

BOOK REVIEWS

Life Beyond Death: What Should We Expect? by David Fontana. Watkins Publishing, 2009. 214 pp. \$17.95 (paper). ISBN 978-1906787080.

David Fontana has now given us a sequel to his earlier *Is There an Afterlife: A Comprehensive Overview of the Evidence* (2005). In his earlier work, Fontana presented a case for postmortem survival based on a broad range of empirical evidences, with a particular emphasis on the data of mental and physical mediumship. In *Life Beyond Death*, Fontana continues where he left off in the final chapter of his earlier work, the nature of the afterlife. Given that we survive death, what might the next world be like? What kind of existence can there be for persons without their physical bodies? Fontana addresses these questions by comparing the data of psychical research and the testimony of some of the Western and Eastern religious traditions of the world. He argues that these diverse sources express a compatible and shared vision of what the afterlife is like.

Overview of Fontana's Book

Fontana begins his book (Chapter 1) by providing his reasons for embarking on this particular study, the limitations of science in handling the topic, and the importance of psychical research (especially mediumship) and the testimony of the world's spiritual traditions to informing us about the character of the afterlife. He tells us, "Much of what is said adds up to a coherent and consistent view of the afterlife based on sources that may make sense to all those who do not on principle dismiss any possibility that we live on after death" (p. 6). So Fontana does not aim to present a conclusive, definitive, or compelling case for what the afterlife is like. Rather, he says, "My aim is to present a selection of the information available to us, and then leave it to the readers to make their own assessment of its value" (p. 7).

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an account of the experience of dying and the initial phase of the afterlife based largely on the data of near-death experiences (NDEs). Patients near death, or who were pronounced dead, report continuing experiences during their down time: an out of body experience, traveling through a dark tunnel with a light at the end of the tunnel, entering into a pleasant landscape, review of their life, and meeting beings of light or deceased relatives or friends. Some of the features of NDEs are corroborated by apparitional experiences, mediumship, and the testimony of the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, and religious traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity. These otherwise diverse traditions seem to converge on a basic theme, a theme reinforced by the phenomenon of deathbed visions (pp. 24–33).

Chapter 4 deals with the possible implications of sudden death and suicide for the afterlife experience. Fontana draws on the testimony of ostensible communicators in various cases of mediumship, such as the mediumship of Wellesley Tudor Pole. The results are corroborated by an appeal to religious traditions, for example Tibetan Buddhism, that emphasize how one's state of mind at death can influence one's experience of an afterlife. The consensus reached by examining these sources is that sudden death or suicide leads to an at least initially unpleasant and disorienting afterlife experience, a fact that may also explain negative NDEs (pp. 20–21, 52).

Chapter 5 covers "earthbound spirits," that is, those who have died but for various reasons fail to move on into the afterlife. Based on the data of mediumship, reasons for remaining earthbound include sudden death, emotional ties, desires, or disbelief in an afterlife (pp. 62–63). Fontana also uses earthbound spirits to provide an explanation of poltergeist phenomena (pp. 64–67). As in his earlier chapters, Fontana appeals to Buddhism to show that the evidence from mediumship is similar to what religious traditions have taught. Here Fontana cites the Tibetan Buddhist belief in a realm of hungry ghosts, reserved for those whose lives were characterized by greed and selfishness. Spirits trapped in this realm see the world of the living and are consumed by their desires for what they see, but their desires cannot be satisfied. Earthbound spirits also have the power to possess people, as is exemplified in trance mediumship (pp. 68–75).

Chapters 6, 7, and 9 develop a conception of three different planes of afterlife existence: the plane of Hades, the plane of illusion, and the plane of color. Together with the earthly plane of existence, these planes constitute the four planes of form. These planes of existence resemble life on earth to varying degrees. They are the abode for people still attached to their earthly existence in some manner.

The plane of Hades is the lowest level of the afterlife, and it is described as a state of mind rather than a location (p. 90). What one experiences in Hades is relative to one's state of mind, especially at the time of death. For some it may be a restful or peaceful state. For others, it may involve a sense of remorse for wrongs done on earth. For others yet, it may be a place of punishment. Hades includes purgatory, and so it includes experiences of cleansing and renewal, as well as punishment.

