Understanding *Near-Death Experiences*: A Response to Mays and Mays's Review

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I want to begin by thanking both the Editor of this *Journal*, Janice Holden, and the authors of the review to which I am responding, Robert and Suzanne Mays, for their attention to the book I coauthored with John Martin Fischer in 2016, *Near-Death Experiences: Understanding Visions of the Afterlife*. It is a thrill to have one's work taken seriously. That being said, I am also happy to have the opportunity to respond to Mays and Mays's (2017) criticisms of our book. As will become clear, I think their critique missed its mark—but it did so in ways that are not uncommon and are so instructive to highlight. My aim is not so much to vindicate what Fischer and I have said in print but, together with readers of this *Journal*, to think more carefully and clearly through issues that are so profoundly meaningful to so many people. Even those who disagree with my conclusions should welcome what amounts to a call for care and rigor.

It is worth beginning with a pithy statement of the thesis of our book: Near-death experiences (NDEs) do not show that physicalism should be abandoned in favor of supernaturalism. In other words, taking the phenomenon of NDEs seriously does not commit one to believing that the mind is nonphysical or that there is a nonphysical realm. The book is, roughly, split into two parts. In the first, we considered various argumentative moves made by authors who do think NDEs pose a fatal challenge to physicalism and show why the evidence does not support this conclusion. For example, we explained why the fact that children and people around the globe have had NDEs does not

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support supernaturalism and why the fact that a given explanation is simpler does not show that it is more likely true. In the second part of the book, we provided a strategy for explaining NDEs in physical terms while, at the same time, taking care not to undermine their profound meaning and positive transformative effects. We aimed to take NDEs seriously—in part, by taking those who report them at their word. We believe them when they say they had these experiences. But we also wanted to examine the phenomena with the same intellectual rigor we would examine any serious issue. We focused on the cases we thought posed the greatest challenge to physicalism, and we held discussion of them to the same high standards we would expect of any serious philosophical debate. No sleights of hand; no smoke and mirrors.

Reading the critique offered by Mays and Mays (2017), however, one gets the impression that Fischer and I undertook authorship of our book as partisan physicalists with little, if any, genuine concern for those who have had NDEs or those who think that NDEs do, indeed, provide an insurmountable challenge to physicalism. They provided four main criticisms of our book:

- (a) Our suggestions for possible physical explanations were *ad hoc*;
- (b) We labeled NDEs “hallucinations,” thus pathologizing them and potentially harming those who have had them;
- (c) We appealed to the progress of science (“promissory materialism”) in order to refute supernaturalism; and
- (d) We were hoisted with our own petard, in that we were subject to the very same pitfalls of confirmation bias that we had pointed out scholars should avoid.

In what follows, I will try to explain why none of these charges stick by showing how they each rely on a misreading, misrepresentation, or misunderstanding of what we said. Although these may sound like strong words—and they are—I hope readers will bear with me. If this topic is of sufficient importance to warrant a lengthy review like the one Mays and Mays (2017) wrote, then it is surely worth getting the discussion right. As things stand, I fear readers of this *Journal* will be seriously misled about what Fischer and I were up to in our book—and so I appreciate the opportunity to set the record straight.

Alleged *Ad Hoc* Explanations

Mays and Mays claimed that Fischer and I engaged in “heavy reliance on *ad hoc* hypotheses” (Mays & Mays, 2017, p. 69). By this point they meant that we appealed to “hypotheses that are introduced to

compensate for aspects of NDEs that do not readily fit the physicalist paradigm” (Mays & Mays, 2017, p. 74). Their complaint was not really with any of the particular “hypotheses” we appealed to in trying to show that there are candidate physical explanations of the relevant phenomena, but, rather, that “taken as a whole, the theory [physicalism] with its additional *ad hoc* hypotheses becomes untenable and improbable” (Mays & Mays, 2017, p. 74).

