

MOREIRA ALMEIDA, Alexander; COSTA, Marianna Abreu;  
COELHO, Humberto Schubert. **Science of life after death.**  
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The book ***“Science of life after death”***, written by Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Humberto Coelho Schubert and Mariana de Abreu Costa, published by Springer in 2022, in English, and translated into Portuguese in 2023, by Editora Ampla, with the title: ***“Ciência da vida depois a morte”*** aims to discuss the knowledge that has been conceived so far about the possibility of life after death. For this, they make a historical presentation about the existing approaches to this theme, and then present the contemporary conceptions and the state of the ongoing research.

The authors belong to the medical field (Alexander Moreira-Almeida - UFJF - and Mariana de Abreu Costa are psychiatrists) and from the philosophy field (Humberto Coelho Schubert - UFJF), all of them linked to the NUPES (Núcleo de Pesquisa em Espiritualidade e Saúde - Nucleus for Research in Spirituality and Health).

It is prefaced by renowned author C. Robert Clonninger of the Washington University School of Medicine, and has five chapters, plus introduction and conclusion, all numbered 1 to 8.

In the *“Introduction”*, the authors outline the aims of the book and provide an overview of how humankind has understood the belief in life after death since

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ancient times and how it persists in much of modern Western society. It states that the question of the survival of a human being's personality after the death of the body would have important consequences for the practical, existential and ethical dimensions of life, as well as for mental health and the relationship that people would have with the grieving process. However, for many, the general belief of most people about life after death is only a religious issue and not subject to empirical investigations. With this in mind, the authors state that there are over 150 years of systematic scientific research on survival after death, involving brilliant scientific and philosophical minds, and the book will present the best empirical evidence available on this reality. They also discuss various philosophical, ideological, and methodological approaches that stand as counter conceptions of the possibility of survival after death. Finally, they conclude that cultural and psychological prejudices are often the major obstacles to accepting survival after death as a fact of nature.

In the second chapter, *"The idea of survival of the soul in the history of religions and philosophy"*, the authors start from the conception that there is a relation between survival of the consciousness and spirituality, understood as having its ultimate meaning in a sacred transcendence. As many approaches to some survival of the soul/spirit/mind after death are fraught with dogmatic conceptions, the proposal is to start from a "dispassionate, skeptical perspective, giving voice to whichever facts are worth analyzing" (p. 5). It also presents the matter of the almost universal presence of the belief in the soul's survival among diverse cultures and thinkers. However, this idea has both universality and ambiguity in relation to the diversity of conceptions, since there is a lack of a single concept, conception, or perspective to address this issue. However, in this chapter, they choose the conception that the part that survives after death, based on the suggestion of natural knowledge, is conceived as independent from the body. From this point on, the text presents a survey of the references to the survival of the soul, starting with the oldest preserved text, Gilgamesh, from the Babylonian epic tradition, and going through other religious traditions and the reality of dreams and "out of body" experiences. Following this, the text discusses the philosophical conceptions of life after death, through Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Fichte, among others. Finally, it discusses the metaphysical denial of life after

death present in many authors. This denial, many times, comes dressed up as a previous idea that science and religion are in opposition.

The chapter three, “*Setting the Scene: Addressing the Main Arguments Against Survival Hypothesis*”, attempts to present the arguments against the survival of something after death. They divide this chapter into five parts: “Neuroscience ‘proves’ that the brain generates the mind”; “Principle of Parsimony: We Should Explain Mind Solely on a Material Basis”; “There Is No Mechanism for How the Mind Would Influence the Brain”; “Science Has Proved Physicalism and Survival Implies Supernaturalism” and, finally, “Survival Implies Cartesian Dualism that Is Rejected by Learned People”. In these five parts, the authors seek to assert that these objections usually present arguments based on mistaken metaphysical and philosophical assumptions and that most often would be related to an ideological commitment to physicalism. The authors argue that there would be no solid argument or empirical evidence to force an *a priori* rejection of the survival hypothesis for what they call anomalous and spiritual experiences that are discussed in the book. Thus, the survival hypothesis should be taken into consideration through rigorous, fair, and open-minded examination, and not rejected *a priori*, which would show a dogmatic and unscientific stance.

“*What would constitute evidence for personal survival after death?*” is the title of chapter four. At first, it presents a brief discussion about scientific knowledge, considering science to be the only possible mediation between “belief and disbelief, between dogmatic conviction and dogmatic skepticism” (p. 27), besides affirming that evidence-based science cannot stick to just one piece of evidence as a criterion of truth. An important concept in the discussion of this chapter is that one should not dogmatically exclude *a priori*, non-physicalist, metaphysical, or “ideologically committed” conceptions. Next, the authors discuss a way to get to the discussion of survival after death, personal identity and how one can know of the existence of other minds, since there is only certainty about our own mind, as stated by René Descartes in the *cogito*. We can know of the existence of other minds through indirect evidence: the perception of the existence of other bodies that behave like ours and express themselves as if

they also think, feel, have desires and a sense of existence. In this way, one can identify the presence of a particular personality, even in a body completely disfigured by a terrible accident, by a specific pattern of mental qualities, or by the perception of a continuity of psychological qualities. However, how does can someone identify the survival of a personality when there is a corporeal death? The authors respond by seeking for elements that would show the persistence of a “thinking being”, an “I” that was still active, such as a “ new verifiable memories and evidence of will, personal skills, affection, peculiar goals, humor, mannerisms, etc., regarding new events and situations” (p. 30). So it is asserted that if this kind of evidence is found consistently, especially by different researchers using different methods and investigating different phenomena, they would be enough to show survival to corporeal death.

