

ESSAY REVIEW

The Compelling, Confusing Evidence for an Afterlife

Surviving Death: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for an Afterlife by Leslie Kean. Crown Archetype/Random House, 2017. 416 pp. \$17.70 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0553419610.

Leslie Kean's *Surviving Death* is a wonderfully readable, carefully constructed summary of the evidence for the existence of what is colloquially called an "afterlife." That is, she considers evidence for the hypothesis that individual human minds and personalities possess an existence going beyond their attachment to any particular body—so that, for instance, an individual with a certain name and certain traits may sometimes continue to perceive and act, even when the body typically associated with that individual is dead and gone.

Most of the book comprises moderately detailed descriptions of specific cases, involving specific people, which indicate the existence of some sort of "afterlife" for individual human minds, or potentially give some information regarding the nature of this afterlife. Kean considers a gamut of phenomena such as past-life memories, near-death experiences, mediumistic trances, poltergeists, and so forth. However, she also makes a significant effort to draw general conclusions, lessons, and hypotheses from the totality of these cases, while maintaining respect for the confusing and in many ways still mysterious nature of the phenomena under discussion.

Each of the topics considered in the book has been reviewed and analyzed in more depth elsewhere. What Kean does, however, is provide a clear, evocative, and rational survey of the many types of evidence that are directly relevant to the possibility and nature of an afterlife for individual human minds.

As the topics Kean covers in her book are so contentious, it's probably best for the reader's understanding if I lay my cards on the table in terms of my own views of the subject matter: I generally agree with Kean that some sort of "afterlife" probably exists. So from my view, as a reader, what interested me in her book was mainly the rundown of particular situations and phenomena, giving insight into what the heck this "afterlife" might be like and how it relates to what happens in this world.

I should also note that my belief in the probable existence of an

afterlife for individual humans is fairly recent. I was raised atheist and have never been religious. For a substantial part of my life, I considered belief in “life after death” as the most obvious of absurdities. It seemed completely obvious to me that foolish people maintained the idea that they would continue living after their bodies died, simply because they were afraid to confront the blunt fact of their impending nonexistence—or else because they were brainwashed by various religious belief systems. I have never been extraordinarily afraid of death, but I’ve always considered physical death something better avoided, and I’ve put a fair bit of effort into working toward the radical extension of the human healthspan (e.g., via applying Artificial Intelligence technology to understand the biology of aging and discover ways to extend human healthspan via gene therapy and other methods, perhaps even via uploading human minds into classical or quantum computers).

What shifted my probability estimate regarding the existence of an afterlife was, basically, reading a lot of the evidence—and then, after doing a lot of reading, talking to some of the people who had gathered some of the evidence I had read about; and talking to a few people whose direct experiences constituted some of this evidence. So, basically, what shifted my perspective was an encounter with the same body of evidence that Kean summarizes in her book—though I read many books and papers, not just one, and thus encountered the evidence in a much more voluminous and less well-organized fashion. Going through all this evidence carefully did not convince me of the detailed veracity of any of the traditional religious depictions of the afterlife. But it did convince me that *something* perplexing and afterlife-like is very likely going on.

One thing I have found, since shifting my view on the issue of afterlife, is that most people who hold a skeptical view on the topic have NOT really looked at the evidence very carefully. This is parallel to the situation with psi phenomena such as ESP, remote viewing, psychokinesis, and so forth. Most people who are skeptical that these phenomena exist, have not actually reviewed the data regarding the phenomena in any detail. These are complex and confusing matters, and there is certainly room for rational disagreement and argument among people who HAVE studied the data. But the arguments one has with people who have looked at the data carefully, are very different from the arguments one has with naïve “skeptics” (many of whom might be more accurately termed “negative believers,” in the sense that some people’s belief in the NON-existence of psi or afterlife is extremely fixed and strong, belying the open-mindedness traditionally associated with the term “skepticism”).

Given the importance of the issue of afterlife to humanity generally,

and the often-confusing nature of discussions surrounding the topic (with religious believers and “skeptical” negative believers often expressing very strong positions with great emotion), I would recommend Leslie Kean’s book to nearly everyone.

For readers who intuitively feel some sort of afterlife does exist, the book will provide a wealth of interesting particulars, enabling them to flesh out their understanding of what the afterlife may be like and how it may intersect and interact with this world.

For readers who are skeptical (in the genuine sense) of the idea of an afterlife, the wealth of perplexing real-world cases considered will, at least, intrigue and give pause.

For the reader who is unsure what to think about the existence of an afterlife, Kean’s book seems likely to provide a nudge in the direction of “Hmm, either some sort of afterlife exists, at least in some cases, or else something else quite strange is going on.”

In the rest of this Review, I’ll run through a series of the specific afterlife-related phenomena that Kean discusses, highlighting some of the key points she makes. Of course this sort of summary lacks the emotionally and empirically compelling details one obtains from reading about each case in detail; but to get those, you’ll have to read Kean’s book, and/or dig deeper into the primary literature.

Having surveyed many of the various relevant phenomena, I will then briefly turn to the question of explanation. Kean contrasts two classes of explanations of the phenomena she surveys: “survival” and “super-psi.” Similar to Stephen Braude in his beautifully rigorous and much more academic treatment of the same issues, *Immortal Remains* (Braude 2003), Kean comes down mostly on the side of survival. I tend to agree—but I think one has to be quite careful in thinking about what “survival” really means.

