

BOOK REVIEW

Signs of Reincarnation: Exploring Beliefs, Cases, and Theory by James G. Matlock. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 408 pp. \$39.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1538124796.

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James Matlock’s *Signs of Reincarnation* discusses important issues related to the belief in reincarnation. These include the historical and social prominence of this belief in various cultures around the world, especially its place in spiritual and religious communities. Matlock also explores data seemingly suggestive of reincarnation and attempts to develop a theory of reincarnation that can account for the data collected by parapsychological investigators and researchers. In this way, Matlock aims to show that belief in reincarnation is defensible as a conclusion drawn from what he calls “signs” of reincarnation.

Matlock does a good job mapping out the wide range of beliefs about reincarnation across time and culture. His description of various case studies and their salient features is highly informative. And his effort to develop a theory of reincarnation—what he calls a “processual soul theory”—is a laudable attempt at trying to accommodate the various details of interesting case studies and a core idea of reincarnation in the spiritual traditions of the world.

Unfortunately, this is where my praise ends. Like many other books on the topic, Matlock’s book suffers from a variety of serious defects. The cavalcade of poor scholarship, conceptual confusion, and impoverished argumentation is particularly egregious given that *Signs* is allegedly based on the lecture notes for Matlock’s course on reincarnation pitched at the advanced undergraduate or Masters-level graduate seminar. In what follows, I’ll explain why Matlock’s book is

paradigmatic of nearly everything that's wrong with survival research over the past thirty years.

MARGINALIZING ARGUMENTATION

The first serious problem is Matlock's tendency to marginalize argumentation.

By *argumentation* I mean the giving of reasons (premises) to support claims (conclusions). Matlock marginalizes this enterprise in a few ways. First, he lacks adequate clarity about the structure of his own arguments. Second, when discussing positions opposed to his own, he doesn't provide the arguments given on behalf of the positions. He fails to do this even when discussing viewpoints with which he is in agreement. Third, he privileges assertions and a selective quoting of sources over the heavy lifting of argument analysis and critique. Consequently, his case for and in defense of reincarnation is illusory.

The Problem of Clarity in Matlock's Argumentation

Matlock says the following in the Preface to *Signs*:

I am chiefly interested in the nature of the evidence for reincarnation, the question of how good the evidence is, and, if it is satisfactory, how to best interpret it. (p. xix)

On the content of Chapter 1, he says

I supply operational definitions [of reincarnation] to assist with my appraisal of the evidence for reincarnation. (p. xix)

Throughout the Preface, Matlock tells us what he intends to *do* but not what he intends to *argue*. But the reader needs to know what *propositions* he intends to show are true, plausible, or probable, and Matlock needs to clearly lay out the structure of his intended reasoning. The activity or process of how he intends to explore the topic is secondary at best. A thin, programmatic topical outline isn't a suitable substitute for an analytical outline that shows the overall structure of his intended argument.

Being clear about the structure of one's intended argument should

answer two important questions for the reader: (i) What is the main argument? (ii) What arguments are invoked to support the premises of the main argument? His answers should be clearly stated, at least in a general way, in either the Preface or the introductory chapter. And he should clearly track the answers in an organized way throughout the book and succinctly summarize his argumentation in the book's conclusion. None of this happens.

There are, of course, various *attempts* at argument throughout the book. So, Matlock is clearly interested in making arguments. It's just poorly executed.

One example of this is Matlock's failure to connect what appear to be distinct conclusions at different points in the book. Portions of text attempt to refute materialist objections to reincarnation. The conclusion here seems to be that *materialism is false or at least highly implausible* (pp. 42–44, 235–246). Other parts of the text allegedly refute alternative explanations for the data by showing they are less plausible than reincarnation (pp. 44–51, 110–121, 192–200, 211–223, 248). The conclusion here seems to be that *reincarnation is the best interpretation of the data* (pp. 115, 120, 270). Matlock also attempts to construct a theory of reincarnation that fits the data (pp. 259–271). The conclusion here seems to be that *there is a theory of reincarnation—the processual soul theory—that predicts the data and exhibits other explanatory virtues necessary for a good theory* (pp. 270–271).

Below I'll address his apparent arguments for each of these three conclusions. Here I only want to point out that Matlock isn't clear about how these conclusions are supposed to be related, and most importantly how they're supposed to be related to whether and how good the evidence is in support of the truth of reincarnation. This is especially odd since he repeatedly says he's interested in and intends to explore whether there's evidence for reincarnation and how strong that evidence is (pp. xix, 42, 52, 86, 201, 235). We get no clear answer to this question, nor how it's related to what he takes himself to have shown about the implausibility of materialism and the explanatory deficiencies of non-reincarnation theories, or even the alleged explanatory virtues of his proposed theory of reincarnation.

Just to be clear, I'm not criticizing Matlock for not giving a *formal* presentation of his arguments. My criticism is that his argumentation

suffers from remedial deficiencies with respect to presentation.¹ Argumentation should not be a scavenger hunt or analogous to working a jigsaw puzzle. The reader should not have to search for hidden clues to uncover the premises and conclusion of the main argument and then search for further clues that distinguish it from supporting arguments. This is especially true for a book that's touted as a college-level text suitable for professionals (pp. xviii–xix).

Privileging Claims over Argument

Far from being a minor presentational problem, this dialectical defect is baked into Matlock's entire approach. Not only does Matlock fail to clearly state his own arguments, he neglects to present the arguments of others. He repeatedly tells his readers what people *claim*, but he doesn't cite, much less critically engage, the reasons they offer in support of their claims. Sadly, this isn't surprising. If someone doesn't see the value in clearly presenting the reasons for his own viewpoint, he's unlikely to see the merits of doing this when it comes to the perspective of others.

