

The last chapter, "Solutions," is devoted to "ways to clean up each part of the information stream and to restore, at least partially, people's faith in numbers." Among the suggestions are such things as to print much greater detail of any published survey result, separate the sponsoring corporations from the university researcher, educate the media people who comment on the studies, and demand "that the scientists involved in the research be available for interviews outside of carefully controlled news conferences."

Crossen's best suggestion, as far as I am concerned, is to "teach their reporters and editors not only fundamentals of statistics but also how to be critical readers of many different kinds of research. One person on each staff should be a trained statistician, available to review research on deadline." I fear that this will never come to pass but note that I am available (but don't forget to be suspicious of me as well).

*Paul Alper*  
*University of St. Thomas*  
*St. Paul, MN 55105*

**Death and Personal Survival: The Evidence for Life After Death** by Robert Almeder. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992. 285 + xii pp. \$17.95 (p). ISBN 0-8226-3016-8. \$50.00 (c), ISBN 0-8476-7728-1.

This is a well-organized and clearly written book that deserves to be widely read and pondered. It makes audacious claims, some of which, to my mind, are extravagant; but they appear in a book in which the author challenges the reader to acknowledge the occurrence of many curious facts, thought by some to show that human consciousness can extend beyond bodily death, and to explain them in a way that entails no such extension.

Almeder, who teaches philosophy at Georgia State University in Atlanta, has published extensively in epistemology, the history of philosophy, and other areas. Among his works is *Beyond Death: Evidence for Life After Death* (Almeder, 1987), but he states that to regard the present work as a second edition of that book "would be a serious mistake" (p. x). The newer volume "seeks to offer a much stronger defense of personal survival" (p. x) than was possible in the earlier. He argues for the rationality of belief in personal survival and holds, instead, that "in the presence of the data and arguments" (p. xi) to be found here it would be irrational not to believe in it — surely an overstatement.

There are six chapters. In the first five, Almeder discusses, one per chapter, what he terms categories of research: reincarnation, apparitions, possession, out-of-body experiences, and mediumship; in the final chapter, he gives "The General Picture." The longest and in my opinion the most interesting chapter is the first, on reincarnation. I shall now examine it at some length and then touch on chapters 2-6.

Almeder begins by assuming something he will later attempt, not altogether

successfully, to prove: "Belief in personal survival after death is... neither logically absurd nor factually impossible" (p. 2). (Here, he surely means that survival is not factually impossible.) For reincarnation, he asserts, the "strongest argument" (p. 2) is due to Ian Stevenson and basically is that "reincarnation offers the best available explanation for a large body of data" (p. 3). This body of data, Almeder proceeds, comprises case studies that Stevenson has "described in great detail" (p. 3) in his 1966 book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* and in many later writings.

The reincarnation-type cases that Almeder considers are broadly divided into cases of children, "usually between the ages of three and nine" (p. 3), who spontaneously claim to remember previous lives, and cases involving adults who undergo hypnotic regression. Almeder cautions, however, that "though there are cases in which regression has produced important results for verifying reincarnation... the vast majority of so-called past-life regressions are worthless as such" (p. 64). Some of the cases provide ostensible instances of responsive xenoglossy, some involve birthmarks. In the first chapter as throughout the book Almeder does an excellent job of selecting and summarizing the cases.

Because of the methods used in their examination and "also because of their richness of detail" (p. 25), two Indian cases, those of Bishen Chand Kapoor and Swarnlata Mishra, seem to Almeder to "typify the strongest sort of evidence for reincarnation" (p. 25). Another case described is the so-called Mrs. Smith case. It concerns a psychiatric patient of Arthur Guirdham whom Guirdham met "in 1961 when he was chief psychiatrist at Bath Hospital in England" (p. 8). This patient claimed to remember "a past life with a Cathar priest" (p. 9), seemingly in 13th-century France, and to remember as well being burned at the stake. Certainly, the many details and discoveries that Almeder reports concerning the Mrs. Smith case and the two Indian cases make for highly intriguing stories. It does, though, strike me as incautious to claim that we can best explain such "very rich" (p. 59) cases by assuming that "human personality (whatever it is) admits of reincarnation" (p. 26). Alternatively, Almeder considers numerous accounts appealing variously to possibilities of fraud, paramnesia, cryptomnesia, subconscious impersonation, extrasensory perception (ESP), genetic memory, multiple personality, sloppy methodology, and even possession. But he makes a fairly strong argument that none of these lines of approach, alone or in combination, provide a plausible explanation of the most interesting reincarnation-type cases.