The first thing to notice is that the label “*ad hoc*” is a bit strange in this context. As Mays and Mays (2017, p. 74) noted, we provided a three-step blueprint for explaining NDEs in physical terms:

- (1) Explain how the subject acquired the information relevant to some aspect of his or her experience;
- (2) Explain why this particular content would be included in a near-death experience; and
- (3) Explain when the experience took place. (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 122)

All of the particular candidate physical explanations we offered in the book were intended to be applications of this general strategy. It is, to my ear, odd to label applications of a general strategy to particular cases *ad hoc*. At the very least, it is odd to do so using the Latin term in a pejorative sense. For one thing, it seems unfair to suggest that the physical explanations we offered are not supposed to be in any way part of a unified explanatory project. The *ad hoc* label does just this. For another, it seems misguided to insist that explanations of NDEs, which involve various particular, peculiar, and quite complex phenomena, be any more unified than the ones called for by the strategy we offered in the book. We do not think that all house fires must be explained in the same way, nor do we think all fevers must either. There does not seem to be good reason to hold NDEs to a different standard.

Mays and Mays (2017) never grappled with one of the core arguments of our book. In Chapters 8 and 9, we argued that two principles that characterize prominent supernaturalist treatments of NDEs, *Single Explanation* and *Simple Explanation*, are false. There is no good reason to insist that all aspects of all NDEs be explained by a single factor, nor is there good reason to insist that simpler explanations are more likely true than complex ones. The alternative, which we argued is much more plausible, both as a general matter and with respect to NDEs in particular, is to be open to messy, multi-factor explanations for complex phenomena. Now, this approach might be objectionable if there were no unified explanatory principles standing

behind such explanations. However, as I have already noted, we provided just that—so it escapes me what is supposed to be objectionable about our strategy.

Mays and Mays (2017) mentioned our criticism of *Single Explanation* and stated that they “agree in principle with the idea that multi-factor explanations are possible for NDEs” (p. 89). Yet they went on to reject our approach because “as [they] showed in the first section of [their] article, the multi-factor physicalist explanation must rely on so many *ad hoc* hypotheses that it becomes untenable and improbable” (Mays & Mays, 2017, p. 89). My complaint is that they had shown no such thing. Even supposing that the physical explanations we suggested are in some sense *ad hoc*, this result would not show that they are untenable and improbable. Applications of general explanatory principles to particular cases may be *ad hoc*, but not in any sense that undermines the view of which they are a part. Indeed, as we argued in passages of the book that Mays and Mays did not pay much attention to in their critique, there are good reasons to think that this is exactly the kind of strategy one should employ when seeking explanations for phenomena like NDEs. If Mays and Mays disagree with this assertion, it would be interesting to know why. They never said.

I will make one more point before moving on. Mays and Mays (2017) characterized so-called *ad hoc* hypotheses as “hypotheses that are introduced to compensate for aspects of NDEs that do not readily fit the physicalist paradigm” (p. 74). In a moment, I will consider their criticism that Fischer and I were subject to the very confirmation bias we warned against. I want to flag here the fact that we conscientiously sought out cases of NDEs, such as that of Pam Reynolds and that of the man with the missing dentures, that did not readily fit the physicalist paradigm *precisely because this appeared to be a good way of making sure that we were taking on the best challenge to physicalism*. In other words, one reason I contend that we are not subject to the charge of confirmation bias is that we deliberately sought out cases that challenged physicalism. And yet here, wrapped up in the charge that we offered *ad hoc* explanations, it seems that we were being faulted for doing just that. I am not sure which goal posts to aim at.

Alleged Pathologizing and Harmful Reference to Hallucinations

Mays and Mays's (2017) second main criticism was that Fischer and I labeled NDEs "hallucinations" and thus pathologized them. They made the point that this label is objectionable both because NDEs are not the same as hallucinations and because labeling them as such risks harming those who have had NDEs. I wholeheartedly agree with both of these points—and this is why Fischer and I were very careful not to label NDEs hallucinations.

In support of their charge that we did so, Mays and Mays (2017) took our words out of context. Their main exhibit was the following quotation from our book:

We shall use the term "accurate" throughout the remainder of this book to mean "truthful" or "corresponding to reality." An *accurate* experience *depicts reality as it really is*. Not all experiences are accurate. Hallucinations, illusions, dreams, delusions—these may all be real experiences. People really do have them. But they are not accurate experiences. They do not correspond to reality. (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 35)

They went on to charge us with erroneously describing "*all* aspects of NDEs as inaccurate and 'not corresponding to reality'" (Mays & Mays, 2017, p. 78).