Matlock's discussion of materialism (pp. 42–43, 235–245) illustrates this. He refers to scientists and philosophers who have allegedly shown problems with materialism, but he does not give their arguments. He attributes claims to them but does not show their alleged support for these claims or how strongly the evidence supports their claims, much less how these opinions of scientists provide support for Matlock's claim that consciousness is independent of a physical substrate.

Matlock enlists the views of Henry Stapp (pp. 43, 236–246) ostensibly to support his own mind/brain independence thesis, but there's so little detail here that the only obvious connection between their views is a shared vocabulary and syntactically similar sentences. But this makes Matlock's discussion of consciousness no more credible than a Deepak Chopra lecture. He says physicist Stapp "espouses an interactionism that permits the mind to act directly on quantum processes in the brain and to play a key role in quantum biology" (pp. 236–237). What is this key role? What is the argument for it? How does it support the claim that consciousness can exist without a brain or any physical substrate? Matlock does not say. The reader does not know.

Matlock says, “A strong argument can be made for mind/brain interaction and the postmortem survival of consciousness independent of the reincarnation case data” (p. 237). But what is this argument? Matlock has not given it. Why is it strong? He does not say. The reader has no idea.

Several pages later we’re told philosopher Alva Noe thinks conscious experience does not arise from neural activity, followed by references to other scientists and philosophers who have questioned the mind/brain identity thesis (p. 246). Again, Matlock does not state these arguments nor their wider context, much less how they would lend support to Matlock’s more specific claim that consciousness doesn’t depend on a functioning brain or suitable physical substrate. The reader’s need to understand these relevant details remains ignored.

While the appeal to authority is salient, it must be judiciously handled. The testimony of a handful of scientists is not a strong argument for what most scientists *think*, much less the truth of what they think. We need to see the scientific arguments for the claims under discussion, together with a clear statement about the degree of credence these thinkers give to their claims. Just because a scientist proposes something does not mean he believes it, much less believes it firmly. And if Matlock only wishes to make an *argument from authority*, he needs to better calibrate his level of credence to fit the totality of opinions among all qualified scientists, not base his opinions solely on convenient outliers. Unless, of course, he can show that the majority of scientists are subject to a cognitive bias his preferred scientists are immune to.

Matlock fares no better when it comes to discussing positions that differ from his own.

Consider Matlock’s perfunctory treatment of appeals to psychic functioning in living persons as a potential counter-explanation of past-life memories and other ostensible signs of reincarnation (pp. 116–120, 212–213, 248, 260). At no point does Matlock explain how thinkers who appeal to psi in this way construe its challenge to reincarnation explanations. He merely selects claims these thinkers have made, removes the claims from their context, then throws objections at them. Matlock’s objections are not new, nor is his refusal to acknowledge, much less critically address, the obvious counterarguments against his assertions provided by the very authors he discusses.

Whether conscious or not, Matlock's strategy amounts to little more than rhetorical trickery. You don't refute a person's argument by merely denying their conclusion. You don't refute a person's argument by quoting an authority who denies their conclusion. You don't refute a person's argument even by marshalling evidence against their conclusion. Refuting an argument requires showing that the person's *argument* fails. This requires stating their argument, demonstrating you understand it, and engaging in conscientious critique—for example, by providing reasons to deny one of their key premises, showing that other considerations weaken the force of their inference, or showing how the evidence against their conclusion outweighs the evidence for it. Had Matlock attempted any of this, he would've realized that his criticisms—for example, appealing to lack of independent support for the kind of psi allegedly needed to account for the phenomena under discussion (p. 117)—have been anticipated and answered by the very thinkers he's discussing.

Here's another illustration:

Contrary to the claims of Braude (2009, 2013) and Sudduth (2009, 2016), I see no reason disembodied psi processes need involve super-psi, so granting psi capabilities to disembodied actors does not oblige survival theorists to credit the supposed super-psi of embodied actors. (p. 248)

Stephen Braude and I have argued that survivalists must postulate a kind or degree of psi indistinguishable from what would need to be postulated if we attempted to explain the same data solely in terms of living-agent psi. Matlock doesn't present our arguments, and yet he says he sees *no reason* to accept the *claims* he attributes to us. Does this mean he didn't read what we've written? Maybe he isn't persuaded by our reasoning and so sees no *good* reason to accept our claims. But this doesn't absolve Matlock of the intellectual responsibility of stating the reasons we've offered and critically engaging them. He should show why the arguments we've presented are not good arguments. Without this, the reader isn't adequately informed about what Braude and I think, why we think it, much less whether Matlock has a remotely plausible reason for rejecting it. Consequently, the reader isn't the least bit informed about the debate Matlock is allegedly discussing.

CONFUSIONS ABOUT MATERIALISM AND SURVIVAL

Marginalizing argument tends to be comorbid with a wide range of conceptual confusions. And this is exactly what we find in Matlock.

Matlock says that skeptics frequently use materialism to prematurely and unfairly dismiss the evidence for reincarnation, so he sees it as part of his task to challenge this position in philosophy of mind (pp. 42–44, 235–46). His definition of materialism is “The philosophical position that material (physical) reality is primary and the mind or consciousness secondary to it” (p. 296). Throughout the book the term is a catchall that includes a metaphysical claim about the foundations of reality (p. 254) and various claims about the nature of human persons and consciousness, including mind/brain identity (pp. 46, 246–247) and the claim that the mind depends on the brain or presumably any other surrogate physical substratum (pp. 45, 236–237, 239).