Take, for instance, attempts to explain them by appeal to ESP. As Almeder points out, there is no good evidence for the paranormal acquisition of skills. He argues that it is one thing to say that through ESP someone has come to know that such and such is the case, quite another to say that through ESP someone knows how to do something or other, like playing a musical instrument. And he believes that it would be necessary with regard to some of the cases, if they were to be explained without appeal to reincarnation, to hold that

certain skills had been acquired by ESP. Thus the child Bishen Chand, like the previous person he claimed to have been (Laxmi Narain), could play the drums skillfully, Almeder reports, but had not been taught how to play them. The skeptic's task would be easier "if we could plausibly argue that knowing how... actually reduces to some form of *knowing that*" (p. 48), but I agree with Almeder that such reduction may well be impossible.

Whether such cases as Almeder describes are plausibly explained by calling them evidence for reincarnation, however, is something readers need to decide for themselves. As Almeder allows, we do not know what reincarnates, "how it reincarnates, how long it reincarnates, whether it disappears after a series of reincarnations, or even why it reincarnates" (p. 267). Do we nonetheless have a clear enough understanding of the concept of reincarnation to accord it the role of *explaining* cases of the sort Almeder discusses? I tend to doubt it. To say, with Almeder, that the survival hypothesis is now "strongly confirmed" (p. 269) or that not to believe in survival is "irrational" (p. xi) is at odds, it seems to me, with the vagueness, controversy, obscurity, and confusion that marks the whole idea of "life after death." Such haziness, further, is one reason I disagree with Almeder's claim that belief in reincarnation is at least as well established as belief in the past existence of dinosaurs. Another reason is that the dinosaur belief, at home as it is in a framework of paleontology, contrasts tellingly in this respect with the belief in reincarnation, which is housed in no scientific theory at all.

Interestingly, Almeder appears to rate Stevenson's collection of cases as better evidence for reincarnation than does Stevenson himself. At any rate, he remarks that "Stevenson believes the argument for reincarnation would be won only by finding an *ideal case*" (pp. 58-59), an ideal case being one that, unlike any case found so far, meets certain conditions, which Almeder sets out. And then he opines that even though extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, "it seems excessively cautious to think that the belief in reincarnation is not established by the rich cases described in this chapter, and that we ought to await the appearance of the ideal case" (p. 60). (Later in the book, when Almeder writes as though ideal cases have already been found — "There are many past and current ideal cases of the reincarnation type" (p. 268) — I take it that he is then using "ideal cases" in a non-Stevensonian sense.)

Why, he asks,

would we need any more evidence for belief in reincarnation than that provided by a nonfraudulent case in which the subject has a rich set of memory claims, some of which refer to past facts that are items of public knowledge and some of which are verified as facts that only the subject could have known if the subject had indeed lived a past life as the person the subject claims to have been? (p. 60)

But a less radical response to such a strange possibility is favored by A. J.

