

In Pursuit of Proof

The other day, a radio interviewer asked me what sort of test or experiment it would take to provide absolute proof of an afterlife. I wasn't expecting that question, so all I could think of to say was that I thought the cases already on the books were proof enough. Here is what I wish that I had said.

It is true that a large body of evidence exists for the survival of the personality after the demise of the physical body. This evidence is sufficiently strong to convince most open-minded seekers. But there is a big difference between “convincing” and “proof.”

When discussing proof, one must always deal with the issue of science and the idea of “scientific proof.” In very simple terms, “science” is the practice of a process called “the scientific method.” Essentially, this method consists of observation to gather facts, then devising an idea (hypothesis) as to how these facts came about. Next, the scientist reasons that if this idea is true, then certain other facts ought to be observable. To use an example from my high-school science class: people used to believe that maggots formed spontaneously in decaying meat. A scientifically minded person observed that flies always seemed to be around the meat before this happened. He had the idea (hypothesis) that the flies were laying their eggs in the meat, so he devised a test (experimental method) by placing some fresh meat in a glass bowl with a fine mesh screen on top to allow air in but keep the flies out. Then he observed that no maggots formed in the meat. Thus, his hypothesis was supported.

Note that this is not the same as proof. In fact, “proof” is not a concept that science is comfortable with. When an idea (hypothesis) has been tested over and over and the results continue to support it, then it graduates from idea school and becomes a “theory.” But no theory is

immune to revision if more facts are observed and better hypotheses are developed.

In short, proof is a concept that is used in mathematics and in philosophy but not in science; there really is no such thing as “scientific proof.”

So, what's the problem then? Why do so many scientists seem to shut their eyes and refuse to see all the convincing evidence for life after death? The answer is not that there is no evidence — the evidence is, indeed, overwhelming — the problem is that there is no scientifically acceptable *hypothesis*. That is, no one has come up with a testable idea of *how* the process of surviving death works.

Okay, so that's where science comes into — and goes out of — the picture. I say “goes out” because even if a reasonable hypothesis was developed, it couldn't be tested. Why? Because for an experiment to be valid, all outside influences must be controlled, and the actions of spirits, ghosts, deceased souls, and what-have-you, are beyond our control. There is simply no way we can design an experiment that is immune to the influence of spirits. Thus, scientists face the catch-22 that if what they are testing for is true, their tests are not valid!

As an illustration of this conundrum, think of a researcher who tests a medium by arranging sittings with strangers and recording how many correct pieces of information the medium can obtain from the deceased friends and relatives of the sitters. Then the researcher compares this

score with that of other people (the “control” group) who either just guess about the sitters or are trained at eliciting information via “cold reading.” Trouble is, the researcher cannot control the spirits in either test. On the one hand, there is no way to guarantee that the sitter actually has any deceased acquaintances who care enough to get in touch. On the other hand, there is no way to prohibit spirits from aiding those making what they think are guesses. If the medium knocks and there’s no one there, while the control group is truly inspired, then the results of the test will be fatally skewed, and no one will be the wiser.

So, there is no such animal as “scientific proof” – not now, not ever. Those who seek proof must turn to another cultural institution: our legal system. Using this approach, to ask for proof is to ask to be convinced “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Since everyone is biased one way or another, how much evidence is required to meet this criterion will vary from person to person. Thus, proof is relative, not absolute.

I started out as a skeptical materialist, but the facts I have learned have changed my thinking. I am now convinced “beyond a reasonable doubt” that the human personality can survive the change we call “death.” I also understand that everyone is not yet so convinced.

... I’m working on it.

