

BOOK REVIEW

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The Immortal Mind: Science and the Continuity of Consciousness Beyond the Brain by Ervin Laszlo, with Anthony Peak, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2014, 176 pp., \$16.95 pb (ISBN 1-62055-303-1), \$16.95 e-book (ISBN-13: 9781620553046).

In this book Ervin Laszlo takes on the big question of whether or not consciousness survives the death of the brain. Laszlo is a philosopher of science with former professorships at universities in the US, Europe, and the Far East and with 2004 and 2005 Nobel Peace Prize nominations (Laszlo, 2014). I found his approach in this book to have been expansive, perhaps visionary, but sometimes less critical than I believe to be warranted. For example, the expression “immortal mind” seems overblown. If, as the author in fact does, one bases a scientific quest to know what happens after death on empirical reports, the most one can ever say is that so and so survived death for *some time*; to say that this person is now proven to be *immortal* (which implies inherent deathlessness) is mere philosophical speculation. Scientific researchers on life after death speak more modestly of *survival* rather than immortality.

Part 1 of the book marshals the evidence for “consciousness beyond the brain” in six chapters. This is the empirical core of the speculations that follow. Each chapter describes the type of evidence, provides examples, and briefly states what may be concluded from the evidence. In every type, Laszlo concluded that the evidence provides “reason-

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able" support for his thesis that consciousness can function apart from the brain. I found that he glossed over the difficulties or obvious shortcomings in drawing such conclusions. For example, one book he cited is cheerfully titled, "Hello from Heaven", in which the sole criterion is the "feeling" or "belief" that contact with heaven was made. Some cases strongly suggestive of survival may easily be explained by recourse to the psychic abilities of living people, but Laszlo gave this possibility short shrift.

The chapters on apparitions and mediumship contain accounts of some of the classic cases in psychical literature as well as parallel cases from recent times. At best one can infer that some deceased person's mind seems to have survived extinction; in what manner and for how long is anybody's guess. Hence, again, the difficulty of Laszlo having used the term *immortal* literally rather than more justifiably for only its rhetorical resonance.

Some near-death experiences, if they can be shown to occur when the brain could not possibly have produced any conscious experience, do seem to show that conscious experience may be possible without a body. But again, for how long? Suppose the experiencer proceeds to die and be cremated. How can it be known that his consciousness didn't fizzle out in the meantime? These experiences provide signs of survival but scarcely proof of immortality.

The chapter on "electronically transmitted communication (ITC)" with discarnate spirits was particularly rich, because of its full treatment of the topic, in part because Laszlo reported his own encounter with the well-known Italian ITC medium, Signor Bacci, who specialized in communicating with spirits through his radio. Bacci called Laszlo's deceased mother from the vasty deep, and she came and spoke through the radio—to the astonishment of her son. The author says very little about this momentous experience; it is too tersely described to be of any evidential use to the reader.

Laszlo's account of these techno-mediated attempts to crash the next world suggests that a large amount of research of this kind has been done, but I found the evidence to be so elusive, subjective, and limited in what it attested to, that as far as I can see it remains at best an interesting possibility. I will say that if there were ever an invention that allowed for some form of clear, two-way communication between incarnate humans and the discarnate world of conscious survivors, it would surpass in importance Galileo's use of the telescope in the observational study of the outer cosmos. It would be the beginning of a new phase in the history of human experience. It would certainly

rebound powerfully on human consciousness, but in what way is anybody's guess; the assumption that its effect must be positive is founded on nothing but pious fantasy.

Another area of research Laszlo discussed involves cases of "past-life recollection"—the author's tendentious gloss on the more neutral "past-life regression" via hypnosis. Now, if the work of Ian Stevenson and Jim Tucker provides good reason to entertain the hypothesis of reincarnation, and, further, if it seems likely that most or all humans have had previous lives, then the memories of those past lives might well be accessible to people in some deep but normally inaccessible region of their mental lives. Hypnosis or other practices such as automatic writing might open the way to those memories. But so far, as far as I can see, the evidence for "past-life recollection" remains pretty flimsy. On the whole, however, Laszlo provided much food for thought about the evidence that exists suggesting the survival of consciousness beyond physical death.