I’m not sure Matlock even sees a difference between mind/brain dependence and mind/brain identity. He casually switches between them (see above references), conflates the two when critiquing so-called materialists (see below), and the pages listed in his index under mind/brain identity thesis refer to pages where he’s discussing mind/brain dependence. This confusion betrays an astonishing disconnect from the entire field of philosophy of mind. Not surprisingly, it has bizarre and implausible implications.

Here’s one such implication: It entails that some forms of *substance dualism* will count as materialist philosophies of mind. Why? Because some contemporary forms of substance dualism affirm that consciousness depends on a functioning brain, and they do not entail that consciousness can exist without a physical substrate. I have elsewhere (Sudduth, 2016, pp. 26–27) discussed these versions of substance dualism, but here I’ll note Lowe (2010), Hasker (2001), and Taliaferro (2001).

To quote Taliaferro:

Substance dualists need not deny that the destruction of the body leads to the destruction or annihilation of consciousness and the person . . . [they may hold] that there is no conscious, personal life without certain configurations of physical states. (Taliaferro, 2001, pp. 66–67)

But Matlock's sloppy discussion of materialism also leads him to make patently false claims about the prospects for life after death from a physicalist viewpoint. After referring to "the materialist conception of consciousness as a product of cerebral activity," he says "The materialist position rules out any possibility of the survival of consciousness after physical death" (p. xx, cf. pp. 42, 51, 245, 260).

Matlock's claim is false.

As just noted, some substance dualists affirm that the brain produces consciousness or that consciousness otherwise depends on a functioning brain. These substance dualists are materialists given Matlock's broad definition of materialism, but their position does not rule out the survival of consciousness, as the sources referenced above explicitly argue.

The thing to appreciate here is that even if the brain produces consciousness or mental states are dependent on the brain, it does not follow (even probabilistically) that consciousness is *essentially* connected to the brain and cannot exist without it. This would be true, for example, if mental states are properties of a soul (immaterial substance), but souls cannot have conscious episodes without an appropriate physical substrate. It would also be true if mind or consciousness is an information-processing structure, for the same information, form, or structure produced in or by one physical substrate can be transferred to different physical media. The mind could be *substrate independent* even if the brain produced it. In which case it does not follow that the mind is destined for cessation upon biological death. Some physicalists accept substrate independence—mind can supervene on any number of physical substrates (Bostrom, 2003).

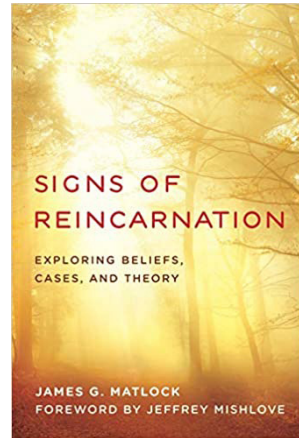
It follows from the above that the postmortem persistence of consciousness does not require any commitment to disembodied minds or the possibility of consciousness existing without a physical substrate. And this is true, not just from the point of view of non-Cartesian substance dualists, but also from the viewpoint of prominent physicalists. There are various physicalist theories of the person—roughly, humans are wholly physical or material beings—that involve life after death in the form of divinely assisted supernatural physical resurrection (Baker, 2011; Corcoran, 2001, 2006; van Inwagen, 1978; Zimmerman, 1999). Alternatively, there is digitalism, a naturalistic view of

immortality that rejects mind–body dualism, idealism, and mind–brain identity (Steinhart, 2014, 2015). Digitalists—for example, Moravec (2000), Tipler (1995), Kurzweil (2005), and Bostrom (2003)—hold that the mind is entirely computable. As such, it is substrate independent. So, consciousness is capable of persistence beyond biological death—for example, through mind-uploading and simulation (Steinhart, 2012).

I suspect Matlock would find these physicalist accounts of life after death implausible or indicative of wishful thinking.

But that’s not relevant here. The point is not about the truth or falsity of these theories, but about their logical implications. Even if false, these physicalist approaches show that Matlock’s claim (p. xx) is both false and confused. Nor is this an incidental error in Matlock’s network of falsehoods and half-truths. It’s a vital part of the rhetorical scaffolding of the entire book, for he would have the reader believe that scientists who reject reincarnation do so because they reject the very possibility of survival *on account of* their materialist commitment (pp. 42, 45, 51–52, 198, 235, 245, 260). No doubt, some do. But one can make that sensible observation without relying on obscurantism and falsehoods.

What’s also bizarre is that given Matlock’s definition of reincarnation, even reincarnation turns out to be compatible with some of the physicalist viewpoints above. According to Matlock’s operational definition, what reincarnates is a “duplex stream of consciousness that carries forward memories, behavioral dispositions, and other aspects of personality through death to union with a new body” (p. 44). Matlock later explains “it is clear that reincarnation is not about the replication of a complete identity in a new person, but about the persistence of a conscious stream and the influence of a previous personality on the present personality” (p. 252). All this requires is substrate independence. So, for all we know, the so-called evidence for reincarnation is only evidence for substrate independence, not evidence against the dependence of consciousness on the brain or other physical substrates. This is why digitalism permits reincarnation (Steinhart, 2017, pp. 3–5).



BLATANT MISREPRESENTATIONS

In the first section of this review, **Marginalizing Argumentation**, I criticized Matlock for failing to present the arguments of his critics. A more egregious error is his blatant *misrepresentation* of their views.