But before going any further in that direction, let’s romp quickly through some of the fascinating and bizarre phenomena Kean reviews in *Surviving Death* . . . and some of the properties and lessons she abstracts from the various case studies she considers . . .

Reincarnation

No high-level summary is going to do justice to actually reading the stories Kean presents. For instance, she describes a young boy telling his mother, after identifying in photos the man he felt he was reincarnated from, “Mom, you still don’t get it, do you? I am not the same as the man in the picture on the outside, but on the inside I am still that man. You just can’t see on the inside what I see” (p. 61). It is very compelling to read this sort of quote after reading a detailed, evocative rundown of the boy’s parents’ long

efforts to understand the strange memories, dreams, and statements their son kept making—and their difficulties coming to grips with the idea of reincarnation, which was against their religious worldview but which was an inevitable consequence of their experiences with their son.

In this case, the boy's parents tracked down the sister of the man their son claimed to be reincarnated from, and asked her to verify various obscure statements he had made about his past life. The statements checked out.

Kean is an excellent writer, and so as she tells story after story of this nature, from America as well as from India where such events are more widely accepted, it is bound to have a real emotional impact on the reader. One empathizes with these children who are confused to be plagued with someone else's memories, and with parents who don't know why their kids are going through such things—but who are relieved to find there seems to be some deeper explanation, rather than their kids just being nuts.

From a scientific view, however, it is more important to look for the abstract patterns beyond the individual stories. This is not so straightforward given the diversity of the different cases involved; but, being abstraction-oriented, as I read I made a list of some of the more general properties of the reincarnation cases that Kean cites:

- These children typically start talking about a past life very early . . . with the average age being thirty-five months. This happens not through hypnosis, but spontaneously, as the children begin recounting events they say they experienced in another life. Though they may talk about a past life many times and with great intensity, they tend to stop making such statements around the age of six, the same time when children typically lose memories of early childhood (p. 46).
- Most of the children describe only one past life. Their memories usually focus on people and events from near the end of that life, and three-quarters of them relate how they died. They very rarely report being anyone famous. Instead, they recall a largely nondescript life of a person who typically lived fairly close by, almost always in the same country. The one part of the life that is often out of the ordinary is how the previous person died. Around 70 percent of the children describe a life that ended in an unnatural death, such as murder, suicide, accident, or combat. Though there are exceptions, the life also tends to be quite recent. The average interval between lives is four and a half years, while the median interval—meaning half are shorter and half are longer—is only seventeen months (p. 47).
- Along with talking about a past life, many of the children show behaviors that seem connected to their statements. A lot of them display great emotion when they discuss events from that life. They do not dispassionately list a number of facts, but instead they cry that they miss people or beg to be taken to them (p. 47).
- Others show phobias related to how the previous person died. In cases

involving an unnatural death, 35 percent of the children have an intense fear about the mode of that death (p. 48).

- Dr. Jim Tucker reports that 70 percent of the lives remembered by children involve a violent death, which includes accidents, murders, and suicides (p. 264).

- Along with statements and behaviors, many of the cases include physically tangible signs of a connection to a past life. Some of the children have birthmarks that match wounds, usually the fatal wounds, on the body of the previous person. They are often unusual in some way, in shape or size or by being puckered or raised rather than flat (p. 49).

These patterns emerge among literally thousands of cases studied by Kean and the other researchers she references (e.g., the curious reader may want to check out the books of Jim Tucker and Ian Stevenson; e.g., Tucker & Stevenson 2013). These are some of the facts that any general theory of such phenomena must account for.

Intermission Memories

Adding to the intrigue and perplexity, some children have clear memories of the “intermission” between the end of their previous life and the beginning of their current one. Jim Tucker, who studied these intermission memories, categorized them as “referring to three main phases: a ‘transitional stage’ just after death, a ‘stable stage’ for most of the time between the lives, and a ‘return stage’ involving events close to the time of birth” (p. 129).

As Kean notes,

Interestingly, the intermission memories tend to arise in the stronger re-incarnation cases, where more statements were made about the past life that were verified and more specific names were remembered, than in the weaker cases. In other words, if a child has a keener memory of his previous life, he is more likely to remember the intermission stage. Also, when intermission memories are reported, the child’s memory of the mode of death from the previous life is more likely to be verified. This supports the possible accuracy of the unusual between-lives memories, since these children have so many other verified memories. “Only an unusually strong memory, and not any other characteristic of the subject or previous personality” distinguishes cases with intermission memories from those without them, report Tucker and Poonam Sharma, a medical student at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, in a 2004 paper. “Their reports of events from the intermission period seem to be part of a pattern of a stronger memory for items preceding their current lives.” (p. 128)

The study of intermission memories becomes a complex pursuit unto itself. It is more difficult to study these scientifically, as compared with past

life memories, because there is no consensus reality, accepted among human scientists, to compare intermission memories to. However, it is striking that so many children report similar intermission memories, even in cases where the children's parents did not believe in reincarnation and the children had no apparent prior education regarding theories of reincarnation, intermission, etc. This could of course be explained via commonalities among human brain structure leading to common patterns of delusion among various children. But in the context of so many validated past-life memories and other associated paranormal phenomena, it seems unwise to gravitate too reflexively toward a wholly neural-reductionist explanation of intermission memories.