It should be obvious from the above quotation that we were using the phenomenon of hallucinations—along with illusions, dreams, and delusions—to illustrate what we meant by the term "accurate." In context, it is clear that we were invoking hallucinations to draw a distinction between experiences that are "real" in the sense that they occur (which includes hallucinations) and experiences that are "real" in the sense that they are accurate (which does not). This distinction is important because these two senses of "real" have often been run together in the literature on NDEs.

What Mays and Mays (2017) took away from the above quotation was that we were labeling NDEs as hallucinations. Not only did we not do that in the text they quoted from the book, but neither did we do it anywhere else in the book. I checked. I searched the pdf of our book for every instance of the term "hallucination," and I can assure readers that nowhere did we use that term to refer to or characterize NDEs. In fact, there is a clear instance in which we *distinguished between* NDEs and hallucinations: "Near-death experiences may be

distinctive in combining vividness and coherence, and are thus importantly different from dreams and hallucinations” (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 40). And when discussing the case of Pam Reynolds, we said that “there seems to be no good explanation for why she would have had a hallucination including these specific features” (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 15). So not only did we clearly say that NDEs are not hallucinations, but we also clearly said that one of the central cases we considered is not plausibly considered to be a hallucination. I am not sure how much clearer we could have been.

I ask readers to excuse me if I sound upset here. Mays and Mays attributed something to Fischer and me that, in fact, we never said, and then they used this misattribution as a basis for attacking our character. I find this situation frustrating, to say the least.

Alleged Appeal to Promissory Materialism

Mays and Mays’s (2017) third criticism is that we appealed to the progress of science (“promissory materialism”) in order to prove supernaturalism false. Their complaint was that “promissory materialism is *a very weak argument and is actually meaningless* because it cannot be used *before the fact* to refute any nonphysical theory” (Mays & Mays, 2017, pp. 94–95). The trouble with this criticism is that it rests on a misunderstanding of our aim in the book. Here is how we put it in the final chapter:

We want to emphasize that nothing we have written is meant to dismiss or lead to a rejection of religious views or views about an afterlife. To be clear, our aim has been to call into question a *particular route* to religious beliefs and beliefs about the afterlife, namely, one that appeals to near-death experiences as evidence for, or even proof of, the reality of the afterlife. We have tried to show that this is not a compelling line of thought. But our position is fully compatible with accepting that there is, in fact, an afterlife. . . . One might believe in the afterlife for reasons that have nothing to do with near-death experiences. (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 171)

Or as I summarized our thesis at the beginning of this response: NDEs do not show that physicalism should be abandoned in favor of supernaturalism.

The astute reader will recognize both from the above quoted statement of our aim and from the summary of our thesis that we were not aiming to refute a nonphysical theory. Hence, it does not make sense to claim that we were using promissory materialism in order to do so.

Whatever complaints one might have about our appeals to the progress of science, they should not be that we did so in order to disprove supernaturalism—because we were not trying to disprove supernaturalism. Rather, we were trying to show that there is no good argument in favor of supernaturalism on the basis of NDEs. Part of this involved trying to show—and this gets at the appeals to the progress of science—that there are good reasons to think that there may, in the future, be good physical explanations of the relevant phenomena. But again, and I want to be very clear here, this point is not to claim that supernaturalism is false. It is to claim that NDEs do not prove, or even provide good evidence for the claim, that supernaturalism is true.

One might suspect I am being disingenuous, or even unfair here. Perhaps what Mays and Mays (2017) were complaining about is that Fischer and I appealed to the progress of science not to discredit supernaturalism but, rather, to discredit supernaturalist explanations of NDEs. In other words, rather than aiming to discredit *a theory*, we were aiming to discredit *explanations that rely on that theory*.

Even if this is the correct interpretation of what Mays and Mays (2017) said, it still does not help them out. Once again, our thesis in the book was that NDEs do not show that physicalism should be abandoned in favor of supernaturalism. We were not as much concerned with discrediting supernatural explanations of NDEs as we were with showing that there is no good reason to abandon the pursuit of providing physicalist explanations of the phenomena. Part of this argument involved pointing out issues with purported supernaturalist explanations of NDEs, and part of it involved pointing out the potential promise of physicalist explanations. But it was not a matter of discrediting a theory or even discrediting explanations based on that theory. It was a matter of defending what we take to be the commonsense starting point in our explanations of things: physicalism.

