

BOOK REVIEW

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Searching for Eternity: A Scientist's Spiritual Journey to Overcome Death Anxiety, by Don Morse. Memphis, TN: Eagle Wing Books, 2000, 428 pp., \$19.95, pb.

Don Morse is a retired professor who has studied everything from dentistry to clinical hypnosis to stress management. As he entered his 60's, the deaths of numerous relatives and friends stirred in Morse a sense of his own impending mortality. In order to alleviate his growing death anxiety, he undertook a lengthy and scholarly research program that attempted to answer three of the biggest questions one can ask in this life: (1) Does some essential part of the person (the *soul*) survive bodily death? (2) Will the afterlife be positive? (3) Is there a God who in some sense guarantees the basic rightness of the cosmos, including an afterlife? In *Searching For Eternity*, Morse invites the reader, in a personal "come along with me" style, to join him on a spiritual and intellectual journey to discover what the available evidence reveals about these three questions, and about a host of related issues like reincarnation, the existence of heaven and hell, and judgment.

After a preliminary chapter explaining the nature of death anxiety and the various means to attempt to cope with it, Morse begins his/our spiritual quest by recounting his own near-death experience (NDE), brought on by an illness in 1983. Many of the usual features, such as the brilliant light and the life review, are present, plus an unusual one: at the end of the life review, Morse "saw" his own funeral and even his obituary in the newspaper!

The next four chapters integrate much of the empirical evidence for the survival of bodily death. Morse thoroughly covers NDEs, out-of-body

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experiences, after-death communications, bilocation, apparitions, waking visions, dream visions, mediumistic accounts, reincarnation, and past-life regression studies. The chapter on NDEs is particularly illuminating, especially the section in which Morse rebuts more than a dozen alternative explanations to the survival hypothesis. Having all these arguments in one place is a valuable contribution to the near-death literature. At other times, Morse seems somewhat less organized and comprehensive in his presentation. Still, after more than a hundred pages of evidence, the open-minded reader is likely to conclude that the chances for survival and possibly even reincarnation are quite good.

After a brief chapter in which he professes skepticism about the possibility of some sort of physical, as opposed to spiritual, immortality, Morse tackles the age-old problem of proving the existence of God. After a review of the Biblical portrait of the Deity, the sort most of us were brought up with, Morse turns to science. There are logical, philosophical, and moral arguments that have also been presented to try to prove the existence of God, but Morse, the inquiring scientist, prefers to look at the physical evidence through the lens of science.

Essentially, Morse uses recent astronomical and biological theories to buttress a form of the theological *argument from design*. The so-called *anthropic principle*, for example, argues that the chances that certain physical factors and constants in the universe happened randomly are so infinitesimally small that one can only conclude that some divinely intelligent plan/planner was necessary. For instance, if the energy of the big bang had differed by one part in 10 to the 120th, there would be no life in the universe! Morse also presents similar arguments about the extreme unlikelihood of complex life evolving by itself. While undoubtedly not proving the existence of God to the satisfaction of many philosophers and scientists, Morse's presentation felt quite convincing to me.

Two rather long chapters follow, covering the view of the afterlife in ancient, Eastern, and Western religions. In this sort of encyclopedic book, there is always some trade-off between parsimony and comprehensiveness, but given the similarity of many of the views, a more condensed presentation, especially of Judaism, would have made this section more readable. The two equally long chapters that follow constitute a *tour-de-force*, a detailed examination of a host of recent concepts of the afterlife. Some of the organizations, groups, and individuals Morse discusses include Seventh Day Adventists, Unitarians, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Theosophy, Eckankar, Emanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, Edgar Cayce, Bruce Moen, Fred Alan Wolf, Greg Little, Peter Novak, and Kaballist Simcha Paull Raphael. Many of the views

presented, such as Urantia, I had never come across before; while others, like Scientology, seem to me to be so dubious as to question their inclusion.

More serious perhaps is the omission of some important recent views. Why include the controversial L. Ron Hubbard or the Seth books and omit Rudolf Steiner, one of the leading and most highly respected visionaries of the 20th century? It is also unfortunate that Morse made no mention of Rodney Collin's unique but sadly neglected book, *The Theory of Eternal Life* (1984). Collin, a student of mathematician and mystic Piotr Demianovich Ouspensky, had a strange, mathematical scheme of the cosmos and survival that defies easy synopsis. A more selective approach on Morse's part would have lent these two otherwise stunning chapters greater integrity.

Finally, Morse presents his own personal concept of the afterlife, which he is by now thoroughly convinced does indeed exist. First, there are several moral lessons Morse wishes to pass on to the reader: that the life we lead on Earth is a major determinant of the afterlife experience; that hateful and angry people will not have a pleasant afterlife; and that suicides are definitely treated differently in the afterlife. These are basically consistent with the "lessons from the light" discussed by Kenneth Ring (Ring and Valarino, 1998) and others.

Morse's depiction of the actual course of life after death, by way of several hypothetical scenarios, is intriguing, and for the most part conforms to portrayals familiar to students of the paranormal. Those who are knowledgeable only about the near-death literature will find that Morse's proposed nine-stage process goes well beyond the preliminary experiences reported by NDErs. Keeping in mind that neither Morse nor I nor anybody knows what happens for certain, I felt that two aspects of Morse's scenarios were less than convincing, or at least theoretically troublesome.

First, Morse relies somewhat on Peter Novak's controversial notion of the separation at death of *spirit* (consciousness) from *soul* (the unconscious) (Novak, 2002). Aside from the idiosyncratic use of these terms, I see no compelling reason to accept this presumed division, nor does Morse provide much of a rationale beyond his liking for the theory.

Second, Morse's hypothetical characters either do not reincarnate at all before finding some sort of lasting peace with God or, in the case of an evil person, they reincarnate a mere three or four times. This account *may* be true, but it does not jibe with the vast majority of reincarnation theories, which emphasize that it takes many lifetimes to evolve to the point where reincarnation is no longer necessary. Merely being a

very good person is not enough, although Morse appears to believe it does. In fact, he begs the question in his stories. In his one unpleasant scenario, a description of the life of a criminal who winds up executed, Morse admits that it was not all the criminal's fault, as he had atheistic, alcoholic parents. Given his environmental handicaps, does it seem fair that this person needs to reincarnate several times, while the characters in his pleasant scenarios, who have all the advantages, do not? The possibility that one's birth environment itself is a result of prior karmic influence seems to elude Morse. Of course, that possibility would imply that all the characters in his scenarios most likely have lived before, thus refuting the concept that for many people reincarnation is not necessary.

Throughout *Searching For Eternity*, Morse alternates between an academic, critical stance and a more personal tone, replete with interviews, anecdotes, parables, cartoons, and drawings. This makes the book more varied and readable, but it may weaken its academic credibility for some readers. Despite its minor flaws, Morse's account of his spiritual journey makes for a fascinating, comprehensive, and illuminating book. It marshals an impressive amount of evidence with which to confront the basic ontological questions mentioned above. If readers wishes to convince their friends—or themselves—that there is far more to reality than the material world and that life continues after physical death, then Morse's *magnum opus* is highly recommended.

References

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