Near Death Experiences

A different sort of evidence regarding the possibility and possible nature of survival after death is provided by NDEs or “near death experiences”—in which a person, during an event where they almost die, has experiences that feel to them like encountering another world, or venturing slightly into an afterlife and then returning, etc.

There are broad commonalities among many NDEs, such as seeing white lights and a feeling of comfort and bliss and “coming home” (Bellig 2015). There are also aspects to NDEs that seem more culturally dependent; e.g., Kean notes

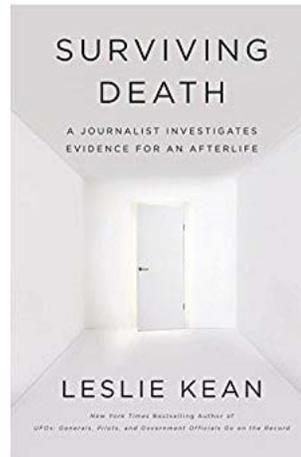
Some talk about heaven and seeing God, but it's not clear to what extent these concepts were learned as children. Some report meeting deceased relatives or other discarnate personalities . . . (p. 133)

It seems clear that whatever is happening during an NDE, it's not just typical imagination; it's processed by the brain as a strange kind of perceived experience:

A lengthy 2014 paper in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* by nine scientists from the University of Padova, Italy, reports on the use of electroencephalography (EEG) “to investigate the characteristics of NDE memories and their neural markers compared to memories of both real and imagined events.” This team reached the same conclusion as the Belgian one. “It is notable that the EEG pattern of correlations for NDE memory recall differed from the pattern for memories of imagined events,” they state. “Our findings suggest that at a phenomenological level, NDE memories cannot be considered equivalent to imagined memories, and at a neural level NDE memories are stored as episodic memories of events experienced in a peculiar state of consciousness.” (p. 99)

Of course, the fact that the brain perceives NDEs as a kind of experience doesn't really tell us anything about the origin of NDE experience. The brain can play all sorts of tricks. The "white light" commonly seen during NDEs is associated with electrical activity in the brain around the time of death (Chawla et al. 2009); on the other hand, this observation does not necessarily imply a reductive explanation of the white light phenomenon nor of NDEs in general (Mays & Mays 2011).

And the various psi phenomena often encountered in the course of NDEs are harder to "explain away" via mainstream neuroscience. Kean recounts the case of Pam Reynolds, who had a vivid NDE during surgery when she had no measurable brain activity:



Pam observed details of the situation in the room where she was having surgery, though her eyes were taped shut, her brain was inactive, and she had a device in her ears making a very loud clicking sound. Still she described the details of the surgical instruments used on her head, and the note (D) the bone saw made while vibrating . . . (p. 109)

As Pam reported:

I then saw my uncle, who had passed away at the ripe old age of thirty-nine. He didn't use his mouth to communicate with me. He did it in another way that I remembered from my early childhood. He had the look. He would look at me and I would understand. And, it didn't take long until I understood that everyone communicated in this fashion. They had the look. They'd look at you and you understood. I also describe it as the knowing, because you just know. And all of these people had this ability to just kind of look and know. (p. 104)

The sound, however, is an entirely different matter and that really interests me. As a musician, I've been taught from the cradle that if you put two tones that are too close together, what you get is discordance. But, in the place where I was, every being had their own tone and every tone was close to the next and yet, when these tones were put together, when everyone was sounding off, it was beautiful. It was harmonic. It was beyond anything that I could ever compose or direct here, or hope to. (p. 105)

Having had this NDE, I no longer fear death. I fear separation. I thought at first that I wouldn't even fear separation, but there is no experience that makes the separation okay when you lose someone. But when my time comes, I will embrace death. In fact, I know people who are dying right now and I envy them their journey. It's a wonderful, wonderful place to go. But, I just don't like being left behind. I don't think any of us do. (p. 105)

This is an especially fascinating case because it combines paranormal perception with clear visions and experiences of an afterlife. The paranormal perceptions involved—of the very specific sights and sounds of the operating theater, perceived in spite of Pam being deeply anesthetized with no brain activity, with eyes closed and ears full of noisy machinery—could of course be the result of garden variety psi, performed by her neurons while in some sort of active state not measured by our current tools for detecting brain activity. But the coupling of these perceptions with her perceptions of deceased relatives and of music transcending the principles of Earthly sound certainly makes one wonder—especially when one combines this with other evidence about the possible nature of an afterlife, obtained for example from reports of reincarnation and from mediumship.

Kean's qualitative conclusion is fairly confident:

Something actually happens during an NDE that we have yet to understand. Experiencers have no doubt that they crossed over into a wondrous afterlife realm to which they will someday return, and that death is merely a doorway into another world. (p. 99)

An added twist to the story is provided by the physical manifestations often observed by others at the time of a person's death; Kean cites numerous cases such as a hospice chaplain reporting

Sometimes I've seen a light, which is in a corner, like candlelight, it's a golden light. It's not electric light and it's not one of the hospice lights. It just appears sometimes. It goes when they die. They take their last breath and everything settles down and the light goes out.

One case like this can be easily written off as a hallucination or delusion. A large number of cases, which is the reality, becomes a definite perplexity. Coupled with so many other psi-ish and afterlife-ish phenomena associated with NDEs, on the other hand, such occurrences start to seem almost unsurprising.