The planes of illusion (Chapter 7) and color (Chapter 9) involve experiences of an idealized conception of the present world, complete with the people, objects, places, and events experienced in our ante-mortem state. Here Fontana makes use of H. H. Price's conception of the next world as a mental projection (pp. 106–109, 148–149, 153–154), an idea corroborated by the Tibetan conception of Bardo. These planes of existence, analogous to the dream world of our ante-mortem state, are shaped by our desires and thoughts. These worlds are, in the words of H. H. Price, "image-worlds," built up from our desires and the content of our ante-mortem memories. Consequently, individuals experience objects and places with which they were familiar in their ante-mortem state. Desires determine activities

as expressions of wish fulfillment. While this explains the diversity of afterlife experiences (within the planes of illusion and color), it doesn't follow that we are confined to our own solipsistic worlds. Fontana says that like-minded individuals will experience a common environment in which they may interact with each other (pp. 106–107). So these worlds are more properly speaking products of corporate minds. Furthermore, communications between discarnate spirits will be telepathic in nature (p. 169), and travel to other locations may be immediate or mediated by imagery of travel acquired before death (pp. 169–170). These features of the planes of illusion and color are drawn largely from the data of mental mediumship.

Chapter 8 covers the topic of reincarnation. Reincarnation is said to occur typically to people who are in one of the planes of form, since these planes of existence indicate continuing attachments to earthly existence. Fontana returns again to the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine of Bardo and the correlated Tibetan teachings on rebirth (pp. 132–142), which include rebirth in realms other than earth. The discussion dovetails with Fontana's emphasis on multiple planes of postmortem existence.

Chapter 10 sketches three formless planes of existence: the plane of intellectual harmony, the plane of cosmic consciousness, and the plane of contemplation of the Supreme Mind (p. 87). These planes are planes of "increasingly pure and rarified consciousness" (p. 86) and represent the higher levels of postmortem spiritual and moral evolution. In the formless realms a person has to varying degrees transcended individual, limited existence and is brought into a greater unity with all other things.

As Fontana says:

the formless planes mark a major departure from the four lower realms in that they are said to be no longer illusory but to approach successively closer to an ultimate reality in which consciousness is not limited by the need to accommodate to a physical body and to time and space, whether actual or illusory. (p. 176)

The different planes of existence are correlated with different degrees of spiritual and moral development (pp. 86–87, 106, 143). Fontana is clear that not only does one's degree of moral and spiritual development at death determine the plane at which one enters the afterlife, but there can be movement between different planes of existence based on moral and spiritual development *in* the afterlife. So processes of moral and spiritual development that began in our earthly existence continue into the afterlife.

Strengths of Fontana's Book

There are three useful contributions Fontana's book makes to the topic of the afterlife.

First, Fontana's inclusion of religious conceptions of the afterlife sets his work apart from many other treatments of the afterlife in parapsychological literature. In this way his work is bound to capture the interest of a broader audience whose

ideas about the afterlife are shaped, at least in a general way, by their adherence to a particular religious tradition. In weaving together insights from Christianity and Buddhism, Fontana has provided a tapestry of the afterlife that rises above the sectarian aspects of many religious conceptions of the afterlife. He shows us how these traditions provide compatible and even complementary visions of the afterlife.

Second, Fontana's emphasis on different planes of existence can be seen as a way of harmonizing the Western religious emphasis on personal or individual survival and the Eastern emphasis on survival that transcends our individuality and separateness from things, for example, in the form of absorption into a higher or universal consciousness. The different levels of the afterlife move increasingly away from individual survival to a more universal mode of existence in which one's individuality has been modified to accommodate a greater unity with other things.

Finally, the diversity of afterlife views and their sometimes apparently contradictory nature is often presented as a reason to dismiss such accounts and perhaps reject the notion of an afterlife altogether. Fontana has to some degree addressed this concern. He has provided a way to reconcile very different accounts of the afterlife, for example, by conceptualizing the afterlife as involving different planes of postmortem existence correlated to a person's level of spiritual development. The idea seems to be an important point of convergence between the various traditions Fontana discusses.