Parts 2 and 3 of the book covered the explanatory science behind the assumption that consciousness might exist "beyond" or outside humans' bodily organisms. Among mainline academics, a small but growing number keep voicing discontent with the current prevailing espousal of materialism. An even smaller number argue for a radical ontology of consciousness as being fundamental and autonomous in nature. Laszlo would not merely resist totalitarian materialism but would completely overthrow it. He invoked a great deal of arcane physics to argue for this radical ontology, which he aptly called "the rediscovery of the deep dimension." He made two philosophical points that clarified his position in the attempt to identify the "deep dimension" of human being as "immortal" consciousness.

The first point, originally made by William James in a famous lecture on immortality, is that humans are not compelled to believe that consciousness *emerges* from their brains (or is *produced* by them) but that the true function of brains is to *transmit* consciousness—which, therefore, must pre-exist the brain. Not only is this move logically possible, but it saves many strange phenomena that otherwise would end up on materialism's hit list. These phenomena include paranormal and mystical experience—as well, of course, as the survival hypothesis.

The second point hinges on a claim of Erwin Schrödinger, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, that, given the nature of mind, whatever it is at bottom it must be numerically one—the "One without a second" alluded to in the Upanishads. Laszlo called this one great fundamental being that is mind and consciousness Akasha, the com-

mon root and repository of all mental life and all possible modes of consciousness. Laszlo drew some consequences from this idea of what Yeats called the Great Memory. For example, if I understand him correctly, he said that when a person remembers a past life, it doesn't mean he actually lived that life; he merely recalls and reproduces memories, behaviors, and (somehow) even bodily wounds from the Akashic memory bank. This view may demonstrate human "immortality" in a strange way: through people picking up others' postmortem memories and reincarnating and experiencing them in *their* lives. Whether or not this interpretation holds up under closer analysis, it does suggest another way of showing how the boundaries of personal conscious life may be far more porous than has previously been assumed.

Laszlo expressed the view that a scientific certification of the belief in human immortality could transform the world for the better. I'm not so sure about that. "In the past," Laszlo wrote,

belief in immortality was just that: a belief. But what if immortality had a foundation in fact? What if it had the kind of credibility that science can offer? This, we have seen, is a real possibility. Would it not inspire and promote positive values and responsible behaviors?

My question is: Was there ever a time when people's belief in 'immortality' was *just a belief*? Did not some people—the devout, the ascetic, the mystical, the near-deathers, the neurologically lucky—have experiences, visions, ecstatic out-of-body states? Did they not see apparitions, bilocate, levitate, witness or be party to supernormal healings, and so on, and infer from these experiences conclusions concerning their immortality? People believe in an afterlife for many reasons, then as now—ranging from mindless reproduction of the established view to full-fledged experiential contact with realities that seem to reveal an after-world.

It is true that science may eventually provide a more sophisticated and compelling conception of postmortem existence. But would this development inspire noble values and make people more thoughtful, more responsible, more compassionate? I think it might for people who have had some direct encounter with transcendent power—people who have tasted the mystical nectar of immortal consciousness. But for most people, I doubt if it would produce really significant changes. Why should a scientific imprimatur of the belief be any more effective than a theological one, that is, as far as eradicating the savagery and mendacity of the human species? If anything, a more scientific account will eliminate the traditional scare tactics of hell, so the certification

of continuity beyond the grave could be dangerous. It will make things much easier for fanatics of all stripes to practice martyrdom for the sake of their beloved causes—however ethnocentric in nature those causes might be. The scientific ratification of an afterlife is just as likely to bring the worst as the best out of people.

In conclusion, I found this book to be a good summary of the different kinds of evidence for life after death. I would especially recommend the book for people interested in the philosophical foundations of “immortal mind.”

References

Laszlo, E. (2014). *Biography*. Retrieved from <http://ervinlaszlo.com/index.php/biography>.