Again, there's nothing surprising here. If Matlock doesn't state the arguments of his critics, there's no context to constrain his interpretation of source material. Equally, there's no way for the reader to assess Matlock's critics without reading the authors he has misrepresented.

A few illustrations will suffice.

In discussing Stephen Braude's analysis of the well-known Sharada case, Matlock says of Braude:

He *supposed* that Uttara invented the Sharada personality in response to the rejection by her friend and as a compensation for an unhappy life. He *contended* that Sharada's detailed knowledge of Bengali geography and customs *was* retrieved by Uttara through a 'motivated psi' or super-psi in her altered state of mind. (p. 212, *italics added*)

But Braude does no such thing. He does not say or imply that this *is* what happened. He's not arguing for the truth of the motivated-psi hypothesis or even for its superior explanatory power. As Braude explains (Braude, 2003, pp. 101–102), he's arguing that survivalists have prematurely dismissed appeals to psi in this context because their analyses have been psychologically superficial and consequently survivalists have decided too quickly in favor of survival. His point is not that motivated psi *is* a superior explanation to survival, but that survivalists—not seeing how motivated psi poses a challenge to survival—haven't presented good enough reasons to rule out this counter-explanation.²

Another example. While clarifying that reincarnation should be understood as involving the persistence of a conscious stream, not the replication of a complete identity, Matlock says:

Braude (2003, p. 298) considered “implausible” the idea that the personality of a deceased individual survived for a time in a disincarnate state, then went through a gradual transformation after reincarnating. (p. 252)

Is this really what Braude said? No.

Braude didn't say it's implausible that the discarnate personality of a deceased person survives for a time, then goes through a transition after reincarnating. He spoke of the *seemingly* implausible scenario of *one person becoming another person* as a potential implication of *Quinton's neo-Lockean view*. His comments are about an implication of someone else's views.

In some cases, the distortions pile up in a single passage and produce a cavalcade of falsehoods and rhetorically charged misdirection.

Prior to *Signs*, Matlock published a critical commentary on *The Myth of an Afterlife*, a collection of essays critical of survival and edited by Keith Augustine and Michael Martin (Matlock, 2016b). Matlock's review was a cacophony of recalcitrant distortions and misrepresentations, especially with respect to the Augustine and Fishman coauthored paper, "The Dualist's Dilemma," in that collection (Augustine & Fishman, 2015). Despite Augustine having corrected Matlock on crucial interpretive points (Augustine, 2016), Matlock ignored them in his reply to Augustine (Matlock, 2016c) and chose to reproduce several of the more egregious errors in *Signs*.³

Augustine and Fishman (2015) maintain that the materialist position has so much going for it that it should be given the presumption of truth. They introduce a Bayesian analysis in which they assign much more weight to the brain/identity thesis than to the possibility of mind/brain interaction. The outcome of a Bayesian analysis is heavily dependent on how one weights the factors that go into it. By assigning the weights as they do, Augustine and Fishman ensure that the mind/brain identity thesis emerges the winner. However, the mere fact that there are serious questions about the mind/brain identity thesis reduces the weight that may in fairness be allotted to it, and if all the evidence in favor of mind/brain interaction is taken into account as well, the outcome of the Bayesian analysis looks very different (Matlock 2016b, 2016c). (p. 246)

Augustine and Fishman do offer a Bayesian analysis in the cited article, and Matlock is also correct that the outcome of Bayesian analysis depends on the values assigned to the components of Bayes' theorem. But everything else Matlock says here is false.

First, Augustine and Fishman are not discussing the mind/brain identity thesis or contrasting it with mind/brain interaction. They're comparing the mind/brain dependence and mind/brain independence theses. Their conclusion? "Using Bayesian confirmation theory and information theory, we find that the dependence thesis is vastly more probable than the independence thesis" (Augustine & Fishman, 2015, p. 204). Matlock's error is doubly inexcusable since Augustine corrected Matlock on it (Augustine, 2016, pp. 216–218) long before the publication of *Signs*.

Second, in their Bayesian analysis (2015, pp. 259–271), Augustine and Fishman explicitly state that they assign the equiprobable weight of 0.5 to the prior probability of each of the contrasting theses (2015, pp. 259–260). This is the same prior probability prominent survivalists have assigned to survival in Bayesian-styled arguments for survival—for example, C. J. Ducasse (1961) and David Lund (2009). So, Augustine and Fishman do not "assign much more weight to the brain/identity thesis than to the possibility of mind/brain interaction." This isn't even true with respect to the mind/brain dependence thesis which they *are* discussing.

Consequently, it is false to say that Augustine and Fishman have rigged their analysis to ensure that the mind/brain dependence thesis—much less the mind/brain identity thesis—will emerge as the winner. They assign the value 0.5 to the mind/brain dependence thesis precisely *not* to prejudice the case against survival. They have, contrary to Matlock's unsupported assertion, given due consideration to the "serious questions" that should reduce "the weight that may in fairness be allotted to it." They do not grant mind/brain dependence a presumption of truth nor does the value they assign to the prior probability of mind/brain dependence predispose their Bayesian analysis to a conclusion against survival.

Two other things are worth noticing here. First, Matlock once again shirks the responsibility of giving an argument. He claims, "if all the evidence in favor of mind/brain interaction is taken into account as well, the outcome of the Bayesian analysis looks very different." But he does not give an argument showing this. Nor does he show what values Augustine and Fishman provide and how such values would yield the result he claims. Second, Matlock obscures the crux of the Augustine

and Fishman argument, which is that the net plausibility or posterior probability of the independence thesis in its various incarnations is inferior to the mind/brain dependence thesis because of the former's lack of predictive power, not because of any particular assignment of prior probability.

