BOOK REVIEW

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While reviewing a bookseller’s website for books on near-death experiences (NDEs), I came across a recent one published by Oxford University Press. This publisher may be more selective and less interested in sensationalism than some other companies. Some writers of books on NDEs have claimed that a publisher would not accept their book for publication unless it had some new controversial material in it, even if that material was not supported by good research practices. The authors of Near-Death Experiences: Understanding Visions of the Afterlife, John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin (hereafter, “the authors”), are both philosophers at universities. Fischer was the Project Leader for the Immortality Project, which was sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation. Sir John Templeton established the foundation to explore science and the big questions, such as whether there is a purpose to the universe. Mitchell-Yellin was also on the Immortality Project team.

Though the authors took the reality of NDEs seriously and respectfully and realized that NDEs induce transformative aftereffects, their overall premise was that NDEs have a purely physical or standard

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psychological basis, and they rejected as unlikely what they deem supernatural explanations. I believe the use of the word supernatural is rather derogatory, but many members of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) regularly employ terms like materialism/physicalism/reductionism that could also be considered derogatory, although the authors under review here proudly utilize the term physicalism for their explanation of NDEs. According to the authors, followers of supernaturalism accept one or two claims. The first is that humans have access to a world apart from the physical world, and the second is that human minds are nonphysical and do not depend solely on the brain. Most members of IANDS would probably accept one or both of these claims. One of the reasons I dislike the term supernaturalism is that when some followers of physicalism are asked for an example of supernaturalism, they respond: creationism. The afterlife visions of NDErs have nothing to do with creationism, although creationists also believe in an afterlife. The authors appeared to believe it is better to accept familiar physical mechanisms rather than disembodied consciousness. The authors maintained that nonphysical explanations for NDEs are possible and comforting to the people to whom they happen but are not the most plausible explanation for them.

Although the authors’ reference list of 69 books, article, and websites demonstrated that they were familiar with other books on the subject of NDEs, their primary references were Eben Alexander’s books Proof of Heaven and The Map of Heaven; Todd Burpo’s Heaven Is for Real; Jeffrey Long’s Evidence of the Afterlife, and Pim van Lommel’s Consciousness Beyond Life. The authors were critical of some NDE researchers, singling out van Lommel and Alexander, who dismiss various physical explanations for NDEs because each explanation does not address all of the features of an NDE. The authors cite a journal article by physician Kevin Nelson about how each aspect of an NDE has a separate neurological basis. I located the table below, probably with the same data as the journal article, in a book by Nelson (2011) titled The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain: A Neurologist’s Search for the God Experience.
**Contributions to NDEs Briefly Encapsulated**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>NDE Feature</th>
<th>Physiological Explanation</th>
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<td>Tunnel</td>
<td>Low blood flow to the eye’s retina</td>
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<td>Light</td>
<td>Ambient light and REM visual activation</td>
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<td>Appearing “dead”</td>
<td>REM paralysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-body</td>
<td>Temporoparietal REM deactivation</td>
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<td>Life review</td>
<td>Memories (hippocampus) from fight-or-flight</td>
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<td>Bliss</td>
<td>Reward system</td>
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<td>Narrative quality</td>
<td>REM dreaming and the limbic system</td>
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The authors asserted that this type of approach to NDEs has more merit, but they admitted that Nelson did not address why all of these mechanisms are triggered by being near death. Nelson’s concept of REM intrusion is interesting, but he asserted, without evidence, that there are only three levels of consciousness: waking consciousness, REM sleep, and non-REM sleep. He stated that NDErs appear to have more REM sleep than non-NDErs, but he was not able to show that the higher level may not be an aftereffect of the NDE—that it may have been present when the NDE first occurred.

I do agree with the authors under review here that it is not necessary to find one single physical factor for the various aspects of an NDE in order to believe it has a physical basis. However, a spiritual theory can attribute the NDE to one principal factor, namely, that the nonphysical component (usually referred to in a Western religious context as a soul—a translation of the pre-biblical Greek word *psyche*) has temporarily departed the physical body. Upon this departure, several options may then ensue. These options may depend upon the needs of the NDEr.