Alleged Confirmation Bias

This brings us to the topic of confirmation bias, which involves various tendencies that shield one's beliefs from disconfirmation, such as avoiding or discrediting countervailing evidence or interpreting information such that it is rendered compatible with one's beliefs. One might worry that Fischer and I were subject to the charge of confirmation bias, especially in light of the fact that we were out to show that a theory *we antecedently accept* is not proven false.

But I do not think we are guilty of having exhibited confirmation bias, and I have already said something about why. Though we do not believe that NDEs pose a threat to physicalism, we went out of our way to write a book explaining why. And in the course of writing this book we took those who reported having NDEs at their word and even sought out the most challenging cases. Of course, we attempted to show why these cases do not challenge physicalism. But the fact that we deliberately looked for the strongest challenges to our preferred view and sought to address them on their own terms seems like a clear sign that we were not simply out to shield our beliefs from disconfirmation. What we were up to does not look like confirmation bias, as I understand it.

However, Mays and Mays (2017) were not concerned with the cases we selected for discussion or our interpretation of the evidence and arguments. They were concerned with our having quoted from a 2013 *Esquire* article by Luke Dittrich critical of Eben Alexander. In particular, they were concerned that we did not track down the YouTube video of the Dalai Lama providing the remarks Dittrich quoted in his own article. It seems that Dittrich did not quote the Dalai Lama's remarks in full. In the quoted passage, the Dalai Lama expressed a need to be vigilant and make sure that those whose testimony, especially about extraordinary phenomena, we accept are trustworthy. But it left out the Dalai Lama's comment that Alexander did not have a reason to lie about his NDE.

Fair enough. I grant that Dittrich left out some remarks by the Dalai Lama that did not fit with the overall gist of his article. And I admit that, in quoting from the Dittrich article, we too left out this aspect of the Dalai Lama's remarks. Still, I do not see how this is supposed to exhibit confirmation bias.

We were not using this quotation to discredit Alexander. Once again, I quote from the book. Immediately after the quotation from Dittrich's article, we said:

Our aim is not to call Alexander's character into question and thereby discredit his account of his near-death experience. As we have stressed, we are willing to take at face value the reports of those who claim to have had near-death experiences. But we agree with the Dalai Lama that, especially in a context where extraordinary claims are being made, the responsible thing to do is to inquire critically.

The purpose of this book has not been to discredit those who share their near-death experiences with the rest of us. Rather, it has been to critically examine the purported *implications* of these profound ex-

periences. Whereas others have precipitously embraced supernatural interpretations of near-death experiences, we have argued that there is good reason to try to fit our understanding of them into the world-view supported by the physical sciences. (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, pp. 178–179)

The message contained in the portion of the Dalai Lama's remarks that we borrowed from Dittrich's article stands alone as good advice, whether or not one thinks Alexander is trustworthy. And anyway, we were not using this text to discredit, avoid, or interpret evidence contrary to our beliefs. In fact, we went on, right after quoting this passage, to make our intent very clear. It is, thus, strange that Mays and Mays (2017) would fix on this aspect of our book as grounds for a *tu quoque* argument regarding confirmation bias.

Conclusion

Fischer and I wrote *Near-Death Experiences* because we felt that the topic deserved more careful consideration than we had seen it receive in print. We had found that the arguments we had read for the claim that NDEs prove physicalism false rested on faulty reasoning, and many of the deeper philosophical issues seemed to us to have been glossed over or ignored. Moreover, the topic had been largely snubbed by academic philosophers, even though it was of immense interest to the general public. There was a void to be filled, and we sought to fill it.

It is wonderful to have this *Journal* devoting space to critical engagement with our book. However, as should be clear from this reply to Mays and Mays's (2017) critique, I would have appreciated more conscientious engagement with what we actually said in the book. There are places where Mays and Mays misattributed claims to Fischer and me or took our words out of context, and there were places where they misrepresented or ignored what we said. I have not tried to hide my frustration about this. And I hope that this response has provided readers of this *Journal* with a more accurate accounting of what we said in the book and why we said it. I hasten to add that I heartily welcome further discussion of our arguments. It is not my aim to shut down criticism but, rather, to make sure that it is on point.

References

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