It's hard to say whether stating the Augustine and Fishman argument would have prevented such egregious errors. But considering how important Matlock makes materialism to the reincarnation debate, you'd think he would have at least tried. His failure to do so is lazy and amateurish. And given that Augustine has corrected Matlock on these remedial interpretive errors, Matlock's insistence on reproducing them—as he does with others—is a form of cognitive intransigence that undermines the scholarly integrity essential to advancing healthy debate on any topic.

Matlock wishes to refute materialism. This is clear. But his reasoning at this juncture depends on a variety of false assumptions about what materialism is and how it's related to survival. He also fails to offer a single argument on behalf of materialism by those people branded with this rhetorically charged term. Much less does he give the reader a glimpse into how skeptics have proposed that materialism or mind/brain dependence challenges arguments for reincarnation. Consequently, we can't take Matlock's criticisms of materialism seriously. And to the extent that his case for reincarnation depends on refuting materialism, his case for reincarnation fails.

REINCARNATION—THE BEST EXPLANATION?

It's common for survivalists to claim that reincarnation provides the best explanation of the kind of data Matlock considers. Matlock too makes this claim (pp. 120, 270). He says his reincarnation theory exemplifies a variety of explanatory virtues (pp. 44, 86, 259–270), and even has “considerable explanatory power” (p. 270).

After arguing that at least five different non-reincarnation interpretations of the evidence are inadequate, he writes:

I have now considered all the major interpretive frames for rebirth syndrome accounts and reincarnation cases alternative to personal survival and reincarnation and found all wanting as explanations

of at least the better cases. This places us in the uncomfortable position of having either to denigrate the investigators who have concluded that reincarnation is the best interpretation of the cases they have studied or to agree with them. (p. 120)

The rhetoric here is unfortunate. Instead of either denigrating or agreeing, we might simply disagree. Does Matlock think there can't be reasonable disagreement with someone without denigrating them? I see no reason why disagreeing with how researchers have reasoned to a conclusion requires denigrating them.

But more importantly, does Matlock succeed in showing that reincarnation is the best explanation of the data he considers? No, not even close.

A good inference to best explanation must adequately rule out competing hypotheses or theories. This means showing that alternatives—especially nearby ones—cannot explain the total dataset as well as the preferred theory. To do this requires having a clear set of explanatory criteria, assigning weights to them, and applying them consistently to the alternate theories and one's preferred theory. Matlock does none of this.

Consider Matlock's perfunctory dismissal of the more recalcitrant counter-explanations of the data—for example, the living-agent psi explanation, especially in its robust psychological forms. As shown above, Matlock relies on a variety of transparent falsehoods and distortions of what this counter-explanation is and how it allegedly challenges reincarnation as an explanatory candidate. He can't even bring himself to state the arguments of those who have insisted that survivalists have been short-sighted at precisely this juncture.

Consider also that Matlock's reasons for dismissing counter-explanations often rest on the presumed lack of independent support for what these theories would need to commit themselves to. Case in point: the alleged lack of "independent evidence" for the kind of living-agent psi that would be required to account for the data (p. 117). And yet, Matlock's theory of reincarnation can be made to fit the data only given a wide range of assumptions for which he's provided no independent evidence—for example, it being unlikely that a conscious stream would lose its structure (i.e. memories, personality traits, and cognitive functioning, including psi capacities)

when becoming discarnate (p. 248), and the expectation that we would see other evidence of postmortem activities such as “announcing dreams, apparitions, and mediumistic communications” (p. 259). Matlock presents no independent evidence for what the content of consciousness and mental functioning will look like should it persist after death. If Matlock can help himself to all manner of assumptions that seem correct to him but for which he feels no obligation to present evidence, there’s no reason why those sporting alternate explanations can’t do the same.

But let’s set aside the above criticism and grant that Matlock has given us good reasons to think that reincarnation—simpliciter or his processual theory—is the best explanation of the data. What follows? Or rather, what does *not* follow from this conclusion?

It does not follow that reincarnation is a *good* explanation, much less a very good one. It might be a very poor one. It’s a truism of inference to best explanation that the best explanation for our data need not be a very good explanation. It might be a terrible one. And given that Matlock thinks alternate explanations are as bad as they are, it seems pretty clear that Matlock has, at best, only shown that reincarnation is the best explanation of a bad lot of explanations. This is an underwhelming conclusion.

I suspect that Matlock thinks the explanatory virtues he attributes to his processual soul theory show that his particular reincarnation theory is a good one, not merely better than the alternatives. After all, after listing some of its alleged explanatory virtues, he says his theory has “considerable explanatory power” (p. 270). But does he successfully show this? No. In fact, he seems utterly unaware of the bridge that must be built from *best* explanation to *good* explanation.

A glaring problem here is that the theoretical virtues he attributes to his theory are illusory.

Good theories, he tells us, can be confirmed or falsified (p. 44). True, but at no point does Matlock say what *observational* datum would falsify or disconfirm his hypothesis. He says his theory is incompatible with certain possibilities—for example, transmigrating across species or retributive karma (p. 270). But these possibilities are not observational data. To show that a theory is incompatible with certain (theoretical) *statements* is not to show that the theory is incompatible

with statements that report observational facts. Hence, it's not an empirical prediction of this theory that it rules out certain possibilities.