Mediumship

In the 1800s and before, it was relatively commonplace for people to go to a “medium” who would serve as a go-between to help them communicate with their dead relatives or friends. In modern culture, this sort of practice is frequently referred to as a joke, as if its fraudulent nature is obvious. And indeed, there were surely many frauds. But when one carefully reviews the many carefully recorded case studies of mediums apparently communicating with the deceased, this position becomes harder to maintain. Robert McLuhan makes this case thoroughly and eloquently in his book *Randi's Prize* (2010).

Often the medium, when “channeling” the voice and expressions and gestures of a dead person, displays an uncanny mimicry of the vocal and body-language mannerisms of the deceased. Recounting of information that was known only to the deceased and a handful of others—e.g., the location of long-hidden objects—is also common.

This sort of information transmission could plausibly be due to psi between the medium and the living relatives of the deceased. However, there are various different examples of mediumistic channeling that stretch this sort of explanation, e.g.,

In some cases, correct information was apparently given about the contents of books in classical Greek; yet neither Mrs. Leonard, nor the sitter, nor the alleged communicator knew classical Greek, while the person who lent the books (Mrs. Salter), though she knew Greek, had not properly studied several of the volumes. Neither telepathy with the living, nor communication with the dead, nor yet clairvoyance, would seem to supply us with an adequate explanation here. (p. 220)

Mediums nearly always interpret their experiences in terms of survival. Many mediums, including Laura, say that “our loved ones on the other side” can hear our thoughts; that they are with us and can receive mental messages from us. (p. 162)

What happens in the medium’s mind during a reading seems to be quite different from what happens in a psychic’s mind when exercising psi perception. As one medium put it,

With psychic information, I have to “squint” from the inside out like to focus on something in the distance. When I do mediumship, it’s not squinting at all. It’s just receiving. (p. 178)

And as psychologist Jeff Tarrant noted about medium Laura,

One area of the brain is becoming active while she is receiving mediumship information; the other area is becoming activated when she is involved in a psychic reading. Coincidentally—or not—Laura reports that she sees psychic information in her left visual field, and she sees mediumship information on her right visual field. Actually, that is exactly what we see on these brain images. So this appears to be confirmation of what Laura reports from her own experience. (p. 210)

Mediums and Tip-of-the-Tongue Phenomena

One quirk of mediumistic séances that frequently strikes me when I read about them is the prevalence of what psychologists call “tip-of-the-tongue” phenomena. For example, from Kean’s account of her own visit with a medium:

She said that Budd mentioned my sister, saying that she lived in New York and had an “L” name . . . Without telling Laura, I was also thinking about my brother, and eventually I asked her if there was anyone else there. After finally getting Budd to pull back, she said a male on my father’s side was there, and then recognized him as a brother. She said he had a “J” or “G” name (the only name my brother went by was Garry), and that his death was unexpected, which it certainly was. (p. 158)

This sort of memory pattern—where the beginning letter of a name comes right to memory, but the name as a whole can only be recalled with great effort—occurs in many cases besides mediumship, obviously. Psychologists call it the “tip-of-the-tongue” phenomenon:

People experiencing the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon can often recall one or more features of the target word, such as the first letter, its syllabic stress, and words similar in sound and/or meaning. Individuals report a feeling of being seized by the state, feeling something like mild anguish while searching for the word, and a sense of relief when the word is found. While many aspects of the tip-of-the-tongue state remain unclear, there are two major competing explanations for its occurrence, the direct-access view and the inferential view. The direct-access view posits that the state occurs when memory strength is not enough to recall an item, but is strong enough to trigger the state. The inferential view claims that TOTs aren’t completely based on inaccessible, yet activated targets; rather they arise when the rememberer tries to piece together different clues about the word. Emotional-induced retrieval often causes more TOT experiences than an emotionally neutral retrieval, such as asking where a famous icon was assassinated rather than simply asking the capital city of a state. Emotional

TOT experiences also have a longer retrieval time than non-emotional TOT experiences. The cause of this is unknown but possibilities include using a different retrieval strategy when having an emotional TOT experience rather than a non-emotional TOT experience, fluency at the time of retrieval, and strength of memory.

...

The transmission deficit model is based on a multi-component theory of memory representation that suggests that semantic and phonological information is stored in memory and retrieved separately. The transmission deficit model posits that TOTs occur when there is activation of the semantic component of the target word memory but this activation does not pass on to the phonological level of the memory of the target word. Thus, TOTs are caused by the deficit in transmission of activation from the semantic memory store to the phonological memory store. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tip_of_the_tongue)

What does the general psychology of tip-of-the-tongue phenomena tell us about mediumistic channeling? Memory is in large part constructive; and in the case of a mediumistic séance, it's not quite clear: Who is doing the construction? Perhaps it's a combined effort between the mind of the medium and the mind of the person being channeled? One gets the sense that what mediums are doing is somehow a cross between receiving messages and constructing systems. Their minds unconsciously must construct a sort of image of the mind they are channeling, based on the fragmentary and erratic signals they receive; and using this image, perhaps, they collaborate in the construction of the memories of this other, now discarnate, person. The type of persistent wholeness and identity possessed by the discarnate entity, as distinct from the medium's mind, is far from clear.