In chapter five, which is the longest chapter of the book, entitled “*The best available evidence for life after death*”, the authors present what they consider being the main scientific evidences for the hypothesis of survival of consciousness after the death of the body through studies about mediumnity, near-death experiences (NDE) and out-of-body experiences (OBE), and reincarnation. About mediumnity, the chapter initially presents a brief history of cultural aspects related to it and what would be the main scientific evidence in this regard involving studies from the second half of the 19th century to the present day. The chapter also presents specific reports of two relevant mediums: Leonora Piper, from Boston, USA, with research conducted by philosopher and psychologist William James, and Chico Xavier, from Pedro Leopoldo and Uberaba, Brazil. Then the chapter presents other studies on mediumnity, and finally presents the strengths and limitations of the main alternative explanations to the survival hypothesis, such as frauds, chance, automatisms or neuropsychological disturbances, and extrasensory perception. About near-death experiences (NDE) and out-of-body experiences (OBE), they are “unusual or extraordinary experiences, often transformative, vivid, and with a transcendent aspect, that occur in life-threatening conditions” (p. 42), having similarities in their reports regarding the perception of seeing outside the body, observing the body from an external point of view, sensation of peace, observation of family members near the body of the “deceased”, vision of beings of light, and experience of return to

the body. In a similar way to when dealing with mediumship, the authors present some studies and research about these experiences and observe that many times they generate more assertiveness about the mind and body dualism than about survival after death itself. The most impressive reports about NDEs are those concerning OBEs, especially from realities in which there is cardiac arrest or aneurysm, in which the brain is no longer functional, and yet there is the experience of “true perceptions”. To corroborate this information, the authors present some case reports in this regard, as well as providing “alternative explanations” for them.

The chapter six with the title “*The weight of the whole body of evidence for life after death*”, examines the implications of the evidence presented in the work for the belief in survival. First, the chapter presents the four possible arguments on this theme, which are fraud and unconscious fabrication of the mind, considered the most “conventional” (p. 61) and the unconventional ones regarding physicalist conceptions: the *Living Agent Psi* (LAP) and Survival. The hypothesis of the survival of consciousness, however, is only supported when associated with the other three arguments. And so, based on a “pragmatic dualism” as an empirical working hypothesis (p. 62), the authors state that the human being has two aspects: “physical body and something beyond that survives bodily death” (p. 62), without, however, going into metaphysical issues such as monism, dualism, or the understanding that the human being comprises more aspects. Finally, in the following, the authors affirm the importance of studies based on the triangulation of information, and discuss in more detail the alternative hypotheses to survival, such as fraud, chance, cryptomnesia, constructions of the unconscious mind, and other conventional origins for the affirmation of survival. They also given a special attention to unconventional perspectives, such as the LAP.

In the chapter seven, “*Cultural barriers to a fair examination of the available evidence for survival*”, the authors state that the survival hypothesis is the simplest answer to the wide range of evidence found. And they discuss the major barriers to an unbiased analysis of this evidence. According to their conceptions, these obstacles would be more associated with and supported by

pseudo-skeptical criticism than by rigorous research or philosophical demonstration. In contrast to the true skeptical attitude of demanding evidence for survival, rejecting it *a priori* based on physicalist dogma is an essentially unscientific attitude. However, by not following the rules of critical thinking, this attempt would offer nothing more than an appearance of skepticism or rationality. Although the authors claim counterevidence would be welcome in the discussion of the potential evidence for survival, one rarely has the benefit of a well-reasoned opposition. Thus, some argue to overcome these barriers and offer a fair analysis of the evidence for survival would require two main steps: the deconstruction of mistaken physicalist and anti-spiritualist philosophical, historical, and methodological assumptions, and the presentation of fair analyses of the full body of evidence suggesting the survival of consciousness.

At last, in the “Conclusion”, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Marianna de Abreu Costa and Humberto Schubert Coelho understand that with a rational, rigorous and open mind it is difficult to resist to the conclusion that the survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death is a fact of nature. And they state that this has consistently been the conclusion reached by the vast majority of humanity, including those who have conducted a careful philosophical and scientific analysis. Thus the best evidence for survival would be the convincing convergence of findings from dozens of highly qualified scientists in a wide range of anomalous experiences (mediumship, apparitions, HE, OBE, NDE, CORT, etc.) that reinforce each other because they point to the same conclusion: the survival of consciousness. To reject survivalist explanations for these findings would require simultaneously postulating a sequence of very unlikely assumptions and facts. Survivalism would be the simplest, most comprehensive, and natural explanation for the empirical data.

To conclude this review, this is a work to be read and taken into consideration, capable of propitiating reflections and favoring further research on the subject. Especially for those who dedicate themselves to this kind of issue, as it brings a wide range of research, studies, and approaches, even if they are often synthetic. However, as the authors do, care must be taken to avoid unscientific skepticism in the face of such phenomena, as well as *a priori*

assumption that condition the readings of the narratives.