them as moving the needle toward survival and by how much, and more work along these lines by theoreticians would certainly be helpful in guiding further empirical research. At Division of Perceptual Studies we have high hope of finding ever-better NDE and rebirth cases, and new angles of approach might also emerge from statistical modeling and analysis studies, just now becoming feasible, of the large collections of computer-coded cases we have already constructed. I must also add here that I was disappointed by Sudduth’s decision not to include crisis apparitions among the categories of evidence he considers (see footnotes 4 and 8 in his Introduction), because contrary to what he says some of these cases seem to me evidentially quite strong and unequivocally suggestive of *purpose* originating on the side of the deceased (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886).

Finally, a few “oddball” cases that formerly seemed to provide evidence powerfully supportive of LAP, such as the Gordon Davis case (in which a medium produced compelling simulations of a person who had been thought deceased but turned out to be alive), have been exploded by more recent detective work (Carter 2012), and further impactful discoveries of that sort might also conceivably occur on either side.

In sum, there seem to be many possible avenues toward further progress. Parapsychologically knowledgeable readers will recall that in 1960 J. B. Rhine called for abandonment of survival research, his main argument being that since survival could not be experimentally discriminated from ESP among the living we should get on with study of ESP among the living. Fortunately, Rhine was not able to capture the undivided allegiance of our tiny field, and much important survival-related work has accumulated since that time, the present volume included. To my mind, the main impact of this

book should be to catalyze and shape further research on *both* survival and LAP models in light of the clearer understanding it provides of the logic of both kinds of arguments.

I do not wish the critical remarks above to obscure my fundamental admiration for this fine and very unusual book, to which I have not been able to do adequate justice in this brief review. It is dense with hard, clear, sustained, and provocative critical thinking, and rich in penetrating observations about the state of play in contemporary discussions of postmortem survival. Bottom line: a difficult but worthwhile read!

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