Of course, Matlock does state some observational data, which he claims his theory predicts—for example, the facts surrounding children who make veridical claims about a previous personality or who exhibit behavior or physical signs characteristic of a previous personality. But I find the reasoning here opaque at best.

It's not clear what predictions his theory makes with reference to the data he's discussing. Memories as such are not observational data, though a *claim* to have remembered a past life is. But as Matlock explains it, his reincarnation theory supposedly *explains* both the fact that some children claim to remember past lives and the fact that many don't make such claims or otherwise exhibit characteristics of a previous personality (pp. 124, 200, 251). So, what is the observational datum the theory predicts? What should we expect to observe if reincarnation is true? And more importantly, what should we not expect to observe if reincarnation is true? And why?

When a hypothesis or theory has a predictive consequence, it either entails or makes probable some observational datum D. "D" is an outcome with parameters that exclude other states of affairs that can, at least in principle, be observed. So if we expect D, we do not expect not-D, nor any other state of affairs incompatible with D. It's only because the prediction D is incompatible with other possible predictive outcomes that we say the hypothesis or theory can be disconfirmed. So, what observational datum does Matlock's reincarnation theory lead us to expect, and which if not observed would disconfirm his theory?

Presumably the prediction that allegedly confirms reincarnation has *something* to do with persons (especially children) claiming past-life memories and displaying behavioral resemblances and birthmarks. But what exactly is the prediction here? By Matlock's own admission, his theory is compatible with the majority of the race not displaying these features. So why does the presence of these features in some cases confirm reincarnation but their absence in other cases (apparently the vast majority of the race) not disconfirm reincarnation?

I understand why Matlock thinks his theory can accommodate the fact that some (most?) people don't have or don't claim to have past-life memories. In our present life, the subconscious is the

repository of memories (p. 124), but because we have built-in defense mechanisms against consciously remembering (p. 200), material in the unconscious can be repressed or blocked (p. 251). But I fail to see why these facts, when incorporated into Matlock's theory of reincarnation, would lead us to expect the world to look the way it does—*some children and adults having past-life memories and some not*. Why not some other way? For example, *no one having past-life memories, everyone having such memories, most people having such memories, most children having past-life memories but no adults having such memories, no children having such memories but most adults having such memories*.

Naturally, the absence of past-life memories across the world does not count against Matlock's reincarnation theory. But that's only because the theory is, as far as I can see, compatible with a very wide range of possible outcomes on this and other points of data. But this is hardly a theoretical virtue. Quite the opposite. The only reason I can see for his not making any of the alternate scenarios a prediction of his theory is that he already knows these scenarios do not obtain. So, Matlock's theory merely accommodates the data, rather than genuinely predicts it. He doesn't seem to appreciate that explanations that merely accommodate previously known facts are much weaker than explanations that predict novel facts.⁴ The former easily creates an illusion of genuine explanation by way of post hoc theorizing.

Particularly illuminating in this regard is Matlock's explanation of how he built his reincarnation theory.

[It] is grounded in data rather than in any a priori considerations. I did not begin with a theory of reincarnation and go looking for evidence to support it; rather, I let the evidence guide the development of the theory. The result is an empirically based statement about what reincarnation is and how it works that can serve as a starting point for further discussion and theory building. (p. 261)

This passage raises red flags.

First, it's unclear how the data could shape the details of his theory unless he antecedently assumed that the data were suggestive of reincarnation in *some* sense. But this begs the evidential question—why

are we justified in taking the data as suggestive of reincarnation in the first place? If I assume that various seemingly unusual features of my garden are signs of an invisible gardener who's tending to my garden, it's only a lack of imagination that would prevent me from developing a theory about this gardener and how he/she/it works that could easily accommodate anything I might observe. Similarly, if I assume that the various data Matlock discusses *are* indeed signs of reincarnation, I can flesh out a "theory" of reincarnation that develops the core idea of what reincarnation is and how it works.

Second, Matlock's theory incorporates a variety of auxiliary assumptions the independent evidence for which (or any other kind of justification) seems wholly lacking. This gives the impression that the only reason for adopting the auxiliaries is to make the theory fit the facts. What's the motivation for accepting these assumptions unless one is already committed—not to a theory of reincarnation but to a contentious assumption that reincarnation is true in some sense and the facts in question are connected to it?

Anyone can create a just-so story to accommodate facts, even otherwise recalcitrant ones. One should not confuse this with theories in an empirically robust sense. Matlock's theory of reincarnation leads us to expect nothing with stated parameters. Yes, it can accommodate pretty much any datum, it would seem, but only by relying on a large number of assumptions, limited only by one's imagination, but most of which are at least as contentious as reincarnation itself. And we have no reason to suppose that the data Matlock's theory accommodates are otherwise improbable (i.e. predicated by the theory but unexpected on alternative theories and not merely a part of our background knowledge). For these reasons, Matlock's processual soul theory is not a good theory of reincarnation.

THE EVIDENTIAL QUESTION

I'm baffled by another problem—the final problem—that vitiates Matlock's entire book. Matlock gives us every indication that he's interested in whether there is good evidence for reincarnation.

