

BOOK REVIEW

Science and the Afterlife Experience: Evidence for the Immortality of Consciousness by Chris Carter. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2012. xiv + 369 pp. \$18.95. ISBN 978-1594774522.

Science and the Afterlife Experience is the concluding volume of a trilogy that began with *Parapsychology and the Skeptics* (Carter 2007; reissued as *Science and Psychic Phenomena*, Carter 2012) and continued with *Science and the Near-Death Experience* (Carter 2010). These books provide handy introductions to parapsychology, psychical research, and allied concerns (such as the near-death experience) for a new generation of readers. They may best be described as quasi-scholarly, aimed primarily at a general (non-academic) audience, although they include notes, reference lists, and indexes. Carter, who holds an M.A. from the University of Oxford, England, identifies himself as a philosopher and here and there addresses philosophical concerns, such as the implications of “paranormal” phenomena for concepts of personal identity. One of the hallmarks of the series is the attention given to materialistic skeptical positions, extended in the volume under review to include super-ESP.

This new installment consists of 19 chapters arranged in four parts, Reincarnation, Apparitions, Messages from the Dead, and Conclusions, preceded by a Foreword by philosopher Robert Almeder, an Introduction by Carter, and a chapter entitled “Psychic Phenomena and the Near-Death Experience: Background” which summarizes the preceding volumes in the series. Carter does a good job of surveying the classic survival literature and presents a strong case for the persistence of the human personality after death, but this is a book primarily for beginners. More advanced readers may find the survey interesting but are likely to be annoyed by the failure to consider recent works, both of evidence and of criticism.

The first chapter sets up the argument of the book by examining the challenge to materialism posed by the experimental findings and theory of quantum physics. Materialism is the philosophical position that all of physical reality, including biological systems, can be explained entirely in terms of material elements and processes. Materialism identifies consciousness with, or reduces it to an epiphenomenon of, brain states, thus ruling out of hand the possibility that it might survive the body’s demise. But in the last century quantum mechanics demonstrated that the materialistic

view is incomplete and ultimately unfounded. Some versions of quantum theory, including the orthodox or standard interpretation, see consciousness as standing apart from physical reality. This opens the door to a mind/body dualism or dualistic interactionism that allows for the survival of consciousness after death and means (as theoretical physicist Henry Stapp (2009) has pointed out) that the judgment about whether or not survival occurs must be based on evidence and not on a priori assumptions.

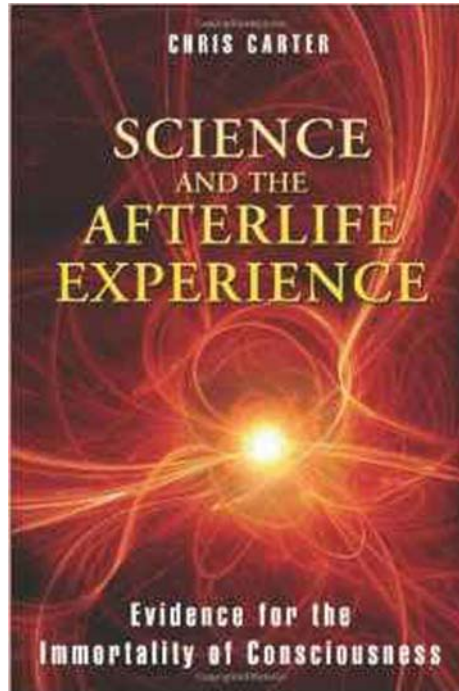
Carter does not say why he chose to start his survey with reincarnation. The decision may strike some readers as strange, because he has not yet established the likelihood of survival, which reincarnation implies. In order for there to be something (let's agree to call it consciousness) to reincarnate, it must first have survived death, and Carter would have us accept survival before providing the evidence for it. The placement of these chapters seems odd also because the reincarnation data are by and large more recent than those on apparitions and mediumistic communications. Apparitions and mediumship were concerns of SPR investigators from the earliest days, but reincarnation began to be researched intensively only in the 1960s, by Ian Stevenson. The argument might be made that the reincarnation data are at present our strongest evidence of survival, so that data from other areas should be assessed with that in mind. Carter, however, does not make this point, nor does he mount as strong a case for reincarnation as he might have done, principally because he relies on a few relatively old sources and fails to take account of recent work. There are in addition numerous omissions and errors of fact that likewise suggest a superficial acquaintance with the literature.