One thing that seems very clear from the mediumistic and other evidence is that the "leakage" of individual minds from the "afterlife" (whatever it may be) into our present world, is very weak and slippery. When living individuals receive signals from minds in the afterlife, these signals are noisy and confused and it requires lots of interpolation and elaboration and struggle to make sense of them. As I noted above, the pattern of information transmission from "apparent disembodied minds" to mediums is a bit similar to the pattern of recollection within a human mind, in cases where emotional charge is high and semantic memory access is easier than phonological memory access. The connections made between a living mind and an afterlife mind seem to involve a combination of relatively abstract emotional and semantic patterns, with occasional concrete mental contents that generally either have high symbolic value or are manifested with great effort. And these connections seem most vivid and insistent when there

is some major emotional content, key to the self-structure of the afterlife mind, involved.

Poltergeists and Materializations

Kean saves for last the afterlife-related phenomena that put some of the most obvious strain on the materialist point of view: ghosts, poltergeists, and various more solid paranormal materializations.

We have all heard various ghost stories—haunted houses are a staple of U.S. Halloween celebrations and amusement parks. As Kean recounts, there are numerous cases where these phenomena have been observed by multiple people, including skeptical ones, and have carried out behaviors displaying the clear imprint of the mind of some deceased person. There is a fair resemblance between these ghosts/poltergeists and the minds of the deceased summoned during *séances*—except that for the poltergeist case, no mediums are required, the spirits just keep coming back again and again, generally to the place where their bodies died or some other place that had great significance to them. Similar forms of PK tend to occur here as in *séance* situations; and similar to reports delivered in *séances* and in cases of well-remembered reincarnation, a post-death mind that is highly active in this world seems often a consequence of a death that is in some way violent or especially troublesome.

Poltergeist investigators Alan Gauld and A.D. Cornell are quoted, characterizing the phenomena as “outbreaks of spontaneous paranormal physical phenomena centering upon the organism of some particular individual,” and noting that there is often some intelligence involved, which “seems to organize and direct the various happenings.”

In some cases communication, such as responsiveness to questions by rapping in code, occurs; the phenomenon seems to exhibit a purpose; and sometimes it focuses on one particular object. (p. 270)

In isolation, these various poltergeist cases might seem like a diverse bunch of unexplained anomalies, mixed up with hallucinations and mental problems. In the context of reincarnation-related and near-death experiences and mediumship and so forth, one is led instead to wonder what might be the underlying dynamics that, after a body’s death, cause some sort of transition to another incarnation to happen for some minds, temporary poltergeistly embodiment to happen for some others, etc.

But ghosts are not the strangest phenomena Kean recounts. What about the appearance of actual, solid human hands? According to Stephen Braude, who researched the 19th century medium Daniel Douglas Home extensively,

among the fifteen different “mind-boggling” types of phenomena that Home repeatedly generated were:

Hands, supple, solid, mobile, and warm, of different sizes, shapes, and colors. Although the hands were animated and solid to the touch, they would often end at or near the wrist and eventually dissolve or melt. Sometimes the hands were said to be disfigured exactly as the hands of a deceased ostensible communicator (unknown to Home) had been. (p. 292)

And some mediums reported the materialization of entire bodies, not just hands. Richet, who studied these phenomena in the early 20th century, was perplexed yet compelled by these shocking, bizarre occurrences, and analyzed them in a measured and thoughtful way. After witnessing many partial and full materializations, he commented that it is just as difficult to understand the materialization of a living, mobile hand, or even a finger, as it is to understand “the materialization of an entire personality, which comes and goes, speaks, and moves the veil that covers him.” In 1934, he wrote:

I shall not waste time in stating the absurdities, almost the impossibilities, from a psycho-physiological point of view, of this phenomenon. A living being, or living matter, formed under our eyes, which has its proper warmth, apparently a circulation of blood, and a physiological respiration, which has also a kind of psychic personality having a will distinct from the will of the medium, in a word, a new human being! This is surely the climax of marvels. Nevertheless, it is a fact. (p. 387)

I am reminded of a passage in the recent book *Sivananda Buried Yoga* (Manmoyanand 2008) in which a yoga master living in a remote Indian cave materializes a bottle of Jack Daniels and some fries, simply to blow the mind of a skeptical visitor. Reading this in a book, it’s easy to assume one is reading a fabrication. But after reading so many other strange stories from 100 to 200 years ago, it’s hard to be so certain.

Struggling Toward Explanations

So how might we explain all this?

It is possible, of course, that all the evidence Kean surveys in *Surviving Death* is a bunch of hokum. All the people reporting these various odd experiences—and all the scientists studying them—could be either delusional or fraudulent, or some combination thereof.

From reading Kean’s book alone, one can’t really dismiss this sort of hypothesis—after all, the skeptical reader could easily wonder whether Kean just made all this stuff up, or naively believed a bunch of kooks and

frauds who were lying to her. But if one digs deeper and reads more and more of the primary reports on these phenomena, and talks to more of the researchers behind these reports, the “delusion and/or fraud” explanation comes to seem more and more of a stretch. In the end we can’t totally rule out the hypothesis that the Apollo moon landing was a fraud, or that a cabal of Jewish bankers or reptilian aliens are controlling all the events on Earth (so that the whole of the world economy and society is a kind of fraud and delusion) either. At some point one has to adopt, as a working hypothesis, the direction in which the abundance of evidence appears to be pointing.

So, supposing the phenomena Kean surveys are mostly real, then—what gives?

