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SCIENCE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

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The history of the investigation into the possibility of life after death is several thousand years old if taken from a religious-philosophical point of view, but not even two centuries old if taken from an academic-scientific one. In the first case, while world religions are concerned with their own models that describe the nature of the afterlife in line with their respective doctrines, philosophy deals with the question of death and immortality, whether of body or soul, from a less dogmatic point of view. In the second case, studies on the subject have been developed by leading researchers in psychology, psychiatry, and medicine, concerned with providing scientific evidence for the possibility of people surviving death.

In all these different approaches, the question of permanence of some form of consciousness after biological death appears as fundamental, and as such it cannot be ignored by any human being, whether lay or scholar. Our humanity is shaped by the existential horizon of our possible finitude, and questioning it can have important consequences in dealing with our own life.

Despite its essentiality, this question has been neglected in academic circles in the last decades, based on an *a priori* prejudice adopted by scholars, who view with suspicion any serious research that intends to investigate the hypothesis of consciousness survival after brain death. They have continually refused to consider empirical evidence



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catalogued over the last centuries in different regions and cultures, which could be soundly explained through this hypothesis.

To reverse this situation is one of the objectives of the recently published book *The Science of Life after Death*, whose authors have a solid background in psychiatry and philosophy, and work on the interface between science, philosophy, and spirituality, at the Research Center in Spirituality and Health (NUPES), School of Medicine, Federal University of Juiz de Fora-MG/Brazil.

The aim of the book is to dismiss any *a priori* rejection of survival of consciousness as an explanatory hypothesis for the anomalous phenomena it discusses at length. Each section of the book contains a vast bibliography that comprises both books and papers of peer-reviewed journals recently published on the subject, including by its authors. In this sense, the book is the product of more than two decades of research in this challenging area, providing the state-of-the-art on the hypothesis of the existence of an afterlife.

The book is divided into eight parts: (1) *Introduction*, which provides an overview of its proposal, justified in view of the importance of humankind's belief in an afterlife, which debunks the so-called *myth of secularization* that emerged from the nineteenth century. (2) *The Idea of Survival of the Soul in the History of Religions and Philosophy*, which points to the need for a clear concept of a surviving soul, mind, or consciousness, to avoid any biases in the conclusions. (3) *Setting the Scene: Addressing the Main Arguments Against Survival Hypothesis*, which analyzes the philosophical and empirical objections to the possibility of a surviving soul based on a physicalist view of mind, rejected by eminent scientists who defend that the brain is only an instrument of the mind. (4) *What Would Constitute Evidence for Personal Survival After Death?*, which highlights the fallibility of every empirically based claim and denounces the ideological aspect of some metaphysical commitments, such as the materialist scientism. (5) *The Best Available Evidence for Life After Death*, which discusses the scientific investigation of extraordinary phenomena such as Mediumship, Near-Death Experience (NDE), Out-of-Body Experience (OBE), and Cases of Reincarnation Type, for which all alternative explanations can be rebuffed. (6) *The Weight of the Whole Body of Evidence for Life After Death*, which analyzes four main hypotheses to account for the experiences presented in the previous section, concluding that consciousness survival is the best one to make sense

of all the available evidence, leaving aside the three others (Fraud, Misinterpretation of Chance, and Living Agent Psi). (7) *Cultural Barriers to a Fair Examination of the Available Evidence for Survival*, which explains why the survival hypothesis is not accepted despite its superiority over the alternative hypotheses; and (8) *Conclusions*, which suggests that survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death is a fact of nature supported by empirical evidence and, therefore, should be handled by scholars and scientists in a fairer way.

The most important question the book tries to answer is whether there is empirical support for belief in an afterlife, and the reply is a cautious *yes*: something is occurring that is not subject to any naturalistic explanation. In order to make their point, the authors build a line of argumentation that seems somewhat fragile at first, but which strengthens over the pages to the point of convincing us, if not of the thesis that survival of consciousness is a scientifically proven fact, at least of its great verisimilitude. Refusing any previous opinion, prejudice or dogmatism based on a physicalist claim that simply dismisses the survival hypothesis as impossible, they recommend intellectual humility in order to investigate this possibility in depth. The book proposes to be an antidote to the skepticism that spreads in contemporary society, through the expansion of consciousness in order to understand consciousness itself. This is made possible because we have the advantage of still living in a pre-paradigmatic period regarding the nature of consciousness and the mind-body relationship, which recommends a theoretical pluralism rather than monism.

One of the merits of the book is to oxygenate the debate about the hypothesis of life after death, through an approach that is more epistemological than metaphysical, calling upon prominent philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos. Popper's idea that scientific theories can never be proven true, but can only be falsified through experimentation, helps develop a fairer approach to the hypothesis of survival, for which no falsification has so far been presented, except, naturally, the documented cases of fraud in certain phenomena intended to support it.¹ In Kuhn's case, his conception of paradigm shifts has two benefits for the survival hypothesis: first, it

¹ Many skeptics argue that mediumship is based on fraud, for the supposed communications with the dead can be explained by naturalistic means such as the Forer effect, a technique used by some people to make general statements that seem personalized to an individual. The book dismisses these criticisms through the notion of *crippling complexity* (p. 66).

explains the subjective resistance of many scientists to change their lifelong beliefs on the topic; and second, it makes it easier for the scientific community to open up to this hypothesis because there is still no paradigm that contradicts it. With respect to Lakato's concept of research programs, their dynamic evolution relativizes any pretense of definitiveness in the case of competing scientific hypotheses, also in light of the complexity surrounding issues of causality.

