

BOOK REVIEW

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Out-of-Body and Near-Death Experiences: Brain-State Phenomena or Glimpses of Immortality? by Michael N. Marsh, Oxford, England, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010, 309 + xxv pp., \$129.98 hc (ISBN 978-0-19-957150-5); Kindle ed. \$123.48 e-book.

As a long-time researcher, author, and regular reviewer for *Terugkeer*, the journal of the Dutch Network Near-Death Experiences, a few years ago I wrote a short review of *Out-of-Body and Near-Death Experiences: Brain-State Phenomena or Glimpses of Immortality?* by Michael N. Marsh. I have decided to extend the contents of my original review a bit for this version for the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*.

Marsh has a background in medicine and theology. At the time this book was published, he was a member of Wolfson College, University of Oxford, which he continues to be in 2020. His main purpose with this book was to show that out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs) do not pose a serious threat to a physicalist ontology and that their contents do not bear any relation to an after-life of the kind taught by Christianity as Marsh understood it.

In my opinion, the book is well written, but Marsh succeeded only in explaining his views and not in showing their plausibility or even tenability. More than anything, the book demonstrates that some skeptics are practicing adherents to a particular Christian dogmatic belief system that includes some type of afterlife.

In the Introduction, Marsh formulated his main question, namely whether NDEs offer a veridical glimpse of heaven or a gateway to another world. In order to explore this question, he used texts by several well-known experts in the fields: Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, Margot Grey, and Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick. He

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approached the issue from both a neurophysiological and a theological perspective on “extra-corporeal experiences” or ECEs—his inclusive term for OBEs and NDEs. For Marsh, the neurophysiological outlook reads that ECEs are generated by a metabolically disturbed brain, whereas the theological approach consists of comparing ECEs with what Christians (are supposed to) believe about resurrection and a Christian afterlife. Oddly enough, Marsh mentioned a third research program that would concentrate on the post-experiential meaning of ECEs, and it seems that he sincerely believed himself to be the first to have come up with this idea. Unlike non-believers such as Susan Blackmore, Marsh did not support the theory that NDEs are created by a dying brain, but he believed that they reflect the conscious functioning of a revived, normal brain. Marsh clearly put his particular Christian dogma first. Within his particular blend of Christianity, mind-body dualism is simply false, such that nothing suggestive of such a dualism could ever be used as a valid argument against a physicalist world view.

In Chapter 1, Marsh provided an outline of the phenomenology of ECEs, described various authors and books in the fields of near-death and related studies, and addressed specific topics, such as hellish NDEs and NDEs in the blind. In describing apparently veridical cases, he seemed to be almost indistinguishable from the average materialist debunker. For instance, he addressed the NDE of Pam Reynolds involving idiosyncratic perceptions that occurred while she was monitored as being deeply anesthetized and that were later verified as accurate by her surgeons. Marsh claimed that Reynolds’s perceptions cannot have partially occurred during her surgery because such would have made it impossible for the brain to store her experience. This argument would be relevant if the notion of a non-physical memory bank interacting with neural processes were a contradiction in terms, but, of course, it is not. Marsh seemed to be unaware of his own pervasive bias and either ignored or dismissed out of hand any corroborated paranormal aspects of NDEs.

In Chapter 2, Marsh resisted the widespread view that ECEs actually amount to real OBEs and glimpses of another realm. He mentioned cultural differences and stressed that ECEs cannot be considered true eyewitness accounts.

Chapter 3 included an attack on his opponents whom he called weak, superficial, and in part dismissive. I find these references rather odd, because it appeared to me that Marsh himself dismissed any factual information incompatible with his worldview. He explicitly confessed

that he felt inclined to ignore contradictory cases found in the ECE literature and that he considered such cases of “boringly trivial significance” (p. 65).

In Chapter 4, Marsh claimed to give an objective analysis of ECEs, but in my view he actually tried to immunize his theory against the data. For instance, he concluded that Reynolds’s NDE cannot have lasted more than a few minutes and that, in this respect, it is comparable to a typical short dream. He did not consider the fact that when people are under general anesthetic with their brains monitored, as Reynolds was, their brains show no activity comparable to dreaming. To use the analogy of anesthesiologist Stuart Hameroff, their brains are like an idling car motor, completely absent of the activity characteristic of dreams (Broome, 2002).