The authors certainly raised a valid point about this alleged soul. They maintained that believers of the soul concept need to explain how this soul interacts with the physical body at some times but not at others. For example, if an out-of-body soul, during an NDE, can pass through walls or other humans without interacting, how does it interact with its own physical body? Some NDE researchers, such as van Lommel, invoke principles of quantum mechanics (QM) to explain nonlocal consciousness, but I do not believe QM addresses how a physical body and soul selectively interact. QM generally involves the submicroscopic world and not macroscopic bodies. However, some researchers postulate that QM interactions could occur in the neurons of two different people.
Being philosophers, the authors described themselves as intellectual descendants of Socrates. In his book, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (2013), historian Darrin McMahon maintained that the history of genius began with Socrates (~470–399 BCE), who reported that since his childhood, he (Socrates) had a familiar divine sign that came to him as a voice. According to McMahon, Socrates taught by the power of his intellect, or rational thought, but also “recognized the existence of mysterious forces, and obeyed them” (p. 7). The Greek term for this force was *daimon* or *daimonion*, or guardian spirit. Many NDErs claim to have a guardian spirit or guide whom they met during their NDEs and who remained available to them afterwards. Thus, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin follow only part of Socrates’s concepts, ignoring the disembodied voice that he heard. At least, in their use of Socratic logic, they have not gone as far as some modern philosophers who believe in neurophilosophy, that is, that philosophy should be based on brain imaging techniques and not logic. The authors claim that the story of Er in Plato’s *Republic* is employing a myth to convince people to live a just life and is not intended to prove an afterlife, especially one that can be visited by the living. However, in his book, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* (2015), Gary Lachman identified Plato as one of the great promoters of the esoteric tradition. In *Phaedo*, Plato spoke about the immortal soul, a separate nonphysical entity co-existing in a human body. Once again, the authors selected only some aspects of Plato’s philosophy in making an interpretation with which Plato may not necessarily have agreed.

Another prominent Greek philosopher, Aristotle, spoke of three types of souls. Psychiatrist George Makari (2015), in his book, *Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind*, commented that Aristotle divided the soul into two forms: material (vegetative and sensitive) and immortal (the rational soul, equated with the intellect). Thus, the most-notable Greek philosophers were not physicalist-friendly.

To further address the author’s claim that Er employs a myth, it should be noted that myths often begin with an incident in someone’s life. Perhaps Socrates or Plato had an NDE in order to write about Er’s NDE. I recently had an article published in *Vital Signs*, the newsletter of IANDS, titled, “Who’s NDE Is the War Shot Author Really Writing About?” The article summarizes an NDE in a short story written by Ambrose Bierce, who was shot in the head during the Civil War. I believe Bierce transferred a personal experience into a fictional story as Socrates or Plato may have done.

The authors maintained that scientific understanding of the physi-
cal world is constantly being updated by technical advancements, and a complete explanation for NDEs could come in the near future. For instance, physiologists know that the current EEG monitors show no brain activity 15 seconds or less after the heart stops, but the authors speculated that better EEG monitors in the future may reveal the brain functioning at levels currently undetectable. Many NDE researchers believe they have disproven past attempts of explaining NDEs by physicalism and refer to proposed future explanations as *promissory materialism*.

Although the authors may be familiar with some NDEs resulting from a particular circumstance and have a solution based on physicalism, their explanation may not address other situations with similar circumstances. For instance, they mentioned that an eye ailment called Charles Bonnett Syndrome may possibly explain NDEs in some blind people, but that explanation would not apply to people born blind who also have NDEs in which they claimed to have been able to see. Another example is that the authors believe that Colton Burpo, the child who had an NDE at age four, may have heard his parents discussing the miscarriage of his sister that happened prior to his birth. During his NDE, he claimed to have met this sister in heaven, but the authors maintained he was recalling an earlier conversation between his parents—even though Colton’s father, Todd, has denied ever having discussed this topic in his son’s presence. It may be too much to expect the authors to be familiar with the vast literature on NDEs available, but their explanation does not address an NDE cited by P. M. H. Atwater (1999) of a 4-year-old child who, during his NDE, reported meeting the spirit of a sibling that had been removed from his young mother’s womb (an abortion) years earlier. The mother had never discussed the incidence of the abortion, even with her husband; thus it had not been discussed in the child’s presence. The authors also questioned Eben Alexander’s alleged meeting with his deceased biological sister during his NDE, a sister he knew of but had never met or even seen a picture of prior to his NDE—by virtue of his having been adopted as an infant. They believe Alexander projected the face of his deceased sister from a photograph later shown to him by his recently located birth parents onto the image he observed during his NDE.

The authors also examined Pam Reynolds’s claim to have heard a surgical team’s discussion during her NDE while she was under anesthesia. They argue that she may have heard a post-surgery conversation on the same topic and simply moved it inadvertently to during her NDE. For instance, during the surgery, when her heart was stopped
and she had her NDE, the authors wondered why she would not have heard the clicking noise being played into her ears. One counterclaim is that not hearing the clicks is an indication that there must be a nonphysical aspect of herself—her soul—that was not in her physical body during the NDE, and thus her hearing was not through her physical ears, hence no clicks. It is interesting how the same facts can support alternate explanations for both sides of an issue.

