

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.

A Philosophical Critique of Empirical Arguments for Postmortem Survival doesn't have the snappy title of Stephen E. Braude's *Immortal Remains*, but it does do exactly what it says on the cover with a similar level of sophisticated analysis and thorough understanding of both the evidence and the arguments for survival after death.

The book commences with a summary of the types of evidence and stances taken regarding the evidence and the possibility that humans somehow survive after death. Michael Sudduth hones the evidence down to three kinds of phenomena: out-of-body and near-death experiences, mediumistic communications, and cases of the reincarnation type (p. 3). He displays a thorough command of the historical and contemporary literature with his summary of the major contributors to the survivalist debate from both the empirical and philosophical examinations, before staking out the territory he will focus on in the book: the classical empirical arguments for survival.

Sudduth presents the bones of the explanatory survival argument as follows:

- 1) There is some body of empirical facts F.
- 2) The hypothesis of personal survival S explains F.
- 3) No other hypothesis C explains F as well as S does.

Therefore:

- 4) S is the best explanation of F (p. 9).

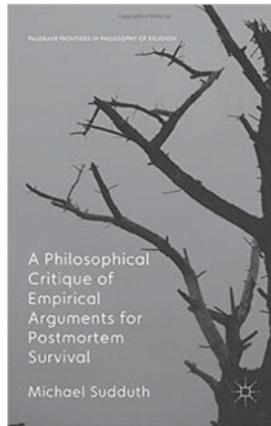
He points out that the argument is explanatory and probabilistic. This is an important starting point as what follows shows that the argument is flawed internally (essentially the arguments needed to maintain 3) compromise 2), and he ultimately concludes that: "*the classical arguments are unsuccessful at showing that there is good evidence for personal survival*" (p. 281). It takes us a while to get there and along the way we will be introduced to strong, moderate, and Bayesian versions of the argument which will lead

to the use of confirmation theory to determine likelihoods and, an important introduction to the analysis, an investigation of the problem of auxiliary assumptions.

Chapter 2 involves a discussion regarding the nature of survival and more particularly what is meant by the notion of survival after death, which he also divides into weak, moderate, and strong versions. It is important for the subsequent argument that there is acknowledgment about what is expected when one is supposed to have survived death in some way. The elements that make the differences among strong, moderate, and weak involve how long and how much of the living personality survives as well as how that entity interacts (p. 45).

Chapters 3 through 5 contain a presentation of the best case studies for the three kinds of evidence (OBEs and near-death experiences, mediumistic communications, and reincarnation cases). Anyone familiar with the survivalist literature and/or parapsychology will recognize the content, but it is worth spelling out as the book is intended for a more general audience, and it is good to see the studies from parapsychology used as part and parcel of the discussion in a forum intended for a wider readership. We end up with a list (e1–e31) of evidence and realize later that in these early chapters Sudduth is creating an arsenal from which he will draw as the book turns to the theoretical discussion between those he dubs the ‘survivalists’ and the ‘skeptics.’

From Chapter 6 on we return to a discussion of the classical empirical arguments. He formalizes the arguments from the literature (Richard Hodgson, James Hyslop, Ian Stevenson, Robert Almeder) and presents them as either moderate or strong. The moderate version maintains that the evidence for survival favors survival over competing hypotheses (e.g., fraud or coincidence). The strong version is strengthened by contending that it adds additional explanatory virtues (e.g., independent support and simplicity) in comparison with rival hypotheses. This leads into a discussion of ‘likelihood.’ For instance, how can we judge how more likely it is that the survival hypothesis can explain how mediums obtain information about deceased people than, for instance, telepathy (or more formally LAP—Living Agent Psi)? This is really the core of the survival debate and it is no surprise that we end up here fairly quickly. And so, the introduction of confirmation theory’s notion of likelihood leads effortlessly into a Bayesian examination of the arguments, which is undertaken in Chapter 7.



Here, and in the subsequent chapter, Sudduth excels both in making the key concepts of Bayesian argument easy to understand and in showing how a version of the empirical arguments can be couched in Bayesian terms. This makes sense and this chapter should be required reading for anyone undertaking a similar analysis.

Though I've never been a fan of Bayesian analysis because of the problem with determining prior probabilities in a meaningful way, Sudduth introduces the idea of auxiliary assumptions to ameliorate this aspect of undertaking the analysis. Before going into this in more detail, he uses Bayesian analysis to show clearly how the prior probabilities and the examination of probability of rival hypotheses must be in sync. He shows how in contemporary formalized renditions of the survivalist argument there is a tendency to maintain both a high prior probability for survival, which requires a simple survival hypothesis, at the same time as needing to maintain a defense of the extended explanatory power of the survival hypothesis which requires a robust one. He calls it a conceptual magic trick, but I would call it wanting to have your cake and eat it too (p. 200).

In Chapter 10 Sudduth more formally develops the notion of the problem of auxiliary assumptions. He points out that explanation of the survival evidence tends to explain or predict the evidence based on what are usually unstated auxiliary assumptions. These assumptions are related to what the afterlife is expected to be like and this can vary depending on the stance that is taken regarding the evidence. This is an important point, as when comparing competing hypotheses it is important to compare apples with apples especially for unstated expectations of what it is the hypothesis explains.

Sudduth contends that a simple concept of survival (required to obtain a higher prior probability) does not adequately anticipate the types of evidence that are put forward for survival (p. 215). He goes on to analyze each kind of evidence with this in mind, concluding that the problem of auxiliary assumptions shows that we don't know enough to establish what the world would be like if survival is true, which is problematic when attempting to compare rival hypotheses. He also argues that the problem considerably lowers the prior probability for survival as once auxiliary assumptions are factored in there is a need for a robust concept of survival (pp. 244–245).

Finally in Chapter 11 we get the full bout of sparring between the survivalist and the living agent psi (LAP) proponents with all that has gone before informing the debate. It is a sophisticated analysis which draws on the established arguments from both camps as well as getting into the nitty gritty of the evidence that variously supports or not the two opposing sides. Sudduth shows how important it is to tease out the assumptions that

inform the discussion regarding likelihood and priors. He shows how the survivalist proponents again maintain a robust survival hypothesis when likelihoods are in question, but revert to a simple survivalist hypothesis when considering priors, which he terms a Bayesian sleight of hand (p. 290). He concludes that for a fair fight to be fought both contenders (survivalist and LAP) require comparison based on a robust conception of survival.

I think this is the take home point of the book and will be, I have no doubt, the topic of much debate in the community of researchers involved in this area. What he has done here is to provide a means of comparing the main two opposing arguments with everything possible laid out on the table so we are able to see what assumptions and assessments inform the debate.

The book is extremely clearly written and organized. The content is dense but Sudduth helps that with a logical structure and plenty of summaries along the way.

My only two beefs with the book are the use of the term 'skeptic' for those who argue against the survivalist hypothesis, as the word is too loaded from its use by skeptics of parapsychology. I would suggest perhaps pro- and anti-survivalists instead. It would also be handy to have a 'cheat sheet' for all the many abbreviations that are used throughout the book. MEA, SEA, BEA, AAR, PoAA, etc.

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