In Chapter 5 and 6, Marsh tried to demonstrate that OBEs are mere illusions generated by neurological disturbances and mentioned specific parts of the brain that would be directly involved in such processes. In Chapter 7, Marsh compared ECEs to sleep-related phenomena such as dreams and sleep paralysis—failing, once again, to answer critics of such views whose work was available at the time Marsh was writing (Greyson, 2004; Greyson et al., 2009; Greyson & Long, 2006; Holden et al., 2006; Long & Holden, 2007). In Chapters 8 and 9, he covered alleged links to temporal lobe pathologies and other neurophysiological syndromes.

In Chapter 10, Marsh revealed his specific Christian religious beliefs, including physical resurrection based on divine grace. Marsh was convinced that the soul is an emergent property of cerebral activity. He was very certain that the analysis in this book conclusively refuted the evidence for a naturally surviving soul. In Chapter 11, Marsh rendered his final verdict: ECEs are illusions rather than real encounters with a spiritual realm.

In Chapter 12, Marsh explained how, despite their essentially illusory nature, NDEs can lead to positive personal transformation. He reasoned that God uses the illusory experience to inspire and change the experiencer. I would have liked him to address why, in his view, God’s grace has not prevented the illusory NDE from being illusory in the first place! In Chapter 13, Marsh reiterated that he believes in a real death of body and soul, after which the resurrection of both depends entirely on the grace of God.

I find this book to be weaker than even the average skeptical treatise, because it was based not only in the irrational tradition of physicalism that typifies such treatises but also in the irrational tradition

of a particular current within dogmatic Christian theology. I find this combination to have a truly suffocating effect on a more reasoned approach based in openness to the totality of the facts and to rational argument. The main discovery I take from this book is the rather shocking realization that physicalism has become so self-evident to many people that they sincerely believe that they may uphold their spiritual beliefs only by adapting these beliefs to physicalism. From a philosophical perspective, the problem is obvious: Physicalism is inherently incompatible with notions such as a non-physical deity, a divine incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, and physical resurrection.

Thus, for two primary reasons, I find that this book did not advance a scholarly understanding of ECEs. One reason is the fundamental conceptual incompatibility between the two primary lines of support for Marsh's premises: physicalism and his religious perspective. The other reason is that previous authors had nullified many of the arguments Marsh presented in this book, yet Marsh reiterated those arguments without even acknowledging, let alone responding to, those nullifications. I can recommend this book only as an exemplification of how an author who begins with a priori non-rational assumptions can create an argument that defies a better informed perspective founded on the complete knowledge base available at the time.

Postscript

In 2016, Marsh published an online paper in *Humanities* entitled "The Near-Death Experience: A Reality Check?" in which he largely discussed the same topics that had been covered in his book. The article includes a few new details, such as that he claimed to have discovered flaws in the case of Pam Reynolds that everyone else would have overlooked and that he seemed to base his critique of the field even more confidently on an almost completely materialistic anthropology, citing recent neurological studies, and showing enthusiasm for the work of skeptical authors such as Susan Blackmore and Kevin Nelson. He applied the neurology-oriented approach to aspects of NDEs but also speculated about a brain-based predisposition for them and for claims about extraordinary abilities in their aftermath, which he dismissed out of hand. In my view, many of his remarks in this paper turn out to be interesting, or even relevant, only if the reader already feels a strong affinity for the materialist world view, regardless of the value of its supposed empirical foundations or of its analytical tenability.

Really new was his very negative discussion of the AWARE Study

(Parnia et al., 2014), results of which became available after 2010 when his *Out-of-Body and Near-Death Experiences* was published. He also denied that there is any substantial evidence for veridical perception during—rather than shortly before or after—cardiac arrest, whereas Chapter 3 of *The Self Does Not Die* (Rivas et al., 2016) dealt rather extensively with precisely such evidence. In fairness, the latter book was probably published after he prepared his paper. However, I sincerely doubt whether it would have made any (substantial) difference to Marsh, as, in my view, his analyses have systematically excluded data that did not support his a priori assumptions about the nature of consciousness.

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