

FONTANA, DAVID. (2004). *Is there an afterlife? A comprehensive review of the evidence*. Foreword by Archie E. Roy. Repley, Hants UK: O Books. 496 pp. ISBN 1-903816-90-4. Paperback, \$24.95. *Reviewed by Tricia Whitehouse*.

The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology tells us that Transpersonal Psychology extends psychological studies into “consciousness studies, spiritual enquiry, body-mind relationships and transformation” (<http://www.itp.edu>). This book addresses all of these fields of enquiry and more, and will be of interest to academics, researchers, educators and practitioners alike, in the arenas of parapsychology, psychical research, transpersonal psychology and psychotherapy. In addition, the challenges and discussions presented by Professor Fontana have relevance to us all as human beings.

This is a long book – almost 500 pages long – and I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. It is the first attempt, to my knowledge, to bring together and critically assess psychical research carried out over more than 100 years. David Fontana writes as he speaks, engagingly and knowledgably, supporting facts with evidence, personal experience and comprehensive references. As befits his impressive academic background, Fontana writes discerningly and encyclopaedically, utilising his skills as a research scientist to evaluate masses of evidence throughout the book.

After explaining his terms, Fontana begins to examine evidence for survival from a number of different arenas, including Shamanism, early spiritual traditions and Western mysticism. This is followed by an in-depth look into modern parapsychology. Over the past 80 years, Fontana says, parapsychologists have examined micro-phenomena which suggest that the mind can function independently of the body. He cites numerous experiments over many years on “anomalous cognition”, which have pointed to the capacity of some people for such things as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis. He goes on to give evidence from experiments into distance healing and prayer – asking, for example, whether the recipient needs to be aware that this is taking place, and whether the effects may be experienced directly on/in the body, with no need for conscious awareness. If these things are possible, he argues, if we can function separately from our body, is it not possible that this part/dimension of us could somehow survive the death of the body? The conclusion drawn by Fontana from this wealth of information is that, although the question of survival has not been directly addressed in the laboratory by parapsychology, the evidence from that work lays the foundations, presents the challenges and defines the terms upon which the remaining evidence can be assessed and may build.

Fontana then proceeds to examine evidence from psychical research, meticulously conducted and carefully documented over more than 120 years by eminent researchers from within the Society for Psychical Research and elsewhere, and including many examples from his own experience. He uses the

measures employed by parapsychology to test the viability of these results, often sharply challenging and refuting evidence which even slightly fails his exacting standards of robustness. He is meticulous in examining even what appears to be the most secure of evidence in the arenas of apparitions, haunting and mediumship, both physical and mental. He discusses fraudulent mediumship, but also gives evidence of profoundly complex and genuine mediumship such as when he outlines the Cross Correspondences – a truly outstanding and powerful series of communications.

Instrumental Transcommunication is the next arena for attention, Fontana once more interweaving clear explanations, autobiographical material and historical research studies in a way that is such a fascinating and delightful feature of this book. Near-Death Experiences, Out-of-the Body experiences and reincarnation follow, with reports from eminent researchers over many years, citing evidence that corresponds with information imparted elsewhere in the book.

In the final chapter, Fontana proceeds to explore the possible nature of an afterlife. He poses the questions often presented as challenges in discussions of such issues: “what survives?” “what is the nature of the body after death?” “occupations in the afterlife” “is there a judgement?”, and so on. Although some of the questions posed may seem facile and superficial, for example “why do spirits wear clothes?” “do spirits need to eat?” “does a spirit body have internal organs” I feel that Fontana is absolutely correct to address them, because not to do so may open him up to later critique on these seemingly irrelevant points – and he shows, with his scholarly and ultimately reasonable arguments, the absurdity of them in this context. His considered and well-argued responses to these questions are outstanding and leave me with no doubt at all as to my own conclusions of whether or not there is an afterlife.

There are one or two copy-editing errors and missing references that I understand were not the fault of the author; nevertheless, I have no hesitation whatsoever in wholeheartedly recommending this book to anyone interested in parapsychology, psychical research, transpersonal psychology, or their own mortality.

The Author

Professor David Fontana is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and Founding Chair of its Transpersonal Psychology Section. He is a distinguished visiting Fellow of the University of Cardiff and has been professor at two Universities in Portugal. He holds the first invited Chair of Transpersonal Psychology in the UK at John Moores Liverpool University. He is currently Vice President, and has been President, of the Society for Psychical Research. He has authored more than 30 books and over 150 papers in academic publications. He has contributed widely to the areas of educational psychology, personal development, meditation, and psychic and spiritual experiences.

The Reviewer

Tricia Whitehouse is a Chartered Counselling Psychologist and transpersonal therapist in the UK. She is the current Honorary Secretary of the Transpersonal Section of the British Psychological Society. She is a university lecturer, clinical supervisor and therapist in the NHS and private practice. She facilitates spiritual development groups and is co-author of an on-line personal and spiritual development course.