

Survival and the Empirical World:
A Philosophical Exploration of Empirical
Arguments for Life after Death

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Book Prospectus
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I. Book Abstract

Most broadly stated, *Survival and the Empirical World* is a philosophical exploration of the empirical approach to postmortem survival—the survival of consciousness or the self beyond physical death. More specifically, in this book I critically evaluate the contention among many who believe in survival that there is empirical evidence that justifies belief in survival. I argue that the classical empirical arguments for survival as developed by prominent philosophers and survival researchers during the past century is unsuccessful.

My exploration of the classical empirical arguments for survival focuses on the “explanatory axis” of such arguments, specifically the contention that the survival hypothesis provides the best explanation of a wide range of empirical data drawn from the phenomena of mediumship, cases of the reincarnation type, apparitional experiences, and out-of-body experiences. Although the empirical approach to survival has considerable merit and there is intriguing empirical evidence that is at least suggestive of survival, I raise significant doubt about the force of the classical arguments, especially where these arguments maintain that the survival hypothesis has the kind of explanatory success characteristic of scientific hypotheses.

The weaknesses of the empirical arguments for survival have largely been masked by the way in which the debate concerning these arguments has been framed, for example, with an emphasis on how certain strands of data are quite improbable but for some hypothesis of survival. I argue that the central issues of debate concerning the inference to survival from the relevant data must be approached with a particular recalibration of the explanatory axis of such arguments. Such a recalibration will constellate the central issues of the debate around the predictive power of the survival hypothesis, rather than the alleged failures of alternative explanations of the data and hence the alleged surprising nature of the data but for survival. This maneuver exposes a range of largely unacknowledged or unexplored auxiliary assumptions on which the explanatory inference to survival crucially depends. I contend that once these assumptions are isolated and their implications traced out, it will be necessary to substantially rethink the three areas of traditional debate concerning empirical arguments for survival: (i) the content of the survival hypothesis, (ii) the assessment of the antecedent probability of the survival hypothesis, and (iii) how alternative explanations challenge the survival hypothesis.

In the light of the recalibration of the explanatory axis of empirical arguments for survival, I argue my central thesis: *we are not warranted in concluding that the survival*

hypothesis is the best explanation of the data traditionally adduced as empirical evidence for survival. To the extent that the inference to survival depends on survival being the best explanation of these data or otherwise embodying a range of ostensible explanatory virtues (in a way superior to various competing hypotheses), the inference to survival suffers from debilitating defects. I conclude with a call for survivalists partial to empirical arguments for survival to rethink the epistemological presuppositions of the tradition of “scientific” inquiry into postmortem survival.

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III. Brief Analytical Summary of Chapters

Chapters 1–3 present and discuss the relevant data, structure, and challenges facing the empirical argument for survival. I argue that the fundamental claim in need of further critical scrutiny is the claim that the survival hypothesis is the best explanation of the data. The plausibility of this core premise to the empirical argument for survival depends on the extent to which the survival hypothesis leads us to expect data that are otherwise very unlikely. In chapters 4–8 I argue that the empirical argument for survival is defeated since we are not warranted in affirming the core premise of the argument, and indeed may very well be warranted in denying it.

Chapters 4–5 provide reasons for supposing that the survival hypothesis (in its various forms) does not lead us to expect the relevant data, unless supplemented with a large number of auxiliary hypotheses that drastically reduce the antecedent probability of survival and therefore make it unsuitable as an explanation of the data. The considerations here support the claim that survival is not the best explanation of the data.

Chapters 6–8 provide reasons for supposing that we are not warranted in believing that the data, even collectively considered, are very unlikely (but for the survival hypothesis), for we cannot adequately rule out a fairly recalcitrant exotic counter-explanation in terms of motivated living-agent psi. This hypothesis has just as much, if not greater, antecedent probability, and it leads us to expect most, if not all, of the data in need of explanation. The considerations here support a more modest claim that we are not warranted to claim that survival is the best explanation of the data.