Ayer, whose thinking on reincarnation, I may say in passing, Almeder seems to oversimplify. Ayer (1963) writes that

even if someone could convince us that he ostensibly remembered the experiences of a person who is long since dead, and... this were backed by an apparent continuity of character, I think that we should prefer to say that he had somehow picked up the dead man's memories and dispositions rather than that he was the same person in another body; the idea of a person's leading a discontinuous existence in time as well as in space is just that much more fantastic. (Ayer, 1963, p. 127)

The question of what reincarnates, if reincarnation occurs, remains daunting. Stevenson addresses it in a 1974 article, where he says that he finds himself "thinking increasingly of some intermediate 'nonphysical body' which acts as the carrier... between one life and another" (Stevenson, 1974, p. 406). Later, he proposes "to call the vehicle that carries a person's mental elements between incarnations a *psychophore*" (Stevenson, 1987, p. 238), preferring that new term to "terms such as *astral bodies* [that] have connotations... we should avoid" (Stevenson, 1987, p. 318). Reflecting on Stevenson's "intermediate body," I (Wheatley, 1979) have concluded that it is an astral body of a kind. And the philosopher Paul Edwards, who has recently subjected the notion of an astral body to scathing and probably well-deserved criticism (see Edwards, 1992, pp. 18-22) and whose four-part critique of reincarnation (Edwards, 1986-1987) Almeder engagingly disputes, says that most believers in reincarnation have taken the view that what exists between incarnations is the astral body in one guise or another. But he thinks "there are overwhelmingly strong reasons for believing that no such entity exists" (Edwards, 1992, pp. 18-19). (In this paragraph I assume that what exists between incarnations and what reincarnates are one and the same.)

It has been alleged that possibly nothing at all exists between incarnations, if reincarnation occurs. This is the view taken by Terence Penelhum (1970), who argues cogently that the idea of disembodied persons is logically incoherent. Referring to the case of Bridey Murphy, he sees it as a viable option to identify Ruth Simmons with Bridey, but just *because* the identification can be made "without [one's] having to postulate an intermediate disembodied soul" (Penelhum, p. 91). And he continues: "To the question 'What has to exist between one incarnation and another?' the answer may be 'Nothing.' This answer has to be possible for the doctrine of reincarnation to be possible" (Penelhum, p.91). (In view of this account, one may question Almeder's implication that for Penelhum reincarnation, like unembodied personal existence, is "conceptually impossible" (p. 85). Yet Almeder's point may be well taken: If there is nothing to reincarnate, why call the process reincarnation?)

Though understandably he doesn't say how it could, Almeder thinks that something may indeed exist in the intervals between incarnations. He seems, however, to want to distance himself from the astral-body idea, writing that

the argument for reincarnation implies nothing specific about the nature of an "astral body," where it goes during the period between incarnates, [etc.]... As a matter of fact, given the cases involved, one need never mention the expression *astral* body. (p. 35)

As I have implied, he sometimes puts it that *personalities* reincarnate, and at other times he speaks of *persons* as reincarnating. Again, he mentions "some core elements of human personality" (p. 35) as surviving bodily death and subsequently reincarnating, and finally, in an important context in which he endorses C. D. Broad's (1962) idea of a  $\psi$ -component (which, presumably for typographical convenience, he refers to as an  $x$ -component), Almeder speculates that what might "persist after the biological death of the human being" (p. 260) — and later perhaps reincarnate — is "the dispositional basis of one's personality (or at any rate some part of it)" (p. 260). I shall return to that idea of Broad's when referring to Almeder's final chapter.

Almeder raises two further questions about reincarnation. The first is whether *everybody* reincarnates, and Almeder admits that universal reincarnation "is not strictly supported by the evidence for reincarnation" (p. 63). The second question is, "assuming the truth of universal reincarnation, what is the cash value of the belief?... [W]ould belief in reincarnation have any personal value or significance?" (p. 63). Here, his answer is that "as long as one cannot remember anything of a past life, belief in reincarnation may not have personal significance beyond satisfying one's curiosity in understanding the nature of human personality" (pp. 63-64). He is probably right, though the satisfaction of curiosity in this context must be given great weight. Indeed, if reincarnation occurs, universally or otherwise, it is plainly something of whose reality we may be permanently unaware, and, from a practical standpoint, none the worse for that.

Anyway, whatever personal significance reincarnation may or may not have, according to Almeder it does occur. And he contends that Chapter I describes evidence for reincarnation that certainly provides "empirically repeatable evidence for personal survival" (p. 265).