I am chiefly interested in the nature of the evidence for reincarnation, the question of how good the evidence is, and, if it is satisfactory, how to best interpret it. (p. xix)

I aim to focus attention on the evidential dimensions of the problem. Could reincarnation be not merely a belief of a good many of the world's people, but a reality for some or even all of us? Is there evidence to support this straightforward conclusion from cases like Rylann's? (p. 42)

I aim to develop a theory that makes sense of the case data in the wider context of scientific knowledge, not merely to demonstrate the likelihood of reincarnation in a generalized sense. (p. 86)

In the first quote above, it's not clear what Matlock means. It might mean he intends to look at the quality of the data and investigative methodology behind the collection of the data. But assessing how trustworthy data are isn't the same thing as asking whether the data are evidence *for* reincarnation. That's a question about the logical relationship between the statements that express the data and the statement(s) that affirm reincarnation. We might have good reason to think that investigators have accurately described the facts at a murder scene. Whether these facts are good *evidence* that a particular person committed the murder requires a good inference from the facts.

That said, I think it's clear from the other two quotes above that Matlock aims also to consider whether there is evidence that would support the likelihood of reincarnation (cf. pp. 33–34, 52). And Matlock seems to think he's been successful in this regard.

First, after a detailed discussion of ostensible reincarnation cases (pp. 123–200), he says “reincarnation cases do not stand alone in suggesting that the mind has an existence apart from the body” (p. 235), and he goes on to claim to provide evidence of mind/body interaction and postmortem survival and to laud “all the evidence now available of the mind's ability to function in a discarnate state” (p. 245).

Second, in the wrap-up in the final chapter, he reintroduces the basic evidential question—is there evidence for reincarnation?—and says an affirmative answer depends on doing what he has done in the book. This at least suggests he thinks there's evidence for reincarnation.

Very strong evidence, for he concludes: “I now feel no hesitancy in declaring I believe reincarnation is the only intellectually defensible interpretation of the data” (p. 270).

For all the expressed interest in addressing the evidential question, I don’t see that Matlock has done anything to address it. Matlock doesn’t even state what it would mean for one statement to be evidence for another, much less do we find any account of criteria of evidence. And I see no argument anywhere in the book that shows that the data Matlock considers are evidence for reincarnation, much less good evidence or evidence that makes reincarnation likely.

Some survivalists who argue that reincarnation is the best explanation of the data infer from this that the data are therefore (good) evidence for reincarnation. In other words, they convert explanatory value into evidential value. This, of course, is an implausible inference, unless one appropriately bridges the gap between explanation and evidence.

Is Matlock making or suggesting this kind argument? His discussion is so lacking clarity it’s hard to say. What we can say is that if he isn’t making the bogus argument—illicitly inferring good evidence from explanatory power—he’s made no argument at all for the truth of reincarnation. On the other hand, if he is making the bogus inference, his argument for reincarnation is poorly stated and monumentally bad.

Let me unpack this a bit.

The problem with attempting to cash in the explanatory power of reincarnation for hard evidential currency is justifying the conversion of one kind of value (explanatory value) into another (evidential value). There is no simple inference *to* good evidence or probably true (or any other such epistemic assessments of belief) *from* the mere fact that some theory better explains the facts than the explanatory rivals.⁵ And Matlock doesn’t help us bridge the gap here. Although he lists a handful of explanatory criteria, he doesn’t inform the reader how he thinks the explanatory success of his theory justifies any kind of answer to the evidential question, much less how strong the evidence for reincarnation is supposed to be based on its alleged explanatory power, though he seems to think that it makes reincarnation likely (p. 86).

Just to be clear, I’m not claiming that the best explanation of some data does not get evidential support from the data. Nor that this cannot be argued. Elsewhere I’ve shown in detail exactly how this can and

often is done using Bayesian probability (Sudduth, 2016), though other frameworks are available. The salient point is Matlock does not do it, but he should. And he doesn't even seem to be aware of this problem. So, he cannot justifiably claim that the data provide good evidence for reincarnation or that he's shown that reincarnation is likely. And if he's not purporting to do this in the book, he should not claim or otherwise suggest that he is.

Matlock's own claims about the alternate non-reincarnation theories exacerbates the problem. He's highly critical of rival theories invoked to account for the evidence. He thinks they're bad explanations. But if these alternatives are so improbable, then it looks like the most we can conclude from reincarnation being the best explanation is that it's just *more* probable than other highly improbable theories. But this is consistent with reincarnation being improbable. Every space of improbable theories will be occupied by theories more or less improbable in relation to each other. None of them thereby merit our acceptance.

Much of this obscurantism could have been avoided had Matlock simply told us what it means for some fact or observational datum to count as evidence for the truth of some statement(s). This is a very basic epistemological question and central to the broader survival debate. Why should, for example, verified claims to past-life memories count as evidence for reincarnation? Why should behavioral resemblances between a current personality and a formerly living person count as evidence for reincarnation? Why should birthmarks be evidence for any kind of reincarnation? Matlock's book provides no answer to these crucial questions.

Matlock's frequent use of the phrase "evidence for reincarnation" only masks this problem. It allows him to conflate (i) facts *alleged* to be evidence for survival and (ii) facts *shown* to be evidence for survival. Whether intentional or not, it allows him to sidestep the crucial challenge of showing that the data *are* evidence for reincarnation, good evidence, or that reincarnation is likely.

I'm not saying the data Matlock is examining are not evidence for reincarnation. I'm saying Matlock has failed to show that they are. Why? Because he's not done what's required in point of logic to do this. Merely describing the data in meticulous detail and saying they're

suggestive of reincarnation doesn't meet this demand because it either doesn't tell us enough or it begs the question.

Here is the recipe for at least partial success in this regard.