The book's main argument rests on a body of empirical evidence related to extraordinary occurrences such as Mediumship, NDE, OBE, and Reincarnation, for which there is so far no ordinary explanation. If there is one thing that is self-evident about these phenomena, it is that the explanation for them is not self-evident. The book mentions some highly reputable researchers who have investigated these abnormal phenomena over the last two centuries; they had little to gain personally from their investigations, and perhaps could have even endangered their already well-established reputations in undertaking them.

There is a tendency to interpret a mystical experience within the doctrine of a given tradition, identifying the experience with its interpretation, as emphasized by Brian Bain (2006). According to him, when this adherence to an interpretation of a deep experience is too strict, it can lead to fundamentalism, intolerance, and cultism. In order to avoid this, it is always refreshing to focus on the experience itself, allowing the interpretation to refer to this pure experience and without confusing both.

This is one of the merits of the book, which attempts to focus on the extraordinary experiences it describes in their purity, respecting the various ways to interpret them, and trying to find the best interpretation with an open mind, proper to the truest scientific stance. The evidence for personal survival after death is not conclusive, because the experiences meant to ground it are susceptible to different explanations. In order to achieve the best explanation in terms of simplicity and elegance, among other intellectual qualities, the authors seek to dispel a rigid worldview on these matters, and their willingness to even tolerate ambiguity is refreshing as well. The book correctly points to the fact that there is no definitive explanation either for the anomalous experiences (Mediumship, NDE, OBE, etc.) or the common experiences (Volition, Freewill, Qualia,

etc.). As mentioned, it is all about *interpreting* when it comes to the subject of life after death – interpreting evidence, ideas, images, and, mainly, experiences.²

It should be stressed, though, that this body of evidence contains apparently independent phenomena which are then presented as a homogenous set. Consequently, to support the hypothesis of life after death, one has to *buy the whole package* concerning paranormal occurrences. In other words, the authors recognize the need to ground their survival hypothesis in the history of paranormality to safeguard its scientific aspect, for there seems to be no evidence outside this domain. This appeal to paranormal or supernatural reports produced over the past few centuries, however, has been observed in almost all the scientific literature on the matter, and this book is no exception (e.g., Moody 1975; Ring 1980). The body of empirical evidence brought by this literature appears to be what is available in the current research on the topic. Concerning these accounts of unexplained phenomena, we concede that their purported consistency does not constitute a definitive proof of an afterlife. Nevertheless, as stated, there is no such thing as definitive proof (p. 69).³

Additionally, the authors replace the talk about the afterlife with talk about the survival of consciousness, which has its merits in allowing the detachment of the hypothesis from any religious connotation. However, there is a difference between the two concepts, because the former seems to possess a much more substantial metaphysical charge than the latter. As mentioned, the authors appear to show little interest in treating the question from a metaphysical perspective, preferring the epistemological viewpoint. In this sense, the book does not intend to analyze the philosophical cogency or implications of the survival hypothesis, but rather to develop an empirical argument to the case that this is the best explanation for the almost so-far unexplained phenomena. We agree that ruling out the hypothesis as impossible is epistemically tenuous, leaving

² It is interesting that while Moritz Schlick proposed that logical positivism's demands for empirical verification would render propositions about God as meaningless, it would not rule out propositions about life after death as meaningless, so long as they involved the subjects having experiences (Hasker & Taliaferro 2019, p. 9).

³ Should we have a current theory that describes the mechanisms by which consciousness circulates and is stored in the universe, then our empirical evidence would be of another nature, and as such might not be called into question, as done by many skeptics. However, this requirement presupposes the physicalist assumption that consciousness is a piece of information subject to physical laws, which we are far from proving. Besides, to assume physicalism is to beg the question, for the dispute between monism and dualism is what is at stake, as properly mentioned in the book (p. 74).

the discussion stalled as has been the case lately in various academic circles. The question of life after death is too important to be left aside as an object of serious research. However, one should not disregard the metaphysical assumptions that lie behind any scientific hypothesis – including the survival hypothesis, – which are not to be confused with ideological commitments as suggested by the book.

The relations among science, philosophy, and spirituality are as rich as they are problematic, and to work on the interface of the three disciplines, as the authors do, helps to grasp *the big picture*. Which one is going to have *the last word* is under dispute as well, although science has a method that looks more suitable for this job, as duly recognized by the book, which handles just the *science* of life after death. What the authors ask of us is only to do science as it should be done, with an open mind to the many possibilities that reality conceals.

Hasker & Taliaferro (2019) argue that, with regard to the entire body of empirical evidence from parapsychology to support the hypothesis of the afterlife, we may be close to an impasse. They consider it unlikely that the fundamental disagreements on the subject between the skeptics and the believers be resolved, especially when the different viewpoints are supported by diverse worldviews.

Even if this book, in the end, does not prove to be able to resolve this impasse, it has value in itself, by showing that the debate must go on, based on the most recent scientific discoveries. The authors advocate the survival hypothesis without compelling us to undoubtedly believe it. It is up to us to take a standpoint, but at least we clearly see where we are in the discussion, for the book puts all the cards on the table.

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