Criticisms of Fontana's Book

While Fontana's work has the above merits, there are some disappointing features of the text, presentation, and argumentation.

(1) Fontana is unclear about how the case for survival (developed in his earlier book) relates to the epistemic status of beliefs about the nature of the afterlife articulated in his latest book. Consequently, it's hard to know where Fontana's exposition of other viewpoints ends and the presentation of his own beliefs begin.

Although Fontana is clear in both books that there is strong support for survival (p. 4), he expresses greater reservation about ideas concerning the nature of the afterlife. He says that his discussion of such ideas "does not necessarily imply a belief [on Fontana's part] in all the things for which they stand," but "it does not imply that the book is based on mere conjecture" (p. 6). He goes on to clarify that much of what he says constitutes a "coherent and consistent view of the afterlife" (p. 6). Later in the text he reminds the reader that his discussion of the seven planes of existence "should not be taken as an attempt to be definitive" (p. 87). So the tone is considerably more reserved than in Fontana's earlier book.

Now this is surely a sensible approach as far as it goes. Since some of the evidences for survival are not informative about the nature of an afterlife, we can't maintain that simply because there's a strong case for survival there's an equally

strong case for what the afterlife is like. Ostensible past life memories, for example, do not typically inform us about the intermediate state between death and rebirth. But something should nonetheless be said about the connection between the case for survival and the case for what the afterlife is like. After all, and this point goes unacknowledged, some strands of evidence—if genuinely evidence for survival—are also evidence for some of the ideas of the afterlife Fontana discusses. This is true of many of the NDEs Fontana cites, and it's true of some of the data of mental mediumship Fontana cites. In these cases, it's difficult to separate the evidence for survival and evidence for the nature of the afterlife. To the extent that belief in an afterlife is reasonable given these evidences, beliefs about the character of the afterlife based on the same evidences will also be reasonable. So Fontana's tone is too reserved at this juncture.

Moreover, Fontana says that in his book he will only draw on mediumistic material “whose information is *likely* to be informative on the afterlife” (p. 5, emphasis mine). This suggests a more positive stance toward at least *some* of the afterlife ideas Fontana discusses, but this is never directly addressed in the text. He says his “aim is to present a selection of the information available to us, and then leave it to readers to make their own assessment of its value” (p. 7). Fair enough, but the reader may want to know how strong of a case Fontana thinks there is for the truth of at least some of the afterlife claims in his text, even if this is contingent on the success of the project he carried out in his former book. Related, the reader might like to know what Fontana *himself* actually believes with respect to the array of ideas he develops in the text, however less than certain these beliefs are. This is only natural given that the case for his belief in survival (presented in his former book) relied heavily on the data of mediumship, which he says here is *likely* to be informative on the afterlife. Again, it looks as if Fontana's stance in his current book is too reserved.

(2) Fontana is quite explicit that he wants to show that the data of psychical research regarding survival and religious testimony about the afterlife are similar at crucial points, that there is a shared core of afterlife beliefs. This includes the Western religious traditions, especially Christianity (pp. 5, 39–40, 43, 47–49, 57, 93–99, 112–113, 183). But there is a significant unacknowledged discontinuity between the Western religious traditions and the afterlife ideas discussed by Fontana. While human persons may exist as disembodied spirits or souls immediately after death, they are in their final or ultimate postmortem state *physical* beings. There is a future day of corporate judgment of the human race. At this time human persons are physically raised from the dead by the power of God. Souls are reunited with their physical bodies. They don't exist as “astral bodies” in non-earthly realms. The redeemed enjoy eternal life on a renewed earth. This eschatology is a logical implication of a holistic conception of the human person. God creates the human person as a psycho-physical unity. Immortality is not a matter of transcending our physical existence but of perfecting it. What is most disappointing here is that Fontana doesn't as much as mention this widespread and deeply entrenched Western religious narrative of survival of death. This casts

considerable doubt on Fontana's claim that the Western religious traditions are consistent with the other traditions he examines, at least as far as the essential features of the former are concerned.