What I above referred to as the “super-psi” hypothesis, Kean refers to mainly as the LAP or Living-Agent Psi hypothesis. In this theory, once a human body dies, the associated mind is dead and gone, too. But living humans, via leveraging various paranormal powers, are sometimes able to dig up information about dead people in surprising ways. Perhaps by reaching back in time with trans-temporal telepathy, to extract information from a now-dead person’s mind back when they were living; or perhaps by reaching into the minds of other living people who knew the now-dead person. In this theory, living human minds are also sometimes able to create weird phenomena—say, disturbances that look like poltergeists, or dissociated personalities inside their own minds that speak with the voices of dead people.

It becomes clear, after a bit of thought, that essentially any survival-ish phenomenon can be given SOME explanation in terms of living-agent super-psi, if one is willing to get ambitious enough about the level of psychic ability attributed to the living humans involved. However, there is a plausibility issue here. There is a tremendous amount of evidence about the nature of psi phenomena—e.g., Damien Broderick and I summarized some of it in our book *The Evidence for Psi* (Broderick & Goertzel 2014) and Ed May and Sonali Marwaha provided a masterful overview in their book *Extrasensory Perception* (May & Marwaha 2015). This evidence suggests that phenomena such as ESP, precognition, and psychokinesis do exist—but they are weak in most situations; and even when they are strong, there is no evidence that they are nearly as strong as would be needed to “explain away” all the observed survival-ish phenomena as consequences of super-psi.

In sum, the counterargument against the super-psi explanation of survival-ish phenomena is twofold. First, it becomes somewhat like the Ptolemaic epicycle theory of planetary orbits—i.e. it violates the Occam’s Razor heuristic that militates toward simpler explanations. Any

phenomenon can be explained somehow or other via sufficiently powerful psi, but the nature of the psi ability posited often needs to be customized quite exquisitely to fit the phenomenon one wants to explain. This reeks of statistical overfitting and feels unconvincing. And secondly, the degree of power and reliability of psi required to make these super-psi explanations work, seems out-of-sync with the known data on psi phenomena.

Lacking any solid theory of psi phenomena themselves, it is hard to rule out the super-psi hypothesis in a really definitive way. But I agree with Kean and Braude that it seems fairly implausible.

But is the theory of “survival” really a coherent alternative, given the evidence?

Some form of survival hypothesis does seem to have Occam’s Razor on its side. As Kean notes,

The similarities between descriptions of NDEs, intermission memories, and end-of-life experiences reinforce the possible reality of another realm or nonphysical dimension where consciousness dwells after death. I believe that these interconnections give weight to the survival hypothesis. (p. 141)

In other words, if one takes what people report from NDEs, intermission memories, and end-of-life experiences fairly literally, one concludes they are reporting that some sort of afterlife exists, in which individual minds exist and persist. This hypothesis also provides a direct sort of explanation for mediumistic channeling and many examples of poltergeists. It’s of course possible that what people report in NDEs, end-of-life experiences, and so forth is largely constructed by their own minds, and that even if it’s being triggered by some domain of being beyond our physical world, these experiences represent a highly distorted interpretation of this other domain. However, the fact that so many of these experiences appear to point directly at some form of survival of the individual mind is noteworthy and deserves to be taken seriously.

One thing that jumps out at me from the various cases surveyed by Kean (and the other reading I’ve done) is the lack of reports about the everyday goings-on in the afterlife. There are few if any cases where a mind sends a message from the afterlife in the vein of “Hey, things are really great up here! I just had an amazing 84-dimensional experience with these purple-eyed aliens who died on a planet somewhere near Andromeda, 4,000 years ago. And Saint Anselm dances an amazing cha-cha!” Or, “It’s really great not to be tied to a physical body that needs to eat and sleep and shit all the time, and live in a purer way. Directly perceiving the truths of all mathematical theorems independent of what axiom system one uses to formalize them, is also pretty cool. But occasionally I sort of miss the taste

of cheesecake . . .” *The Simpsons* TV show depicted Heaven as involving Jimi Hendrix and George Washington engaged in a pleasant game of air hockey.

It is not especially clear whether the afterlife mind accessed in a mediumistic session is an entity that was persistently growing, changing, and acting in some afterlife domain, independent of the mediumistic access—or whether it is some sort of entity that is created by the mediumistic session itself, out of some more abstract “individual mind stuff” that continues to exist independently of the body previously associated with that now-afterlife mind. But the dearth of concrete narratives about the afterlife from these afterlife minds provides some weak evidence that, if these afterlife minds are engaged in actions and dynamics when no medium is channeling them, they don’t necessarily much resemble the actions and dynamics we are engaged in here.

Of course, it COULD be that human minds are romping in some sort of afterlife that is vaguely similar to our everyday human life on Earth, and just don’t have any way to communicate directly about this life to us, or are restricted from communicating such things to us by some sort of post-embodied security clearance. Some theorists have posited that the dead people mediums talk to are stuck in a kind of temporary limbo, and haven’t yet completed their journey from this world to the next. But the evidence for these sorts of hypotheses is very scant.

I would also say that, if one looks at the evidence Kean summarizes, there isn’t terribly much that points in the direction of the traditional Judeo-Christian narrative regarding the afterlife. Some people do report God and Heaven sightings in their NDEs, but these are quite various in specifics, and it’s easy to see how these would occur as a result of cultural conditioning. Phenomena like “white light” are extremely common in NDEs but are quite generic and don’t indicate any specific theological explanation.