IV. Detailed Outline of Chapters (with Chapter Abstracts)

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1: The Empirical Approach to Survival

Synopsis

Chapter 1 introduces the empirical approach to survival and outlines the larger architecture of the book. To situate the empirical approach to survival in its broader conceptual landscape, the chapter discusses two basic features of concepts of survival and models of survival associated with the western philosophical tradition and the western and eastern religious traditions. The philosophical and religious approaches to survival are then compared to the empirical approach to survival. The chapter outlines the two core features of empirical arguments for survival: (i) evidentially relevant kinds of data collected from mediumship, cases suggestive of reincarnation, near-death experiences, and apparitional experiences and (ii) the structural features of the argument from the data to the survival hypothesis.

1.1 The Concept of Survival

1.1.1 The Survival of the Self or Some Aspect Thereof

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1.2 Philosophical and Religious Approaches to Survival

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Chapter 2: Calibrating the Survival Debate

Synopsis

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature on classical empirical arguments for survival with the aim of (i) defining the central issues of debate and (ii) proposing a particular recalibration of this debate.

Traditionally there have been three central issues in the debate concerning the empirical arguments for survival. (a) The first concerns how to understand the survival hypothesis

itself. What is the content of the survival hypothesis? Are we postulating the survival of the self in a robust or significantly attenuated sense? (b) The second issue concerns the epistemic credentials of the survival hypothesis independent of its ability to explain the data empirical survivalists adduce in its favor. More technically stated, what is the antecedent probability of survival? Skeptics assign a value here close to zero, whereas empirical survivalists typically adopt a defensive posture and argue that reasons adduced by skeptics for viewing the survival hypothesis as antecedently improbable are weak or defective. (c) The third issue of debate, and what often occupies most of the logical space, concerns the extent to which some hypothesis other than survival can adequately explain the data. While skeptical appeals to various naturalistic explanations have regularly entered the discussion here, the bulk of the literature has focused on what is widely regarded as the most recalcitrant counter-explanation of the data: the appeal to psychic functioning among living agents, which in its more potent forms is joined to various claims concerning relevant psychological factors.

In the final section of the chapter I argue for a recalibration of the survival debate. While the three issues sketched above are important, they would be more effectively engaged with a new focus: *the logical connection between the survival hypothesis and the features of the world that the survival hypothesis ostensibly explains*. The explanatory axis of the classical arguments assumes such a connection. However, not only is this matter inadequately developed in the bulk of literature, it has regularly been masked by the survivalist pre-occupation with the alleged inability of competitors to explain the data.

Once we set the central issue as the efficacy of the survival hypothesis in leading us to expect the data, the other three issues will accordingly constellate. It will be necessary to explore the content of the survival hypothesis with a view to determining what kind of content best facilitates the needed logical connection between the survival hypothesis and the relevant features of the empirical world. It follows that assessments of the antecedent probability of survival will have to consider not only a core survival claim but also whatever auxiliary assumptions have been introduced to facilitate properly linking survival to the empirical world. Finally, proposed explanatory competitors will be more accurately assessed when their explanatory force is compared to how well the survival hypothesis leads us to expect the relevant and fine-grained features of the empirical world.

Authors considered: C.D. Broad, Curt Ducasse, H.H. Price, Alan Gauld, Ian Stevenson, John Hick, Robert Almeder, David Ray Griffin, R.W.K Paterson, Stephen Braude, and David Lund.

2.1 Survival Hypotheses

2.1.1 Robust Personal Survival

2.1.2 Attenuated Survival Hypotheses

2.1.3 Further Reflections

2.2 The Antecedent Probability of Survival

2.2.1 The Intelligibility of Survival

2.2.2 Substance Dualism and Survival

2.3.3 Personal Identity and Embodiment

- 2.3.4 Consciousness and Embodiment
- 2.3 The Challenge of Explanatory Competitors
 - 2.3.1 The Alleged Failure of Naturalistic Explanations
 - 2.3.2 The Alleged Failure of Living-Agent Psi Explanations
 - 2.3.3 Super-Psi vs. Motivational Living Agent Psi
- 2.4 The Need for a Recalibration of the Survival Debate
 - 2.4.1 Why the Survival Debate Needs Recalibration
 - 2.4.2 Recalibrating the Explanatory Axis
 - 2.4.3 The Three Traditional Issues in New Perspective

