

**The Survival of Human Consciousness: Essays on the Possibility of Life after Death** edited by Lance Storm and Michael A. Thalbourne. McFarland, 2006. 311 pp. \$45.00 (paper). ISBN 0-7864-2772-8.

This book is a companion piece to an earlier volume on parapsychological research edited by Michael Thalbourne and Lance Storm (2005), the present one covering the "oft-forgotten, or at least marginalized, third domain" of psychical research, namely, "afterlife research" (pp. 5–6). Its purpose was to present multidisciplinary perspectives on the question of survival after death. Although among the five sections there is one on "evidential issues," most of the 16 authors write primarily from a social scientific or philosophical perspective.

The first section is entitled "Historical Issues," and in the first chapter Keith Chandler undermines the common view that belief in survival arose from humanity's fear of death. Instead he argues that fear and denial of death are a recent historical development deriving from "the spiritual anorexia of modern skepticism, which has constricted our sense of self to the sensual and materialistic . . . dimension" (p. 12). In contrast, in "virtually all times past" (p. 13) humans held a view of "the unity of life and death" and of death as "a natural occurrence transiting to some sort of afterlife" (pp. 22–23).

In the second chapter Christopher Moreman addresses a question that is raised in several places in this volume about "what will survive?" He contrasts the typically Western bias toward survival of the individual with what he says is erroneously attributed to an Eastern view, that the individual self is obliterated (p. 37). He argues that the truer Eastern view, derived from mystical experiences worldwide, contrasts the temporary self with the larger and truer Self.<sup>1</sup> After death there is "a realization of the true essence of the self. In eventually merging each self with a World Soul, the essential component of the self is preserved, it is only that what we presently perceive of as the essential component of a self is actually mistaken" (p. 37). Puzzlingly, and in apparent contradiction to this, he later says that after death "the individual is lost . . . no more than a drop in a bucket, with form for but a brief fall before merging back into the whole" (pp. 44–45). Most mystics in fact, even those who have experienced the "introvertive" type of mystical experience of merging with a Whole, have described, not the loss of the individual, but the paradoxical sense of being both an individual self and merged with the Whole.

Section II is titled "Theoretical and Experimental Issues." In Chapter 3 Douglas Stokes writes about "Mind, Matter, and Death," beginning from the presumption of "the intimate dependence of the human personality on the state of the physical brain" (p. 47). Stokes credits "modern cognitive neuroscience" with "revealing" this insight, although it has been almost a truism for much of human history and in fact involves much more complex issues than either Stokes or most contemporary scientists seem to recognize. Stokes concludes with the

proposal that what survives are lots of "mini-Shins," or little spheres of consciousness that are associated with many parts of the brain, which are "much more like a quark than like a molecule or a neuron" (p. 63) and may be recycled, perhaps endlessly, throughout the cosmos. Unfortunately, the chapter seems more a collection of musings on random topics often found in popular books on philosophy and physics—including the standard arguments against "perilous" dualism, studies of split-brains and multiple selves, panpsychism, and quantum hidden variables—than an in-depth examination of any of these.

In Chapter 4 William Braud does a reprise of the movie "My Dinner with Andre," describing lunch, dinner, and coffee break discussions between two fictional psychologists, Alan and Erika, at a fictional conference on death and dying. First they discuss "what survives." Is it an individual consciousness or—a view "gaining in prominence"—a "pure consciousness . . . devoid of content"? Do some people survive and others don't based on their beliefs and expectations? Or should we consider the view, "just as interesting, exciting—and probably more useful," that survival is not literal but symbolic: "There are many ways of 'dying,' 'surviving,' and even being 'reborn' other than literally and physically" (pp. 81–82). Why this is more interesting, exciting, and useful escapes me, but in any case it is certainly not a new suggestion. They then discuss reincarnation, suggesting (as Buddhists have before) that what survives is not a person with individual memories and characteristics but a "pattern," as in a wave that moves through "the individual droplets and molecules" (p. 86). They discuss the alternative hypotheses of survival, super-psi, and the dramatizing tendencies of the unconscious, but Braud expresses his preference for studying the human meaning and impact of experiences rather than their ontological "reality" (p. 88). He also provides suggestions for future research, but all of them strike me as of doubtful value, practically speaking. Most require extremely gifted and consistent mediums or psychics of a kind rarely seen. Another involves the use of hypnotic regression to recover memories of near-death experiences (NDEs), out-of-body experiences (OBEs), or childhood previous-life memories; but he neglects to mention that using hypnosis to recover *any* memories, normal or paranormal, is a highly problematic issue.