Although I might agree with the authors that a life review does not necessarily indicate a life after death, many of the life reviews I have read indicate that the nonphysical world has a moral agenda for properly treating fellow humans and consequences for improper behavior, but allows the NDEr to judge him- or herself. A reductionist physical world would not be expected to have a moral agenda and consequences. In place of a nonphysical world, the authors believe a relatively new concept called terror management theory (TMT) offers a physicalist-friendly explanation for NDEs. For instance, TMT allows a person to project meaning and value, such as returning to life for a purpose, into a universe without meaning. The authors noted that many people have a moral transformation without having an NDE: “Supernaturalism has no monopoly on transformative power” (p. 113).

I reviewed a hard copy of the book and could not do a word search afterward, but I do not recall the authors ever mentioning the word love except for one quote that I list in a paragraph below that they obtained from an outside source. It is difficult to believe that any NDEr, especially those who have been to the light, could describe their experience without invoking the word love. The authors do speak about awe and wonder and believe scenes of natural beauty can activate awe and wonder similar to NDEs.

In his book, The Spiritual Nature of Man (1979), the famous marine biologist Sir Alister Hardy (1896–1985) summarized a survey of religious/spiritual experiences found by his research team called the Religious Experiences Research Unit in England. One of the experiences was a profound shared NDE that I have forwarded to several other people who have been trying to collect shared NDEs. Hardy found the most common trigger for these religious experiences was being out in nature, although that cause was less than 20% of the total number of experiences in the book. When he was fairly young (unspecified age), Hardy had what I would call a mystical or spiritually transformative experience (STE) as he walked alone along a country road. I believe his feeling of unity with nature during his STE is much different than merely awe and wonder at the beauty of nature. It was
probably his own personal experience that motivated Hardy to do his spiritual research, although it was many years later.

The authors discuss one study in which some cancer patients had transformative effects in their lives after taking a single dose of psilocybin. One patient in the study came to “understand love is the most powerful force in the world” (p. 117). To the authors, this indicates such an effect is the result of a physical substance interacting with the brain. Psilocybin is classified as a psychedelic drug, and many people (including the authors) realize that psychedelic drugs may facilitate spiritual experiences, such as being introduced to nonphysical realms, but often with dangerous consequences, such as addiction. The authors also quoted from an LSD trip that had many similarities to an NDE. The authors seem to have overlooked a plausible alternative explanation: that the hallucinogen does not create the experience, per se, but modifies brain chemistry such that the experiencer becomes capable of perceiving spiritual realities not typically accessible to a normally-functioning brain.

The authors accepted that NDE report are sincerely given, but they asserted that sincerity and seeming reality do not imply accurate descriptions during an out-of-body experience. This conclusion would disagree with Holden’s (2009) contention in one chapter of The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences that the numerous anecdotal incidents of veridical perception that is, corroborating evidence of the observation made during the out-of-body portion of an NDE, suggest that they are not hallucinations. This chapter was referenced by the authors, but they did not agree with Holden’s conclusion.

Chapter 12 in the book is titled, Confirmation Bias: We Believe What We Want to Believe. Unfortunately, the authors seemed to believe confirmation bias occurs only in people who favor the supernatural viewpoint. I suspect that just as much confirmation bias happens in those upholding the physicalist explanation for NDEs. This process often takes the form of choosing data to present that may not be universal, or even typical. For instance, the authors selectively chose a vision by a blind person and a child who may have heard his parents speak of a miscarriage. Physicalists often disclaim anything considered paranormal as outside the realm of possibility.

Several other main ideas put forth by the authors are:

• Childhood NDEs often come through adult interpretation.
• Transformation in a person’s life after an NDE is not proof of an afterlife.
• Fictional stories or poems can bring meaningful insight for a person’s life and thus induce transformation.
• Physicalist-friendly explanations for NDEs do not detract from their awe-inspiring power.

Earlier, I discussed the term supernaturalism. It should be noted that if there are nonphysical entities, such as Aristotle’s vegetative, sensitive, and rational souls, then they are a natural part of life, and not supernatural. Aristotle thought the vegetative and sensitive (think plants and animals) souls were physical but not recognized as such by physicalists. However, at least the rational soul is superphysical, if not supernatural.

In his book, On Liberty (1859), John Stuart Mill commented that a person who does not understand the other side of a case does not really understand his own case. Whereas many IANDS members may disagree with Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, it is always a good practice to review perspectives other than one’s own current view. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) is credited with saying, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” I conjecture that within 25 years the nonphysical nature of NDEs will be recognized as self-evident.

References