Chapter 3: The Evidence for Survival

Synopsis

In chapter 2 I argued that the survival debate must be recalibrated so that the central question is the logical connection between the survival hypothesis and the relevant features of the empirical world it is adduced to explain. It is necessary to be as clear as possible about the relevant features of the world. Hence, in chapter 3 I provide a detailed description of the essential strands of data the survival hypothesis allegedly explains in a way superior to the various explanatory competitors. These data, briefly introduced in chapters 1 and 2, are collected from the investigation of four distinct kinds of phenomena: mediumship, cases suggestive of reincarnation, near-death experiences, and apparitional experiences. The chapter illustrates the data from the more reliable and significant case investigations into each of these phenomena. Furthermore, I locate the various data under a three-fold typology: data involving veridical features, data involving personality and skill-set features, and data involving important phenomenological features. Since it will prove crucial to the argumentation of subsequent chapters, I also consider cases that exhibit a confluence of data from two or three of the classification types. The chapter concludes with a restatement of the classical empirical argument for survival in the light of the chapter's more robust account of the essential data.

- 3.1 Veridical Features of the Data
 - 3.1.1 Subjects Possessing Information about the Lives of Formerly Living Persons
 - 3.1.2 Subjects Possessing Information about Current Events in the Lives of People Closely Related to Some Formerly Living Person
 - 3.1.3 Subjects Possessing Sensorily and Inferentially Inaccessible Information about Features of the Empirical World
- 3.2 Personality and Skill-Set Features of the Data
 - 3.2.1 General Personality-Trait Features
 - 3.2.2 Possession of Linguistic Skills Possessed by a Formerly Living Person
 - 3.2.3 Possession of Other Skills Possessed by a Formerly Living Person
- 3.3. Phenomenological Features of the Data
 - 3.3.1 Subjects Seeming to Remember Past Lives
 - 3.3.2 Subjects Seeming to be Outside Their Body
 - 3.3.3 Subjects Seeming to Experience or Communicate with a Deceased Person
- 3.4 The Confluence of Features in Actual Cases
- 3.5 The Classical Empirical Survival Argument Restated

Chapter 4: Survival and the World: The Problematic Connection

Synopsis

In chapter 4 I present the first round of arguments for supposing that survival hypotheses do not have adequate explanatory power, namely that such hypotheses fail to have *predictive power*. I distinguish between simple, modified, and complex survival hypotheses, the latter two resulting from conjoining the simple survival hypothesis to various auxiliary assumptions (in addition to identity trackers). I argue that the simple survival hypothesis has no predictive power at all, the modified survival hypothesis makes only very general predictions (equally predicted by other hypotheses), and the complex survival hypothesis, while potentially making specific predictions, must rely on many assumptions that are untestable, *ad hoc*, or unwarranted. This defeats the empirical inference to survival since it (a) significantly lowers the antecedent probability of survival, (b) represents a substantial deviation from the empirical methodology and scientific model many empirical survivalists are trying to emulate, and (c) would, if permissible, enable explanatory competitors to justifiably make the same moves with exactly the same predictive success. At several points in the chapter I provide comparisons and contrasts between the ostensible predictive power of the survival hypothesis and the alleged predictive power of theism as a hypothesis that purports to explain features of the empirical world.

- 4.1 Explanation and Empirical Testability: Preliminaries
- 4.2 The Predictive Failure of the Simple Survival Hypothesis
 - 4.2.1 Possible Afterlife Scenarios for Souls and Embodied Survivors
 - 4.2.2 Survivors, Survival Data, and Features of the Empirical World
 - 4.2.3 Predictive Power of Theism: A Comparison
- 4.3 Modifying the Simple Survival Hypothesis with Auxiliary Assumptions
 - 4.3.1 Necessary Assumptions Regarding the Beliefs, Desires, Intentions, and Powers of Surviving Persons
 - 4.3.2 Assessing the Predictive Power of the Modified Survival Hypothesis
 - 4.3.3 Unwarranted Postmortem Survival Conditional Statements
 - 4.3.4 Robust Theism as a Hypothesis: A Further Comparison
- 4.4 Special Considerations Concerning “Reincarnation Scenarios”
- 4.5 Prediction, Antecedent Probability, and Explanatory Competitors
 - 4.5.1 Problems with General Predictions
 - 4.5.2 Interface of Explanatory Power and Antecedent Probability

Chapter 5: Empirical Testability Explored Further

Synopsis

In the light of the arguments of chapter 4, I critique three attempts to develop a survival hypothesis that allegedly has predictive power that would make the survival hypothesis open to verification/confirmation and falsification/disconfirmation analogous to scientific hypotheses. I argue that all three attempts fail, mostly for the reasons developed in chapter 4 and also due to confusions about how the empirical testing of hypotheses works

in the sciences. I also show how survival arguments sometimes cleverly mask these defects.