In Chapter 5 Michael Thalbourne reports a questionnaire study involving large numbers of undergraduate students in which he looked at the relationship between reports of "veridical visionary experiences" and of hallucinations of dead people, and responses to hallucination, sheep-goat, and absorption scales. The results suggest that hallucination-proneness is not a predictor of the experiences, but, as with so many such surveys that rely on unselected subjects and uninvestigated reports, one does not know exactly what is being measured. The problem is particularly exacerbated when vague and undefined questions are used, such as "I have had veridical, hallucinatory visionary experience," one of the items used in this study.

In Chapter 6 John Boyd and Philip Zimbardo describe the "transcendental-future" time perspective, in which one views one's life as extending beyond the

point of one's physical death, in contrast to the "traditional, mundane" perspective that life is confined by the endpoints of birth and death. (Why they call this the "traditional" view is a bit puzzling.) They argue that for those with a transcendental time perspective, actions that might seem irrational from the traditional perspective—such as "suicide, extreme heroism, and excessive tithing<sup>v</sup>"—are actually quite rational in seeking future rewards or avoiding future punishments (p. 108). Psychologists, they say, could benefit from understanding the importance of such a time perspective in influencing behavior. I would have thought that history and literature had demonstrated this amply, but if psychologists are catching up, this is perhaps progress, although I couldn't help remembering C. D. Broad's pungent remark about "all the tests which psychologists have devised for the discovery and canonization of the commonplace" (Broad, 1962, p. 341).

Section III turns to "Evidential Issues." In Chapter 7 David Fontana discusses physical psi phenomena, such as physical and direct voice mediumship, the Scole case, and instrumental transcommunication. He says that the phenomena are either "the product of [psychokinesis] PK" or "the work of discarnates," and he finds it "hard not to favor" the discarnate theory (p. 135). I'm afraid I find it quite hard to favor the discarnate theory on the basis of the evidence we currently have. For Fontana it "stretch[es] the bounds of credibility to argue that the phenomena at Scole were due to PK" (p. 138) because the communicators, speaking through two entranced mediums, showed "consistent individuality throughout the two years [of the investigation], both in terms of their personalities and their vocabulary" (p. 137). In the absence of any evidence for the identity of these "communicators," why not think that this "consistent individuality" derives from the entranced mediums? Fontana also argues that the survival hypothesis becomes more credible if a medium can speak nine languages not learned normally by her "with sufficient skill to convince native speakers" (p. 134). I agree. But it will take more and better documentation of this claim than the memoirs of a countess—the evidence cited by Fontana—to convince me.

Chapter 8, a review by William Roll of research on apparitions and mediumship, is certainly the best chapter in the book in terms of providing a good overview of some survival-related evidence. He too then discusses "what survives?" and concludes that if there is survival, it is likely to be in the form of physical memory traces and interpersonal psychophysical fields (whatever that means). Unfortunately, he does not discuss the enormous problems arising from the notion of physical memory traces (see, e.g., Braude, 2006; Gauld, 2007).

In Chapter 9 Stanley Krippner reviews studies of after-death communications (ADCs), that is, experiences in which a deceased person seems to make contact with a living person directly, without the intervention of a third party such as a medium or psychic. Krippner emphasizes the therapeutic effects of such experiences, but, although I of course applaud the application of knowledge derived from psychical research in a therapeutic context, I cannot share the view

"that 'being realistic' is not always as important in maintaining mental health as is fostering 'positive illusions'" (p. 185). Unfortunately, our knowledge about what ADCs really signify will not, I believe, advance as long as researchers fail to question the assumption, often repeated and gaining ground these days, that "the medial right temporal lobe, hippocampus, and associated limbic structures of the brain are linked" to ADCs, NDEs, OBEs, and other such, despite the so far almost complete lack of valid evidence for this claim (Kelly, Greyson, and Kelly, 2007).

Chapter 10 is the reprint of a case report, previously published by Erlendur Haraldsson in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, of a young Sinhalese girl who seemed to have memories and birthmarks associated with a man, a stranger to her family, who had died 2 years before her birth. The case is indeed an interesting one, but I wondered why the editors chose to print a single case report, and one already published elsewhere, rather than a review or evaluation of the immense body of such cases published over the past nearly 50 years.