Chapters 1-5 possess a common format, one comprising the sequence that structures the chapter on reincarnation — that is, an introduction to the category of research to which the chapter is dedicated; presentation and discussion of cases, including those Almeder judges to be evidentially best; skeptical responses; replies thereto; and conclusions.

The chapter on "Apparitions of the Dead", like all the others, offers impressive examples. One such is a ghost story related to the crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401 in 1972. This chapter concludes that "the evidence presented here — while persuasive in some ways — will seem something less than ideal from the skeptic's point of view" (p. 130).

Chapter 3, on possession, includes a very puzzling case that, Almeder reports, was presented in this *Journal* in 1989, in an article by Stevenson and others. Almeder calls it the Sumitra case and notes that those authors "close

their discussion with the claim that the only plausible interpretation consists in appealing to a type of possession or reincarnation" (p. 152). (Almeder's section on differences between reincarnation and possession ends with an arresting observation: "*Possession* might be applied to cases of an apparent 'taking over' of a body after its birth; but if the possession occurs before birth, then it is what we mean by *reincarnation*" (p. 158.) And Almeder closes his own discussion with the claim that "the methods used in the Sumitra case investigation... show fairly compellingly that the usual objections to the effect that there might be natural (i.e., nonparanormal?) ways to explain the data are quite unfounded" (p. 159).

Chapter 4 deals with out-of-body experiences divided into voluntary and involuntary. It discusses Charles Tart's experiment with Miss Z (whom Almeder insists on calling Ms. Z) and Karlis Osis and Donna McCormick's experiment with Alex Tanous, which Almeder regards as a "successful repetition" (p. 168) of Tart's experiment. He concludes that whereas "we cannot claim to have conclusive evidence" (p. 198), still, "we have in these best cases enough in the way of 'proof to justify a rational belief in some form of postmortem personal survival" (p. 194).

The focus of Chapter 5, "Communications from the Dead," is trance mediumship, with emphasis on a 19th-century case of alleged mediumship and xenoglossy that Almeder calls the Greek case, the mediumships of Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Willett, and a recent experiment in mediumship conducted by Arthur Berger. Almeder's conclusion is that "if what we have here does not seem robust enough evidence based on... mediumship to make postmortem personal survival a sure thing, it does make survival more likely than not" (p. 249).

In the book's final short chapter, which is followed by a 12-page bibliography and an index, Almeder declared that if we had only the best available evidence from any *one* of the categories of research he examines, "we might not find the evidence sufficiently compelling to warrant full-blooded conviction in personal survival" (p. 255). But, he goes on, the case for survival derives from the whole body of evidence amassed from the categories collectively: "The *multiplicity* of the arguments provides the extraordinary evidence required for conviction" (p. 256). But of course it won't be convincing if we suspect that the idea of survival is conceptually incoherent. Something the last chapter tries to demonstrate is that the idea is not incoherent.

I do not find that anything in this book serves to counter Penelhum's argument that the idea of a *bodiless* person is logically incoherent (see Penelhum, esp. pp. 54-78), but Almeder does not insist that what survives *is* bodiless (though he seems to believe that personal survival without a body is a possibility). In fact, as we've seen, he endorses (at least in part) Broad's idea of a  $\psi$ -component (Broad, pp. 415 ff.), which is not impugned by Penelhum's reasoning. Yet given that Broad's idea is coherent and that it is logically possible, in Almeder's words, "for the dispositional basis of a human personality to persist after the biological death of the human being who had possessed that personal-

ity" (p. 260), it in no way follows that such persistence would count as personal survival. Unlike Broad, Almeder seems to think, implausibly, that the  $\psi$ -component by itself could count as a person. What's more, though Almeder claims that continued existence beyond death of "the dispositional basis of one's personality (or at any rate some part of it)... [still] organized in its former characteristic pattern" (p. 260) is not "factually impossible" (p. 260), it is unclear what he believes warrants such a claim.