This assessment applies to the book as a whole but is most apparent in the chapters on reincarnation. In Chapter 1, Evidence from India to England, Carter notes the widespread geographical and historical presence of the belief and introduces the reader to Stevenson's research through three case studies, but he makes several mistakes along the way. In reviewing historical accounts of past-life memories (p. 20), he wrongly attributes them to the Indian Tulsi Das, who recounted the experiences of another person, not of himself. Carter asserts that no cases appeared between the early 19th-century case of Katsugoro and a series of Burmese cases published in 1898, whereas Wortabet (1860) described an interesting Syrian Druse case in the interim. He states that most cases reported from India between 1900 and 1960 involved single cases, yet the majority were contributed by two investigators, seven by one (Sahay 1927), and four by the other (Sunderlall 1924).

In describing the 1960s British case of the Pollock twins (pp. 23–25), who behaved in strikingly different ways in line with the deceased older

sisters whose lives they recalled, and only one of whom had birthmarks, Carter misses the very significant fact that they were shown to be monozygotic. Dizygotic or fraternal twins are no more similar than any two siblings, but monozygotic or identical twins share the same DNA and should not (according to materialistic biology) reveal such differences. Later (p. 37), in discussing the case of Ma Tin Aung Myo, a Burmese girl who claimed memories of a Japanese army cook, he notes that she cross-dressed into adulthood but neglects to mention that she became an open lesbian. Role confusion is common in reincarnation cases in which the subject and previous person are of opposite sexes, but pronounced gender dysphoria of the sort exhibited in this case is extremely rare.

All of the references in Chapter 2, Characteristics of Reincarnation Cases, are to a single work, the 1987 edition of Stevenson's *Children Who Remember Previous Lives* (Stevenson 1987). Carter does not seem to realize that this was superseded by a second edition in 2001 (Stevenson 2001). Thus, he says (p. 36) that Stevenson found phobias in 50% of cases in which the death of the previous person was violent. This is true per the 1987 edition, but in the 2001 edition, drawing on a larger sample, Stevenson gives the figure as 36%. Carter repeatedly states that children "almost always" (p. 33) stop talking about the previous lives between 5 and 8 years of age, apparently unaware of a study by Haraldsson (2008) which showed that 38% of Sri Lankan subjects who spoke about previous lives in childhood claimed to retain at least some memories into middle adulthood. His brief discussion of intermission memories (memories of the period between lives) (p. 35) would have been enhanced by reference to a paper by Sharma and Tucker (2004). In discussing the continuation of Stevenson's research (p. 43), he acknowledges a 1994 replication study but not the many later papers by its authors (Antonia Mills, Erlendur Haraldsson, and Jürgen Keil) and



others who have greatly expanded our knowledge of reincarnation cases and their subjects. The evidence no longer rests as heavily on Stevenson, so Carter arguably is wrong when he says on p. 53, “If Stevenson’s cases are seriously flawed, then of course the case for reincarnation collapses.”

Chapter 3 takes up Alternative Explanations of the Reincarnation Evidence, from fraud to “cultural fantasy.” By “cultural fantasy” Carter means the idea that reincarnation cases can be explained as cultural constructions in the context of prevailing beliefs in and about reincarnation. Chapter 4 is devoted to The Objections of Paul Edwards, a skeptical philosopher. It begins with an error in the first paragraph, in which Carter declares that “the writer most frequently criticized in the book is, not surprisingly, Stevenson” (p. 51). Actually, that distinction goes to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who receives 38 pages to Stevenson’s 30 pages. Chapter 5, Reincarnation in Review, concludes Part I of the book. This short (five-page) chapter is mainly concerned with showing why ESP does not adequately account for apparent past-life memories. Carter does not address the superpsi possibilities outlined by Stephen Braude (2003) or David Ray Griffin’s (1997) idea of retrocognitive inclusion, which holds that persons with past-life memories are exercising retrocognitive ESP to access the memories of deceased persons and then incorporating these memory streams into their minds and behaviors.

Part II, Apparitions, is better than Part I, although it too is dated in its coverage. Chapter 6, Strange Visits, introduces the subject with cases drawn largely from Green and McCreery’s *Apparitions* (1975). In Chapter 7, “Characteristics and Theories of Apparitions,” Carter presents the standard classification of apparitions of the living, crisis apparitions, postmortem apparitions, and haunting apparitions, then considers theoretical approaches under the headings, “The skeptical theory,” “The telepathic theory,” and “The physically real theories.” In a lengthy Chapter 8, What Underlies Ghostly Visions?, he supplies additional cases studies. He concludes Part II with a brief Chapter 9, Final Thoughts on Apparitions.