Tibetan Buddhism and other Eastern wisdom traditions seem to hold up a little better in the light of the evidence, particularly in the area of reincarnation. Some of these traditions have very specific theories of reincarnation, involving a certain amount of time spent by each soul between one body and the next, and so forth. However, these also leave a lot of key questions unanswered, such as (among many, many other issues) the mechanism of creation of new souls (given the explosion of human population, which would imply there are not enough reincarnated souls to go around for all the new babies). And their explanations of phenomena such as mediums talking to the minds of people dead for decades or centuries (long after their souls should have landed in new bodies), become complex and start to feel Ptolemaically “overfit” to the phenomena they’re trying

to account for. Overall, my own sense is that these Eastern reincarnation-oriented narratives fit the observations significantly better than Judeo-Christian heaven/hell oriented narratives, but don't constitute anywhere near a final or adequate explanation. (Kean does not phrase her conclusions in exactly this way, but given the tenor of her discussion of reincarnation-related phenomena, my impression is that she probably roughly concurs.)

Kean explicitly leans in the direction that an afterlife exists, and individual human minds persist in it in some form; but that the properties of this afterlife may be quite different from anything we imagine. . . . She cautions against narrow, traditionalist versions of survivalism, noting that "certain beliefs about what survival would look like, which cannot be proven, are built into what survivalists call their 'hypothesis'" (p. 20). She uses quantum mechanics as an analogy to illustrate how aspects of the broader universe can operate very, very differently from our expectations:

Think of it this way: We know the quantum world—the infinitesimal components of matter imbued with life—is governed by different principles and realities from the ones we know in our everyday lives. How different and unimaginable to us might be a world where consciousness exists post-death? (p. 21)

She does consider that the evidence regarding survival-ish phenomena presents a compelling refutation of the idea that the mind exists *ONLY* in the brain; in fact she phrases this a little more strongly than I would:

I have come to the inevitable conclusion that most likely the brain has a facilitating or receiving and not a producing function in the experience of consciousness. So under special circumstances our enhanced consciousness would not be localized in our brain nor be limited to the brain. (p. 123)

I see what she is getting at here. However, if one takes a careful look at quantum mechanics, one realizes that events and entities at different points in time may be considered subtly interconnected, beyond our commonsensical notions of causality. How much more true might this be once one moves beyond the confines of our everyday "material" spacetime continuum? Could it be that the extended consciousness of a human individual exists in spaces and times other than those occupied by the brains and bodies with which that individual is associated—but that still these brains and bodies play an integral role in maintaining and constituting that consciousness? But perhaps this falls under the aegis of what Kean would call a "facilitating role"? We currently lack a clearly-defined language for talking about such things.

Summarizing the evocative and compelling but generally confusing nature of the evidence regarding survival, Kean presents a series of heartfelt queries:

And even if one accepts that in the present state of our knowledge some sort of survival theory gives the readiest account of the observed phenomena, many issues remain undecided. In the vast majority even of favorable cases, the “surviving” personality that claims continuity with a formerly living, or previously incarnated, personality, is only able to demonstrate such apparent continuity on a very limited number of fronts, and may, indeed, markedly fail to demonstrate it on others. This does not, of course, mean that behind the observed manifestations there does not lie the fullest possible continuity; but equally it means that the hypothesis of complete continuity is unproven, and all sorts of possibilities remain open. Is there partial or complete survival? Sentient survival, or (far worse than mere extinction) survival with just a lingering, dim consciousness? Is there long-term survival or survival during a brief period of progressive disintegration? Is there enjoyable survival, or survival such as one would wish to avoid? Survival as an individual, or survival with one’s individuality for the most part dissolved in something larger? Is survival the rule, or is it just a freak? To these and many other questions I can at the moment see no very clear answers. (p. 220)

Challenges

An excellent book like *Surviving Death*, confronting a critical and confusing topic, inevitably presents the reader with many challenges.

Even for the reader with a basic intuition that some sort of afterlife exists and that “paranormal” phenomena sometimes occur—and even more so, for the more skeptical reader—some of the phenomena recounted in *Surviving Death*, especially toward the end of the book, are going to be a challenge to believe. Did whole people really materialize out of thin air? But there’s a slippery slope with all these strange phenomena. Once you accept mediumistic PK—tables jumping around and all that—then poltergeists are just a small step. And once you accept “traditional” poltergeists, is it that much more outrageous to throw in the occasional materialization?

Making sense of all the complex, confusing evidence from the various weird phenomena recounted, provides a different sort of challenge—and one that nobody has really met successfully so far. It is not entirely obvious that these phenomena *can* be rationally and scientifically understood—there is no logical requirement that everything in our universe must be regular and predictable enough to be susceptible to the methods of science. However, there do seem to be many recurrent patterns in the way various afterlife-related paranormal phenomena happen; I have summarized some of these above. These phenomena are anomalous relative to our modern

scientific worldview, and relative to most of what happens in our everyday lives (especially in modern society; arguably relatives of these phenomena played a larger role in peoples' lives in many pre-civilized societies); but they are not utterly random and unpredictable glitches in the universe. It seems it may well be possible to form a rational scientific theory of how and why and when and where such phenomena occur, and what causal factors underlie them. But at the moment this remains a (fascinating) challenge.