(3) As a special case of the above, Fontana's treatment of bodily resurrection in Christianity (pp. 43, 112–113) at best marginalizes the view that the resurrection body is a physical body. Fontana acknowledges that Christianity affirms "bodily survival" but he takes this to mean the possession of a non-physical body, an astral or soul body. He acknowledges that for centuries it was assumed that the resurrection body was a physical body but that now it is generally believed to refer to a non-physical body of some sort (p. 43). While some theologians hold to a spiritualist interpretation of bodily resurrection, the physicality of the resurrection (of Jesus and the human race) is still a widely held belief, even among prominent contemporary Christian philosophers (e.g., Richard Swinburne, Peter van Inwagen, Stephen Davis, William Lane Craig, Kevin Corcoran, Dean Zimmerman). Contemporary Christian philosophers disagree of course as to whether this physical body is the original body reconstituted, revived, or a newly created replica body, but the physicality of this body is not in doubt among such thinkers. Fontana's account is particularly unfortunate since physicalist conceptions of the resurrection body potentially resolve philosophical issues concerning personal identity and survival. They also provide a model of survival that is consistent with supposing that consciousness depends on a functioning brain. In this way, Fontana's discussion is isolated from relevant mainstream discussions in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion.

(4) In Chapter 8 Fontana raises the well-known population argument against reincarnation (p. 122). This argument claims that the increase in population on earth is incompatible with reincarnation models. Fontana is unimpressed by what he calls the "standard reply" to this objection, namely that people reincarnate more rapidly these days than at earlier times. Fontana says that we really don't know that this is the case, so this population objection to reincarnation "remains effectively unanswered" (p. 122). But as David Bishai has persuasively argued, it is the population-argument objector who is saddled with an unwarranted metaphysical assumption, namely that "the mean duration of stay in the afterlife has been constant throughout human history" (Bishai, 2000: 419). The population argument needs this assumption, but the assumption certainly seems unwarranted, or at least no more warranted than assumptions built into rebirth models that allow them to be compatible with population growth. So the population objection carries considerably less force than Fontana supposes.

(5) Fontana's defense of survivalist interpretations of the data is at crucial points disappointing and inadequate. For example, as in his earlier work, Fontana dismisses appeals to living agent psychic functioning, the so-called Super-ESP hypothesis (p. 147–148; cf. 79, 166), to explain the veridical data of mediumship. Fontana simply says that this view "involves so many debatable assumptions and suppositions as to put it outside the bounds of serious credibility . . ." (p. 147–148).

Nothing more is said. Fontana just refers the reader to his more detailed discussion of the Super-ESP hypothesis in his earlier book (p. 148). Among other things, the Super-ESP hypothesis challenges the survivalist interpretation of the data of mediumship,¹ one of Fontana's main sources, which he says is "likely to be informative on the afterlife" (p. 5). Given the space afforded to refutations of various other non-survivalist interpretations of afterlife evidence (pp. 11–15, 70–71, 73, 78), it's disappointing that Fontana doesn't say more about this rival hypothesis and cite his specific reasons for rejecting it, for example, that it is allegedly unfalsifiable and postulates a degree of living agent psi for which there is allegedly no independent support.² This would benefit those who haven't read Fontana's very large earlier book or who are unacquainted with the super-psi debate in parapsychology.

It is also peculiar, if not ironic, that Fontana dismisses the Super-ESP hypothesis on the grounds that it is based on "debatable assumptions." This may or not be true, but it requires further explanation because there is hardly a point in Fontana's own presentation that isn't based on "debatable assumptions" broadly construed. Indeed, given Fontana's own cautionary disclaimers throughout his book, it would seem that Fontana is very aware of the conceptually problematic and evidentially limited nature of his project. So what sort of debatable assumptions does the Super-ESP hypothesis involve? And how are these assumptions significantly more debatable than the assumptions at work in Fontana's account of the afterlife? These are two important questions Fontana does not address. Consequently, Fontana's treatment of the evidence of mediumship, as well as other survival evidences, suffers from an important inadequacy. The super-psi hypothesis seems unfairly dismissed, a dismissal that is unfortunately all too characteristic of much of the literature on survival.