Carter’s selection and presentation of apparition cases is generally good and conveys well what is most exciting about the best cases—the suggestion that personality and dispositions, will and intentions, persist beyond death. He is less good in his handling of theory. He conflates Gurney’s earlier and later views and does not deal adequately with the ideas of F. W. H. Myers or with Alan Gauld’s (1982) useful evaluation and extension of them, nor does he address Griffin’s (1997) assessment in terms of super-psi or Braude’s (1986, 2003) theory that apparitions are produced by psychokinesis, much as apparently genuine (non-fraudulent) séance materializations are thought to be. Carter clearly prefers the animistic position (what we might call the

there-really-is-something-there position) but does not seem to be aware of Gauld's (1982) probing criticism and dismissal of it. The there-really-is-something-there position may be fundamentally correct nonetheless, but to be fully convincing it would require a defense beyond the naïve level of analysis Carter provides.

Part III, Messages from the Dead, includes seven chapters and is the longest and best section of the book. In Chapter 10, Ancient Evidence, Carter highlights anthropological and early historical accounts of mediumship. In Chapter 11, The SPR Investigates, he describes work with two classic mediums, Leonora Piper and Gladys Osborne Leonard. In Chapter 12, Alternative Explanations, he discusses the possibilities of "conscious fraud," "subconscious fraud," and "ESP and subconscious fraud," before turning to a consideration of the "difficulties with ESP as an explanation." Chapter 13 asks, *Super-ESP as an Explanation?* Here Carter shows why a very extreme ESP would be required to explain the better mediumistic communications collected during the pre-World War II heyday of psychical research. That the best cases point to the survival of personality and cognitive skills comes through clearly once more.

Carter spends some pages on one of the most interesting of recent cases, involving a deceased chess grandmaster, but fails to consider other studies (e.g., Beischel & Schwartz 2007, O'Keeffe & Wiseman 2005, Robertson & Roy 2004). He includes an account of a case from psychic Arthur Ford, evidently not realizing that Ford was posthumously exposed as a fraud (ironically in one of the sources he cites for the case). His notion of "super-ESP," moreover, is badly outmoded, having been replaced by the super-psi of Braude (1992, 2003), Griffin (1997), and Michael Sudduth (2009).

Chapters 14 through 16 are devoted to the Cross-Correspondences. These were complex networks of motifs and literary allusions communicated through two or more mediums in such a way that their sense was apparent only when all the messages were considered together. These puzzle cases were ostensibly devised by Myers after his death and carried on by other deceased investigators of the early SPR for a period of about thirty years, from 1902 until about 1932. They are considered by many authorities to be among the finest evidence for survival after death, because they suggest not only the persistence of character but of the ability to think and plan in the afterlife. Carter does a good job of introducing the subject, but again his presentation is diminished by his failure to consider recent criticisms, such as those of Braude (2003) and Moreman (2003).

The last three chapters of the book form Part IV, Conclusions. The title of Chapter 17, *How the Case for Survival Stands Today*, leads the reader to think that he has before him an up-to-date assessment of the survival

evidence. But this book could have been written in the main twenty years ago. Moreover, because he misses so much of the recent evidence for reincarnation, Carter underestimates the present strength of the case for survival in general. Recent work on apparitions and mediumship have done little to resolve the stalemate between survival and super-ESP (or super-psi), but the richly complex reincarnation data provide a much stronger challenge. To handle the reincarnation data, super-psi must explain not only the statements children make regarding previous lives, but also the associated emotions and behaviors as well as the physical signs that link the children to the people they talk about.

Chapter 18 asks, *Is Survival a Fact?* Here Carter avers that the evidence “proves” survival “beyond all reasonable doubt,” backing up this conclusion not with a summary of the evidence but with a “theory of knowledge.” Basic to this epistemology is the idea that we can never be absolutely certain that something is true but only that it is most likely true because we cannot demonstrate otherwise. Knowledge thus becomes a “*category of belief*” (p. 281, italics in original), and a well-founded belief in survival is tantamount to knowledge that survival occurs. Chapter 19, “What the Dead Say,” considers what mediumistic communicators have had to say about the process of dying and the state of being called death. The first part of this chapter makes an interesting and original contribution to the survival literature, but the second part is based solely on Myers’ communications through Geraldine Cummins, published in the 1930s.

I have emphasized this book’s shortcomings, but I do not want to leave the impression that it is a thoroughly bad book. Carter has gotten the big picture right and he makes a powerful case for the persistence of personality beyond death. Readers wanting a casual introduction to the survival literature will learn a great deal, and if the book succeeds in getting them to go further into the literature it will have served an important purpose. But readers should not expect an up-to-date survey of the subject, nor should they look for a careful weighing of the evidence for survival, pro and con. Readers whose tastes tend toward more academic writing and sophistication in analysis would do better to start with Griffin (1997) or Braude (2003), both of whom also end up endorsing survival as the most satisfactory interpretation of the data in toto.

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