



After the Afterlife Debate

By Steven Novella

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The debate hosted by Intelligence Squared on the proposition – Death is not Final, was a lot of fun. Of course, I am pleased with the outcome, as I think my partner, Sean Carroll, and I performed well, and in the end we won the final audience vote.

Off stage I found Raymond Moody to be a very nice guy. He is a philosopher of logic, and in general seems to understand a great deal about skepticism. He rejects the pseudoscience of ESP and other paranormal claims. Yet – he seems to have a soft spot for claims of the afterlife. Not surprising since he wrote the book on NDEs in the 1970s.

Eben Alexander was also very friendly, as I expected given his interviews and everything I have read about him.

Although interesting, debates are terrible venues for carefully dissecting the evidence. There is no time to look up references and check claims. Two times Eben Alexander and I came to an “impasse” and had to simply move on.

One such impasse (the one that seemed to generate the most internet discussion) was when Alexander cited Carl Sagan as believing in reincarnation. He seemed unaware of the stature Sagan has in the skeptical community. Afterward, back stage, he asked me if I had ever read *Demon Haunted World*. I chuckled.

Alexander specifically referenced *Demon Haunted World* page 302. The relevant section has already been posted by many others, including in the comments here, but here it is:

“Perhaps one percent of the time, someone who has an idea that smells, feels, and looks indistinguishable from the usual run of pseudoscience will turn out to be right. Maybe some undiscovered reptile left over from the Cretaceous period will indeed be found in Loch Ness or the Congo Republic; or we will find artifacts of an advanced, non-human species elsewhere in the Solar System. At the time of writing there are three claims in the ESP field which, in my opinion, deserve serious study:

- (1) that by thought alone humans can (barely) affect random number generators in computers;*
- (2) that young children sometimes report the details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than*

reincarnation;

(3) that people under mild sensory deprivation can receive thoughts or images “projected” at them.

I pick these claims not because I think they’re likely to be valid (I don’t), but as examples of contentions that might be true. The last three have at least some, although still dubious, experimental support. Of course, I could be wrong.”

To put this in context, Sagan is arguing that we have to be open to even unlikely possibilities, and sometimes it is not unreasonable to gamble on low-probability ideas. I tend to agree, within the limits of practicality and resources. But if someone wants to spend their time researching very unlikely ideas, more power to them. Just expect to be held to a very high standard of scientific rigor.

In the full quote Sagan clearly states that he does not think these propositions are likely to be valid, and the evidence so far for them is “dubious.” But – further researcher might be interesting. That’s pretty thin gruel on which Alexander is hanging his hat.

Further, *Demon Haunted World* was first published in 1995. In the almost 20 years since, the case for reincarnation is weaker, if anything. Sagan is referring primarily to the work of Ian Stevenson, who collected hundreds of cases of children reporting memories of past lives.

Stevenson’s methods have been soundly criticized. ([Here’s a good summary.](#)) He has no method for falsifying any account, which were either solved or unsolved, but never falsified. He often used translators, and failed to adequately control for the cultural beliefs of the children and all possible sources of contamination.

[In a review of the book](#) A Cogent Consideration of the Case for Karma (and Reincarnation), Barry Beyerstein wrote:

As Leonard Angel showed in these pages some time ago (SI, Fall 1994), careful reading of the acknowledged “best cases” for reincarnation, e.g., several from the parapsychologist Ian Stevenson, reveals significant internal inconsistencies in the accounts that throw them into doubt, even before the evidence itself is examined. Edwards notes similar problems in the evidential base and has taken the trouble to trace many other “best” cases back as close to their sources as possible. Along the way, we are treated to some hilarious examples of gullibility among those seized by the will to believe.

The case for reincarnation remains dubious.

Alexander, however, finds this evidence compelling and overwhelming, as he does for ESP and a host of other paranormal claims – anything that suggests a mind separate from the brain. Clearly his threshold for compelling and overwhelming are different from mine.