

Empirical arguments for life after death

PHIL 20208
Jeff Speaks

November 28, 2006

1 What would a good empirical argument for life after death have to be like?

Empirical arguments for life after death are arguments based on experience. We can think of them as an instance of a form of argument familiar from both scientific and every day reasoning: as *best explanation* arguments. When we make use of inference to the best explanation, we experience some event or fact, and on the basis of this come to believe in the existence of some other event or fact which we take to be the best explanation of the observed event or fact. Some typical examples.

Suppose that some experience e is given as evidence for life after death. Then, when we are evaluating the evidence, we can think of our task as separated into two questions:

- Does the hypothesis of life after death provide an explanation of the occurrence of e ?
- Does this hypothesis provide a better explanation of this occurrence than any other possible explanation?

One thing we are asking when we ask whether a theory would explain a given event is: if the theory were true, would the event in question be likely to happen? Or, does the truth of the theory make the event substantially more likely than the falsity of the theory? Some examples.

Lots of considerations are relevant to the question of whether one explanation is better than another. But one consideration which seems to be relevant is how likely to be true we think that the explanations are to be compared independent of the evidence under consideration. Consider the fact that I showed up for class on time today, and the explanation that aliens brought me here in their space ship. We all agree that this is not a good explanation, in the sense that your evidence that I made it on time today does not give you license to believe this. But what makes it a bad explanation? Presumably at least part of the answer is that you have no prior reasons to believe that aliens are carting professors around and so have a low degree of belief, going in, in that hypothesis.

When we are evaluating ‘inference to the best explanation’ arguments for life after death, however, there is a further complication. The relevant experiences are experiences that

of a sort that (probably) none of us have had. This means that the arguments are based on the experiences of others that are conveyed to us by testimony; and we have to believe the testimony about the relevant experiences before it is even relevant to raise questions about whether they are best explained by the existence of life after death. This raises the question:

When are we justified in believing the testimony of others?

Given how much and how successfully we rely on testimony, many think that some principle like the following is likely to be true:

We are justified in believing the testimony of others under normal conditions unless there is special reason to distrust that testimony.

This kind of principle suggests that we don't need some special justification for each instance of testimony that we accept; rather, we need special justification for not accepting a given instance of testimony. However, this sort of principle leaves lots of questions open. What counts as a normal circumstance? And what would be a good 'special reason' to distrust testimony? Here are some candidates:

- The speaker is known to be untrustworthy.
- The speaker has a lot to gain by lying in the present case.
- The testimony conflicts with lots of other testimony.
- The testimony concerns some event which, independent of the testimony, seems very unlikely to happen.

Some doubts about the last of these.

2 Near death experiences

The evidence most commonly given for life after death is from near death experiences. In the readings for the course, Moody is a defender of this sort of argument, whereas Lester is more skeptical. Moody identifies several different aspects which, according to his research, are reported as recurrent in near death experiences. They include, for example:

- Hearing doctors or others pronounce them dead.
- The experience of moving very rapidly through a dark space, which many describe as a tunnel.
- A very loud buzzing noise.

- An out of body experience, in which one looks down on one's own body and sometimes also on scenes in other rooms.
- Encounter with a very bright light, which is often identified as a personal being of some kind.
- A review of the events of one's life.

As noted above, we should ask two kinds of questions about these reports: Should we trust the testimony of people that report having experiences of this kind? and If we accept their testimony, are the experiences they describe best explained by the hypothesis that there is life after death?

Moody addresses the latter question in the selection we read, when he considers and rejects alternate explanations of the reported experiences. He considers the following alternate hypotheses:

1. The experiences are hallucinations caused by drugs administered while in the hospital.
2. The experiences are caused by a lack of oxygen in the brain.
3. The experiences are caused by some brain event or other, given their similarity to experiences of patients with neurological conditions.
4. The experiences are wish-fulfillment dreams, or delusions.

Moody rejects all of these alternate explanations. Sometimes this is because the experiences reported to him are different in character than experiences brought about by the suggested explanation as in the case of (1), (2), and (4); other times this is because the experiences happen without the suggested causes, as in the case of (1) and (2); other times the problem is that the explanation cannot make sense of the constancy of near death experiences across different subjects, as in (4). Are his arguments convincing?

Lester does not doubt the honesty of the sources of testimony about near death experiences, but is more skeptical than Moody about whether the best explanation of these experiences is hypothesis that there is life after death. Two important critical observations are as follows:

- The type of near death experience seems to vary with the type of bodily injury or illness suffered by the patient. E.g., patients who went into cardiopulmonary arrest were more likely than others to have a 'tunnel' experience. This both calls into question the explanation of near death experiences offered by the hypothesis of life after death — since that hypothesis seems unable to explain this aspect of the experiences — and suggests that physiological explanations may be able to do better.
- Near death experiences seem, contra to what Moody implies, to vary widely from culture to culture. See, e.g., the description of the near death experience of an

Indian man (49). If we think that life after death is the same for all people, then this calls into question whether the hypothesis of life after death is even a good explanation of near death experiences — quite apart from the question of whether it is better than competing explanations.

Lester does suggest (46-7) that out of body experiences do seem to provide one sort of near death experience which should, in principle, be amenable to test.

3 Other kinds of evidence

Beloff discusses a number of other alleged sources of empirical evidence for life after death:

- Communication of mediums with the dead.
- Evidence for reincarnation from memories of past lives.

Some of the criticisms which apply above also seem to have application here. For example, the evidence of reincarnation appears to be heavily culture-dependent, whereas it is natural to think that if reincarnation happens at all, it happens everywhere. The case of communication with mediums is a more interesting one, because it seems at least in principle to be more readily verifiable than other kinds of evidence for life after death. Consider Beloff's description of the following case:

“Probably the person for whose postmortem existence we have the best evidence is a George Pellew. He was a Bostonian gentleman ...and, although he did not himself believe in survival, he once told his friend Hodgson that, should he die in the not too distant future and then discover that he *had* survived, he would earnestly attempt to communicate the fact through Mrs. Piper. In the event, he did die soon afterward in an accident ... and, lo and behold, a spirit-control calling itself George Pellew ...duly began communicating through Mrs. Piper. Whenever she held a sitting at which any of his friends were present, he never failed to greet them whereas, conversely, he never greeted anyone he had not known during his lifetime. In this way he correctly recognized 30 out of a possible 150 individuals without making a single error.”

It is a strength of this kind of evidence that, like the experiments involving out of body experiences mentioned in Lester, it is both (in principle) open to test and cannot, if genuine, be explained away as some sort of physiological malfunction. Does this make this sort of argument for life after death convincing? Does the fact that communication occurs through a medium, whose job it is to communicate with the dead, make the testimony less trustworthy?