LETTER TO THE EDITOR

More Comments on the Book
Near-Death Experiences by Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin

I recently read the book Near-Death Experiences: Understanding Visions of the Afterlife by John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin (2016). Although I had planned to write a whole review of this book for this Journal, I learned that Dan Punzak (2016) had already fulfilled this task, so I’ll limit myself to a few remarks.

First, the authors seemed to be sincere in their claim that physicalism is on the whole more plausible than what they call “supernaturalism.” To make this point, they claimed to cover basic issues within the philosophy of mind.

In my view, however, physicalism is not just less plausible than other ontological positions; from an analytical perspective, it is completely untenable. As I tried to show in my paper Exit Epiphenomenalism, written together with philosopher Hein van Dongen (Rivas & van Dongen, 2003), the only physicalist position that is not intrinsically incoherent is a materialism that is eliminative regarding phenomenal consciousness or ‘qualia.’ Adherents to all other types of physicalism recognize the existence of phenomenal consciousness and thereby, implicitly, of its causal impact on the cognitive apparatus as well. If phenomenal consciousness really had no impact on human cognition, we humans would have no reason to think about it or even to form a concept of it. In other words, if one accepts the existence of an irreducible phenomenal consciousness, then one also must accept its causal efficacy.

This point brings me to a related issue. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) claimed that posing a nonphysical consciousness leads to the age-old problem of how something nonphysical could ever affect the brain. However, this ancient question is misguided, because it implies a need to explain mind-brain interaction in physicalist terms. If it is concluded analytically that there must be an interaction between a nonphysical mind and a physical brain, physicalism is simply refuted, which means that it is a priori useless to look for a physicalist explanation of this type of interaction. Instead, mind-brain interaction would
have to be an irreducible phenomenon with its own specific natural laws.

Proceeding from the above line of reasoning, the authors’ awareness of the “daunting” problems faced by physicalism seemed to me to be minimal. Physicalism is certainly not among the rational options—either in explaining near-death experiences (NDEs) or in the context of everyday conscious life!

To seek to explain anything in the realm of the psyche in purely physicalist terms is, thus, irrational and, therefore, incompatible with a truly scientific spirit. Even a rational explanation of NDEs in terms of hallucinations could never be physicalist, as NDEs involve consciousness.

Secondly, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) claimed that even if a patient could not have had sufficient brain functioning to explain the occurrence of NDE-consciousness, enough cerebral activity could still have been present to expect an unconscious registration of sensory impressions. However, this explanation is clearly wrong in cases of NDEs in which the patient perceived specific events that happened during (and not before or after) cardiac arrest. Within less than half a minute, the cortex shuts down, meaning that no measurable cortical functioning remains. The authors seem to have overlooked the fact that physicalists locate (the supposed direct neurological substrates of) human phenomenal consciousness in the brain’s neocortex and not in any other parts of the brain and that within physicalist theorizing the amount of cortical neurological activity should therefore, quite obviously, exactly match the level, richness, and lucidity of the consciousness experienced. But in NDEs, people have rich, lucid experience in the absence of measurable neural activity in the cortex.

Thirdly, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) made various unfounded claims concerning several of the cases they discussed in the book. For example, regarding NDEs, they stated that the clinically dead Man with the Dentures could still have been able to (physically) register specific events. Similarly regarding the case of Pam Reynolds, they speculated she could have registered all relevant and irrelevant auditory stimuli unconsciously, including the notorious clicking sounds, and then sorted them out later on. Both of these claims have been discredited by careful research (Rivas, Dirven, & Smit, 2016). Also, they mentioned anomalous veridical perceptions, such as Colton Burpo’s meeting with Pop, but ignored the fact that such perceptions still require a convincing explanation, even if physicalism cannot provide
it. In addition, they tried to find support for their physicalist theory in reincarnation research. For instance, they seemed to claim in the case of James Leininger that this child could have gathered enough information during a visit to an air museum at age 18 months to enable him, starting at age 2 years and continuing through his childhood, to provide very detailed memories of a previous life as a specific fighter pilot; on the contrary, even James’s devoutly Christian father Bruce Leininger—who did not believe in reincarnation and diligently tried to falsify his son’s claims—came to accept that there is no such normal explanation of the case. Furthermore, the authors failed to acknowledge that James also possessed specific knowledge of facts that were not related to any air battle or to aviation in general, such as the names of his past life sisters and the fact that his previous father had been an alcoholic. Clearly, James had no normal way of knowing such things (Tucker, 2013). In both fields of near-death studies and reincarnation, the authors ignored data that did not fit their preexisting physicalist notions.

Although Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) claimed to be interested in the facts, they neglected to consider numerous cases presented in the book The Self Does Not Die that defy physicalist explanation (Rivas et al., 2016). Although the latter book was published at about the same time, so Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin can be forgiven for not having read that book per se, the book was a collection of cases almost all of which already existed in the professional literature; a thorough consideration of the facts would have included not only reference to these cases but physicalist explanation of each of them based on careful analysis of accurate information. As Rivas et al. (2016) asserted, such an explanation is not possible.

Fourthly, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) claimed that the medical knowledge demonstrated by several authors, such as Pim van Lommel and Eben Alexander, is simply irrelevant for the explanation of NDEs. This claim seems to me to be rather outrageous regarding NDEs during cardiac arrest, in which cases knowledge about the way an acute heart attack affects the cortex is absolutely essential. It is almost as if Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) were trying to strengthen weak arguments that their opponents could discredit through careful analysis by devaluing the expertise of those opponents.

In summary, I join Punzak (2016) in finding many flaws in Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin’s book that fundamentally undermine their premise of a physicalist explanation of NDEs.
References


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