The careful scrutiny of alleged predictive consequences of the survival hypothesis in chapters 4 and 5 exposes one of the crucial presuppositions of empirical inferences to survival: the dependence of the survival inference on various assumptions concerning what consciousness would be like if it should survive the dissolution of our present bodies. I argue that, relative to our background knowledge, all such assumptions are either not adequately warranted or we are faced with multiple and widely divergent competing survival hypotheses and unable to non-arbitrarily make a choice from among them, unless we broaden our background knowledge to include data from one or more of the religious traditions of the world.

5.1 The Schmeidler-Survival Hypothesis

5.1.1 Gertrude Schmeidler's Test Proposal

5.1.2 A Hypothetical Case: Testing the Survival of Elvis Presley

5.1.3 Overall Assessment of Schmeidler's Hypothesis

5.2 The Almeder-Survival Hypothesis

5.2.1 Almeder's Prediction-Verification Claims

5.2.2 Almeder's Falsification Claims

5.3 The Roll-Survival Hypothesis

5.3.1 H.H. Price and William Roll: Place Memories

5.3.2 Roll's "Testable" Survival Hypothesis

5.3.3 The Failure of Roll's Survival Hypothesis

5.4 Concluding Comments on Explanation and Prediction

Chapter 6: The Psychological Dimensions of Survival Evidence

Synopsis

In chapter 6 I explore the extent to which non-survival hypotheses can lead us to expect the psychological features of the data, especially persons identifying themselves as formerly living persons, persons exhibiting temporary possession by discarnate personalities, and persons exhibiting unusual skills and personality-traits indicative of some formerly living person.

The chapter explores depth psychological models of the psyche and clinical data in the forthcoming DSM-V concerning various dissociative phenomena to show that many, if not all, the psychological features of the data would not be surprising if it turned out that survival is false. First, purely psychological considerations—for example, the range of established dissociative phenomena—would lead us to expect the dramatic and very lifelike personae of the deceased manifested in mediumship and cases suggestive of reincarnation. Second, there are many cases of unusual human abilities, outside the cases allegedly suggestive of survival, that exhibit the qualities found in the better cases allegedly indicative of survival, which makes their appearance in the latter context overall less surprising. Finally, the chapter looks at how models of the psyche which emphasize the unconscious reveal the subtle nature of human needs and motivations, which in turn opens up the plausibility of a motivational explanation of the prominent and

otherwise quite curious psychological facts exhibited in cases suggestive of survival, not the least of which is how unusual psychological phenomena take a form that is *prima facie* suggestive of survival. This is applied to several historical cases of alleged reincarnation, spirit communication, near-death experiences, and apparitional experiences.

- 6.1 The Self and Dissociative Phenomena
 - 6.1.1 The Ego, Complexes, and Dissociation
 - 6.1.2 Dissociative Phenomena and Dissociative Disorders
 - 6.1.3 Dissociative States and Mediumistic Personae
 - 6.1.4 Dissociative States and Reincarnation Personae
- 6.2 Unusual Abilities and Skills
 - 6.2.1 The Sudden Manifestation of Linguistic Skills
 - 6.2.2 The Sudden Manifestation of Artistic Skills
 - 6.2.3 The Sudden Manifestation of Other Interesting Abilities
- 6.3 Motivational Factors and Belief in Survival
 - 6.3.1 The Subtle Nature of Needs and Motivations
 - 6.3.2 Depth Psychology and the Unconscious
 - 6.3.3 Motivations Arising from the Unconscious
 - 6.3.4 How “Survival” Meets Fundamental Psychological Needs
- 6.4 Some Ostensible Cases of Survival Viewed Motivationally
 - 6.4.1 Cases of the Reincarnation Type
 - 6.4.2 Cases of Mediumship
 - 6.4.3 Cases of Near-Death Experiences
 - 6.4.4 Cases of Apparitional Experiences

Chapter 7: The Veridical Dimensions of Survival Evidence

Synopsis

In chapter 7 I explore the extent to which non-survival hypotheses can explain the veridical features of cases allegedly indicative of survival. In particular, the chapter provides a detailed look at what most survivalists regard as the strongest explanatory competitor to survival at this juncture, the supposition of living agent psychic functioning in the form of extra-sensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK), which would in principle grant living agents epistemic access to information that otherwise seems to require a formerly living person as its source.