In a recent paper (Goertzel 2017) I have proposed one potential theoretical direction for explaining psi phenomena and perhaps survival-type phenomena as well. In the approach suggested there, our familiar spacetime continuum is viewed as being embedded in a wider space called a "eurycosm," whose properties are in some ways more mind-like than traditionally physics-like. The dynamics of the eurycosm have aspects similar to what Sheldrake (2009) has called "morphic resonance," which results among other phenomena in a sort of "pattern completion," wherein the presence of some part of an entity causes the emergence of other parts of that entity. Pattern completion dynamics in the "near eurycosm" (the part of the eurycosm closely coupled to our physical world) provides a different sort of route to explaining paranormal phenomena—different from materialist physical explanations and also different from spiritually or religiously focused explanations. For instance, the appearance of more and more parts of a dead person's mind in the mind of a medium, or an apparent recipient of reincarnation, may be explained—at least on a conceptual level—via a dynamic wherein the pattern of the dead person's mind, once it starts to flow from the eurycosm into a particular region of our spacetime continuum, is driven on by pattern completion dynamics to flow more and more. I find this theoretical direction appealing; but admittedly at this point it is a fairly raw set of speculations. The challenge of explaining either psi or survival-type phenomena in a rigorous and convincing way is not yet met.

As with psi-related phenomena in general, but more so, in addition to the conceptual challenges there are also sociocultural challenges involved with talking about, or doing research on, afterlife-related issues. In these contexts I often feel myself trapped between, on the one hand, intensely religious or spiritual people who place a great deal of faith in cultural narratives regarding psi and afterlife related phenomena; and, on the other hand, devoted scientific materialists who consider it obvious that I have somehow fallen for a bunch of delusive and fraudulent nonsense. Writing a good book on survival-related phenomena requires artfully dodging both of these camps; and Leslie Kean has met this challenge admirably, via focusing on clear, dramatic but precise accounts of real-world observations (which is clearly the right path given the weakness of our current theoretical understanding).

In reading *Surviving Death* I frequently found myself thinking about the film *The Matrix*, and the broader “simulation hypothesis”—the possibility that perhaps our universe is in fact a computer simulation or something similar. What if we are just conscious players inside some advanced variant of *The Sims*? What if they are looking in, amused as heck at our wacky theorizing about Heavens and Hells and morphic resonance and all that, because they know that the “paranormal” experiences we’re fussing about so much are mostly just bugs in the software of the simulation? What if they know that mediumistic appearances of the minds of deceased people are simply a matter of software code that allows the simulation at one point in time to access the backup database of information about the simulation at previous times? And so forth.

The “universe as a computer simulation” idea in its most literal form is probably too current-tech-culture-centric to be true, but something along those lines seems far from impossible. Who knows what types of simulation-building or universe-building technologies post-Singularity humans might create, or post-Singularity aliens might have created in the past? The main conclusion one is driven to, when musing about the large category of thinkable explanations for the various phenomena Kean reviews, is that we really have no idea what kind of world we live in. The regularities we have observed as a culture, and codified in the formalized patterns we call the “laws of nature,” are both beautiful and useful to us in our context; but they are obviously not complete. Theological and philosophical ideas may well say something useful about aspects of the universe that science does not currently touch; but their vague and error-prone nature is obvious. Extending our current understanding of the universe to convincingly encompass the various phenomena Kean reviews in her book, with their implication of the apparent reality of some form of afterlife, is fairly likely to lead us to an understanding as far beyond our current worldview, as our current worldview is beyond that of a Stone Age tribe.

The issue of surviving death is, of course, not only a scientifically and philosophically fascinating matter, but an intensely personal matter for each of us. In that vein, I find it interesting to ask myself whether my relatively recent “conversion” to believing some form of persistence of the individual self beyond the death of the body is likely, has made me somehow more comfortable with the idea of my body dying. I would say that it has, but only slightly. I still feel strongly motivated to help find a cure for human death, aging, and disease. Aging and death have a lot of suffering associated with them, and that is not good, according to my ethical system. It is a bit reassuring to feel that, even if my body dies, the abstract patterns of my mind and personality, and perhaps stray concrete aspects here and there,

may reintersect this world at some future points in time, independently of my body. But to me, this is not so different from the reassurance I feel that if my children and grandchildren live and flourish and reproduce, my essence in some sense will live on. Being reincarnated, even if it occurs, is not the same as keeping on living; and me existing in some space outside our spacetime continuum is awesome if it's a reality, but still not the same as me existing here in this spacetime. I suppose the bottom line is that the more concrete aspects of my personality are attached to their own continued existence, and not just to the continued existence of the more abstract patterns to which they are attached.

But that's just me. Each reader who is convinced at a gut level by Kean's book that survival of the individual after death is at least pretty plausible, is going to react in their own way. And this is how, I think, we will finally get to the bottom of these confusing, complicated, and critical matters. As more and more science-minded people study the evidence for survival-related phenomena, via *Surviving Death* and other books and articles in the same vein, more people will be thinking about the matter in both its scientific and its more human aspects. And this is just what we will need in order to finally crack these puzzles. Leslie Kean has done us all a significant service by writing an entertaining, highly readable book that also has the capability of stimulating readers to think and to reflect hard on these topics that are critical in both a personal and a scientific sense.

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