First, Matlock needs to be clear about what it *means* for the data to be (good) evidence for reincarnation. The base-level idea is straightforward enough: Whatever is evidence for another statement *h* counts in favor of the truth of *h*, is an indicator of the truth of *h*, or gives us a (good) reason to think *h* is true. Survivalists and non-survivalists often parse the concept of evidence in terms of evidential probability. Here "data are evidence for *h*" means data-statements confer some favorable probability on *h*—for example, raising *h*'s probability. Others parse evidence totally or at least partly in terms of explanation—for example data-statements are evidence for *h* only if *h* successfully explains the data-statements. I don't expect Matlock to develop a complete epistemology or theory of evidence, but he should at least be clear about what he's talking about.

Second, Matlock needs to state his *criteria* of evidence; he should state the conditions under which he thinks data-statements count as evidence for some other statement(s). And since evidence comes in degrees, his criteria of evidence should include principles that discriminate between different degrees of evidential support between statements. Such principles should tell us when data weakly support a hypothesis, when data offer modest support, and especially when data strongly support a hypothesis, as well as when and to what extent the data support one hypothesis more than they support another.⁶

Finally, Matlock needs to apply such principles or canons of evidence to the data he discusses, his reincarnation theory, and alternative theories.

Matlock does none of this. Consequently, he cannot justifiably claim that the detailed data he meticulously describes over two hundred pages are evidence for reincarnation, much less good evidence for reincarnation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I've given four substantive criticisms of Matlock's book.

First, he fails to adequately address a crucial evidential question—

is there (good) evidence for reincarnation? But he claims his book will do this.

Second, he doesn't adequately address the explanatory question he flirts with—is reincarnation the best explanation of the data? But he claims the book will do this.

Third, as the result of the first two deficiencies, the connection between explanatory power and evidence is opaque. In this way, Matlock's book exhibits a more widespread deficiency in the literature on survival.

Finally, the analysis and argumentation in the book is badly impoverished, amateurish even in places. He fails to offer clearly stated arguments (of his own position or those of his critics), doesn't seem to understand remedial philosophical concepts, and misrepresents the claims and arguments of those who hold positions that differ from his own.

Like many other survivalists, Matlock gives us narrative, a just-so story, not a clearly stated argument with a coherent structure and command of the essential concepts he deploys, like evidence and explanation. He ends up reproducing a familiar pattern in survival literature: Present data, describe non-survival explanations, ignore the arguments for these counter-explanations and instead quote "experts" who seem to reject them or simply assert that they fail, then claim that survival—or in this case reincarnation—wins.

This is not how a case for reincarnation is made. This is not how arguments of any kind are made. And it's not how one advances the debate on survival, a topic that is worthy of a more serious kind of critical engagement.⁷

NOTES

- ¹ For a striking contrast in survival literature over the past forty years, see Almeder (1992), Braude (2003), Gauld (1982), Lund (2009), Paterson (1995), and Augustine and Fishman (2015). Whatever else one might say about these books, one cannot accuse the authors of failing to be adequately clear about their conclusion(s) and premises.
- ² In the same context, Matlock accuses me of *adopting* "the alternate personality interpretation" (p. 213). This is false; I don't *adopt* this

hypothesis. I argue that, in the reincarnation arguments I consider, *survivalists* cannot justify the explanatory power of reincarnation and simultaneously rule out the explanatory power of appeals to a robust psi hypothesis that includes psi and impersonation features. Matlock likely distorts my position for the same reason he distorts Braude's. He fails to understand what kinds of claims we're committed to because he fails to understand the kind of argument we're making.

- 3 Matlock has similarly ignored my corrections and reproduced in *Signs* many of his distortions of my arguments which he first published in a review of my book on survival (Matlock, 2016a). Among these is his contention (pp. 51–52, 246) that my Bayesian analysis fails for the same reasons that Augustine and Fishman's analysis fails. While some of my arguments respond to Bayesian-style survival arguments, I do not leverage Bayes' theorem against survival by relying on reductive materialism, mind/brain dependence, or any other position in philosophy of mind to drive down the prior probability of survival. I argue that survivalists themselves drive down the prior probability of their own hypothesis/theory when they bulk it up with a wide range of auxiliary assumptions in order to ensure that their hypothesis/theory can properly accommodate the data (Sudduth, 2016, pp. 18–20, 245, 296). I also argue that survivalists have not succeeded in arguing that a bulked survival theory leads us to expect data which are otherwise improbable, in part because they've not been able to sufficiently rule out rival theories that would lead us to expect the data. And so we're not justified in concluding that the data make survival more probable than not, much less highly probable.
- 4 The need for "novelty" does not seem to center around when facts were found or known relative to the development of the theory, but whether the theory was specifically adjusted to entail them. Thanks to Keith Augustine for bringing this to my attention in an earlier draft of this review.
- 5 Bas van Fraassen has argued this point in detail (see van Fraassen, 1989, pp. 142–150).
- 6 If evidence is parsed in terms of probability, one's criteria of evidence naturally include principles that distinguish between (i) evidence raising the probability of a hypothesis, (ii) evidence making some hypothesis more probable than not, and highly probable, and (iii)

evidence favoring one hypothesis h^* over another h . Bayesian analysis is often invoked to give a formal account of (i) and (ii), whereas Likelihoodism can give a formal account of (iii). For discussions on probability and explanatory approaches to evidence, see Achinstein (2001). On Bayesian and Likelihoodist approaches to probability and evidence, see Sober (2008, Chapter 1).

- ⁷ Thanks to Stephen Braude and Keith Augustine for commenting on earlier drafts of this review. And to James Matlock (correspondence, January 1, 2021) for clarifying his interpretation of Augustine and Fishman (2015).

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