(6) There's an interesting philosophical problem raised by Fontana's presentation of afterlife ideas. Fontana presents the idea that there can be movement between different planes of existence caused by one's spiritual or moral development (p. 143). Although at death some people enter immediately into the formless realms, others reach such realms from lower planes of existence. But according to Fontana at least two of the lower planes of existence amount to mental projections based on the desires and memories of postmortem individuals. So what's the problem here?

The difficulty stems from the plausible assumption that moral and spiritual development is actualized in worlds with some objective features, not worlds that are, in the words of John Hick, "plastic to our human wishes" (Hick, 1994: 273). The idea here is that objective features of a world generate genuine conflicts and challenges that are responsible for character formation. Now if afterlife worlds were solipsistic worlds, it would be clear that such worlds would not be conducive to any sort of spiritual or moral development. However, Fontana does not believe that afterlife worlds are solipsistic. He incorporates the idea of interaction and shared experiences between really distinct discarnate spirits that exist in a common mind-produced environment. Fontana says, for example, that individuals

gravitate towards locations where there are individuals of a like mind to himself” (pp. 106–107). So, as he says, each community builds up its own little world (p. 107).

The problem here is that worlds that are projections of a corporate mind are not significantly more conducive to the moral/spiritual development of its members than solipsistic worlds fashioned by a single person’s mind. Both kinds of worlds will lack genuine character-forming conflicts and challenges. Moreover, Fontana doesn’t suggest any constraints on what kinds of desires will group people together in the afterlife. Do people, for example, whose lives were characterized by an overwhelming desire to shop, gather and spend their time roaming around in afterlife malls? Are they sufficiently funded for persistent purchasing? For them, perhaps money does grow on trees. Their world is plastic to their collective wishes. It’s very hard to see moral and spiritual development in such wish-fulfillment worlds. Fontana says, for example, that people in the plane of illusion can only progress once they recognize the illusory nature of their existence. But is this the sort of thing a person would recognize given that his world has been fashioned from his own thoughts and desires? It is difficult, I think, to see people moving from these lower realms of form to the higher planes of formless existence.

One resolution to this difficulty is to emphasize rebirth into the earthly realm or some realm that is not plastic to our wishes, individually or collectively. Fontana suggests rebirth on earth from the planes of form (p. 143) but he doesn’t utilize it to alleviate the unacknowledged difficulty of positing worlds that are both mental-projection/wish-fulfillment worlds and also conducive to moral and spiritual development. Consequently, Fontana misses an important opportunity to give his discussion some philosophical sophistication.

(7) Finally, although Fontana provides author-text references when quoting source material, no page numbers are provided for any of these. Fontana doesn’t even provide page numbers for important references to his own earlier publication, for example, when referring readers to his refutation of the Super-ESP hypothesis (p. 148). While the editor(s) may have felt this acceptable given the book’s popular orientation, it is unfortunate for the reader who wishes to locate Fontana’s quotations in the cited sources, or who wishes to follow up on Fontana’s references to his own earlier publication.

Despite these weaknesses, Fontana’s book is a helpful contribution to reflections on the possible nature of the afterlife. Hopefully it inspires similar future projects.

MICHAEL SUDDUTH
Department of Philosophy
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, California 94132
michaelsudduth@comcast.net

Notes

- ¹ For an account of how the super-psi hypothesis challenges the survival of hypothesis, see Stephen Braude (2003).
- ² Fontana (2005: 103–112) raises these particular criticisms. For a defense of the super-psi hypothesis against these criticisms, see Michael Sudduth (2009).

References

- Bishai, D. (2000). Can population growth rule out reincarnation? A model of circular migration. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 14, 411–420.
- Braude, S. (2003). *Immortal Remains*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Fontana, D. (2005). *Is There an Afterlife: A Comprehensive Overview of the Evidence*. O Books.
- Hick, J. (1994). *Death and Eternal Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Sudduth, M. (2009). Super-psi and the survivalist interpretation of mediumship. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 23, 1–27.