Almeder believes that "belief in reincarnation and personal survival [is] an experimentally viable hypothesis... [and] a strongly confirmed one, as well" (p. 269). There is enough evidence for personal survival of death, he thinks, to make it rational to believe in its occurrence. Characterizing such evidence, he uses various modifiers. Thus, he finds it either "plausible" (p. 98), "solid" (p. 136), "persuasive" (p. 203), "good" (p. 249), "convincing" (p. 205), or "compelling" (p. 237). But to my mind, all these adjectives are excessive. I agree that we don't know that "consciousness cannot exist without a brain" (p. 34), but it should be plain that we don't know that it can. The strongest adjective I would use in the present context is "suggestive," but even to say that we have suggestive evidence for reincarnation or survival may itself suggest that we are less in the dark than we are about what would survive or reincarnate — the after-person, to use Ayer's term (see Ayer, 1973, p. 124).

Almeder acknowledges that we are in the dark about such matters. Referring to reincarnation, he mentions the "very perplexing philosophical questions [that] emerge" (p. 86) and says "it is by no means clear just how to answer them" (p. 86). For example: Is "the reincarnated person... just the former person with a new body, or... a distinct personality that has subsumed... the former person... or... a composite[?]" (p. 89). But he speaks of "intuitions... sufficient to sustain the belief that human personality... survives and sometimes... reincarnates" (p. 89) and holds that the tough questions will be decided "on the basis that reincarnation does in some interesting way occur" (p. 89).

It is salutary to notice that in *The Philosophical Possibilities Beyond Death* Brooke Noel Moore (1981) covers much the same ground as does the present work, but reaches a conclusion profoundly different, arguing that "personal survival beyond bodily death is neither a priori impossible nor... a priori certain" (Moore, p. 205). And though that does not necessarily mean they haven't survived, still, "I can only think that it is very likely that my death will end my existence" (Moore, p. 205).

All the same, I find Almeder's seemingly extravagant assessment of the evidence invigorating and thought-provoking. In an undergraduate course in the logic of mortality, as Antony Flew has termed it, *Death and Personal Survival* would serve admirably. Although I do not regard Almeder's optimism (or, if you will, pessimism) about surviving as being so far realistic, I believe that in expertly and vividly presenting a variety of often mystifying cases and giving his thoughtful perspective on what they mean he has performed an unusual service for what I hope will be a wide and critically receptive readership.

Regrettably, the book was not well served by its proof-readers. Some names are misspelled and several titles are rendered inaccurately (for example, Flew's first name becomes "Anthony" and the title of a book by Ducasse is repeatedly miscited), there are at least two misquotations, the index contains at least one major error, and there are many other typos.

James M. O. Wheatley  
500 Duplex Ave., Apt. 2601  
Toronto, Canada M4R 1V6

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**Bad Science: The Short Life and Weird Times of Cold Fusion** by Gary Taubes. New York: Random House, 1993, 503 pp. \$25 (c).

Here's a fifth book in English about cold fusion (see reviews of three others in JSE: 5 #2, 6 #1, 6 #4). What's different, new, or special about this one?

It is considerably longer; but it does not go deeper into the substantive issues of experiment, data, and theory than the earlier books by Close, Huizenga, or Mallove. (The first book, by Peat, is chiefly of historical interest: it was written too soon and published too quickly).

This book is the most recently published, yet it does not bring the story more up to date. The chronological manner in which Taubes tells the story ends in June 1991, though the book was printed two years later. An Epilogue of 4 pages does nothing to make up for that.

With Close and Huizenga, Taubes is quite sure that cold fusion does not exist; but he argues the case less by argument about the issues than by *argumentum ad hominem*.

This book belongs to the "let-it-all-hang-out" genre that places "human interest" clearly ahead of the intellectual issues; a genre that I'm tempted to call scientific pornography because it appeals more to prurient than to scholarly passions. This genre was foreshadowed by J. D. Watson's soul-baring memoir,