Part IV, "Sociological and Phenomenological Issues," begins with "What the Channeled Material of Suicides Tells Us About the Afterlife," by Pamela Heath and Jon Klimo. They say that the study is based on a "scholarly examination of several hundred books and magazines published over a period of more than two hundred and fifty years," intended to look for "consistent themes" across different eras, cultures, and types of experiences. Unfortunately, they give no indication of what these hundreds of sources are, and in fact the 20 references they cite consist almost entirely of popular books by or about present-day psychics or mediums in the U.S. and the U.K. If there are consistent themes or descriptions of the nature of the afterlife, not readily attributable to normal cultural or psychological factors, this chapter provides no insight into this.

In Chapter 12 Robin Wooffitt describes the application of Conversational Analysis (CA), a sociological technique for analyzing verbal interactions, to mediumistic readings. CA shows things usually left out of purely verbal transcriptions, such as pauses, emphases, and repetitions. He gives an example of a traditionally transcribed passage of a reading and the same one using CA, to show "why a detailed [i.e., CA] transcript is so important" (p. 225). For the life of me, however, I could get no more information from the convoluted and difficult-to-read CA transcript than I did from the regular one. Wooffitt also gives many examples showing that mediums often ask a question, get a reply from the sitter, and then attribute the information back to the "spirit," a process (long recognized as an example of "cold reading") that Wooffitt calls a "three-turn attributive sequence." But again, it doesn't take CA to see this process happening, and although Wooffitt is careful to caution that such a process doesn't mean the medium is not actually getting the information from a spirit, it is hard not to adopt the more parsimonious view, in examples like this anyway, that the information came from the sitter's feedback. In any case, if studies of

mediums and the source of their statements are to advance, I doubt it will be by sociological tools for analyzing conversation.

In Chapter 13 James McClenon discusses "The Origins of Belief in Life after Death: The Ritual Healing Theory and Near-Death Experience." The Ritual Healing Theory says that "dissociative genotypes" undergird all psi experiences, which generate beliefs in spirits and magical abilities, and then shamanism, the earliest form of religion. The "resulting shamanic rituals, based on placebo and hypnotic effects, provided greater survival benefits for those with dissociative/hypnotic capacities, causing an evolutionary cycle leading to the modern genetic basis for religiosity" (pp. 244–245). It's hard to know how to even begin to ask for clarification of what this theory actually means, but one might begin by asking for evidence of "dissociative genes" and of the "biological basis of NDEs" (p. 253); by pointing out that there are alternative and complex explanations other than genes for why certain people have multiple paranormal experiences; by asking what is meant by the "placebo and hypnotic effects" of shamanism, especially when we have no real scientific understanding of what either placebo or hypnosis is or does; and by explaining how "cross-cultural analysis implies ... a physiological basis ... of consciousness" and how the physiology of consciousness generates belief in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities (p. 246). The issues behind such claims are enormous and complex, but are neither referred to nor dealt with in this chapter.

Lance Storm summarizes all the preceding chapters in Chapter 14, "Where Do We Go From Here?", and in Chapter 15 presents his own solution, which he calls "Radical Survivalism." His proposal is "that all events and all beings after their demise ... are preserved or sustained as forms of knowledge or information," a pool of knowledge that we can occasionally access by super-psi and elaborate with our "mythopoetic" abilities. To me, this seems neither a solution, radical, nor survival, but in any case it also does not seem new since it sounds very much like "akashic record" theories.

Storm says that in "presenting so much inconclusive evidence in this book, we have nevertheless advanced a little because no one can exclusively defend or refute one hypothesis in favor of another" (p. 265). He thinks that "the super-psi explanation works nicely for the 'soft' evidence like trance mediumship, drop-in communications, cross correspondences, and the like" (p. 265), although he concedes that it accommodates the "hard" evidence like the reincarnation cases less "nicely." Leaving aside the fact that virtually all serious students of the evidence for survival—even those who favor the super-psi hypothesis—would question how "nicely" it works, one must wonder why Storm considers this an advance. He calls for research to differentiate between the alternate hypotheses (p. 265), but what does he think survival researchers have been trying to do for over a century? There is little evidence, either in this chapter or throughout much of the rest of the book, of the depth of thinking and effort that our predecessors have put into the philosophical, methodological, and empirical

issues related to the survival question. But "the way forward" will require thinking and research equal to or even greater than what has come before, and certainly not less.

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### Note

- <sup>i</sup> Several authors in this book refer to a similar distinction, although none indicate that this distinction has a long history, not only in Eastern religions, but in Western philosophy and, closer to home, in psychical research (e.g., Ducasse, 1951, p. 495; Myers [see Kelly, 2007, pp. 82–83]; Schiller, 1891 1894, pp. 279–282).