I argue that there is a version of the living-agent psi hypothesis, one which integrates the psychological insights canvassed in chapter 6, that would lead us to expect the same sorts of generalized phenomena presented by the better cases of survival. Of crucial importance to this chapter is my showing how a psychologically robust ordinary-psi hypothesis (not super-psi) poses the most efficacious challenge to the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis (in each of the forms considered in earlier chapters). The point argued here is not that this exotic counter-explanation is a superior explanation to survival, but rather that the survival hypothesis is not clearly a superior explanation to it. Moreover, I show that, while skeptics may dismiss this hypothesis as being no less extravagant as survival, since the survival hypothesis is committed to an auxiliary

assumption entailing psychic functioning (in both living agents and the deceased), the survivalist is in a particularly poor position to counter explanations of the data in terms of exotic cognitive processes and causal powers that survivalists must also postulate. Finally, the chapter demonstrates why the appeal to super-psi (judged by many survivalists to be implausible) is unnecessary to defeat the explanatory power of the survival hypothesis.

7.1 Ordinary Psi and Super-Psi

7.1.1 The Extent of So-Called Ordinary Psi and Its Explanatory Salience

7.1.2 The Facts that Ordinary Psi Allegedly Cannot Explain

7.1.3 The Status and Relevance of Super-Psi

7.2 Motivational Psi Theory

7.2.1 Stephen Braude's Motivational Psi Hypothesis

7.2.2 Application to Some Actual Cases

7.2.3 Response to Survivalist Objections

7.3 The Psychologically Robust Psi Hypothesis

7.3.1 What the Motivational Psi Hypothesis Explains

7.3.2 The Need for Auxiliary Assumptions

7.3.3 Predictive Power and the Data of Survival

7.4. Concluding Remarks

Chapter 8: The Survival Inference Defeated

Synopsis

In this chapter I provide a comparative analysis of the survival hypotheses and their primary explanatory competitor, the psychologically robust living-agent psi hypothesis. The analysis considers the predictive power of the hypotheses, together with their comparative antecedent probability based on simplicity and fit with background knowledge. I clarify in the light of this analysis how the psychologically robust living-agent psi hypothesis undercuts the inference to survival. Roughly stated, *the psychologically robust living-agent psi hypothesis undercuts the inference to survival by preventing us from being sufficiently warranted in believing that survival is the best explanation of the data* since it (a) has at least comparable if not superior antecedent probability, (b) leads us to expect the same kinds of data (as the survival hypothesis does in its more robust forms), and therefore (c) significantly increases the antecedent probability of the data, even collectively considered. Consequently we cannot maintain with any significant warrant that the survival hypothesis (in any of its versions) leads us to expect data that are otherwise quite surprising.

In the final section, I provide a final argument against classical empirical arguments for survival. I argue that even if survival were the best explanation of the data, survivalists have not done enough to show how judgments of favorable epistemic probability or likelihood follow from the attribution of explanatory virtue to the survival hypothesis. I offer some possible ways around this problem utilized in scientific reasoning, but show why they are of limited utility in arguments for postmortem survival as an ostensible scientific hypothesis.

- 8.1 Survival vs. a Psychologically Robust Psi Hypothesis
 - 8.1.1 Comparative Analysis: Predictive Power
 - 8.1.2 Comparative Analysis: Recalcitrant Evidence
- 8.2 Antecedent Probability Comparisons
 - 8.2.1 Fit with Background Knowledge
 - 8.2.2 Simplicity and Other Trade Offs
- 8.3 The Inference to Survival Undercut: Summary
- 8.4 Best Explanation and Likely Truth
 - 8.4.1 Bas Van Fraassen and Peter Lipton on Inference to Best Explanation
 - 8.4.2 Ampliative Inference: Science vs. Survival Arguments
 - 8.4.3 Reasonable Belief vs. Likely Truth

CONCLUSION