

Four Ostensible Near-Death Experiences of Roman Times with Peculiar Features: Mistake Cases, Correction Cases, Xenoglossy, and a Prediction

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I present four apparent near-death experiences (NDEs) reported in Roman times. Despite their uncertain reliability, they contain features deserving attention. Three reports involve taking the wrong person to the realm of death by mistake (“mistake cases”), and even include the claim that the correct person had died after the NDEr revived (“correction cases”). Though common in Asia, such cases are absent in contemporary Western NDE reports. The fourth report contains an alleged correct future prediction and xenoglossy, the latter being a novum to NDE research. After introducing the four cases, I discuss their peculiar features and some related aspects of near-death states with a focus on their relevance for future NDE research.

KEY WORDS: Roman near-death experiences; mistake case; correction case; xenoglossy; prediction.

The four near-death experience (NDE) reports introduced in this paper were outlined in a book by Augustine Calmet (1672-1757), an influential Benedictine abbot of the 18th century who published its last

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edition in 1751. His book constitutes an erstwhile standard work on alleged vampires and revenants from a theological perspective (Calmet, 1993). In due form, he also discussed cases in which more or less “dead” persons revived and retold what they had experienced. Scattered across some chapters, Calmet listed about 15 cases that appear to match what, today, are considered NDEs. Generally, the reports resemble those previously described from Christian medieval times (Zaleski, 1987) and from Asia (Cuevas, 2008; Murphy, 2001; Pasricha, 2008). However, with the exception of the well known NDE reports transmitted by Plato (e.g., Moody, 1975) and by Gregory the Great (Zaleski, 1987), the reports presented by Calmet have to my knowledge not yet been discussed in the NDE literature. Some of them date back to times when Christianity was not widespread. Because they contain interesting features, I introduce four of the oldest cases.

Of these, one report stems from St. Augustine (354-430) and will be summarized after a translation of his treatise *On the Care to be Had of the Dead* (2008). The second report is narrated by Lucian (125-180) in the book *The Liar* (2008) and will be given in full length. Calmet attributed the third account to Plutarch (45-125) and referred to his treatise *On the Soul*. However, there are only fragments of this particular work left, and the reference to the NDE report is found in the scripture *Praeparatio Evangelica* by Eusebius of Caesarea (~262-338). The original source of the fourth report is not included by Calmet, but it is dated to the times when Narses (490-574) was governor of Italy. Given the inability to find the original sources of the last two cases, I present only brief summaries based on Calmet (1993).

The Four Cases

Following is case one, after the original text in Chapter 15 of the treatise *On the Care to be Had of the Dead* by St. Augustine (2008):

A man named Curma lived in Tullium, a town close to Hippo in Africa, by profession a lower clerk of the local administration. Once, he grew sick and lay without awareness and motion for several days. Yet, he was not buried because he sometimes showed signs of subtle breathing. One day, he suddenly reopened his eyes and asked to send someone to look after Curma the smith. Those who went there reported that Curma the smith had died the very moment that Curma the clerk revived. The latter then reported that when he was sent back to earth, he heard a voice saying not he, but Curma the smith shall be taken to court. Previously, he had seen several deceased

persons known to him at this court, but also clergymen who were still alive. They urged him to go to Hippo to become baptized by the bishop Augustine. This he did, if only in his vision. Thereafter, Curma was led into heaven. Here, he didn't stay for long but was instructed that if he wanted to do so, he had to be baptized. He replied that he had been baptized already. Yet, he was informed that this took place only in his vision and that he had to go to Hippo in flesh and blood to be baptized as he had seen. As soon as Curma was healthy again, he did as he was told.

Only after two years, St. Augustine accidentally heard about the story of Curma, whom he didn't remember baptizing among many others unknown to him. He established personal contact to Curma and direct witnesses of the bygone incident. All reassured that everything happened as St. Augustine was told, including the death of Curma the smith.

Following is case two, by Lucian. In his book *The Liar*, a man by the name Cleodemus recounted this story in the presence of listeners including his friend Antigonus (Lucian, 2008):

“I had been ill, and Antigonus here was attending me. The fever had been on me for seven days, and was now aggravated by the excessive heat. All my attendants were outside, having closed the door and left me to myself; those were your orders, you know, Antigonus. I was to get some sleep if I could. Well, I woke up to find a handsome young man standing at my side, in a white cloak. He raised me up from the bed, and conducted me through a sort of chasm into Hades. I knew where I was at once, because I saw Tantalus and Tityus and Sisyphus. Not to go into details, I came to the Judgement-hall, and there were Aeacus and Charon and the Fates and the Furies. One person of a majestic appearance – Pluto, I suppose it was – sat reading out the names of those who were due to die, their term of life having lapsed. The young man took me and set me before him, but Pluto flew into a rage: ‘Away with him,’ he said to my conductor; ‘his thread is not yet out; go and fetch Demyllus the smith; *he* has had his spindleful and more.’ I ran off home, nothing loath. My fever had now disappeared, and I told everybody that Demyllus was as good as dead. He lived close by, and was said to have some illness, and it was not long before we heard the voices of mourners in his house.”

Following is case three, by Plutarch (after Calmet, 1993, p. 150):

A man named Enarchus reported that his soul was led to hell by demons. However, the chief of the devils to whom he was led grew angry at them since they should have brought another man by the name of Nicander. Thus, he forwarded the demons to Nicander and sent Enarchus back to revive. On the same day, Nicander was suddenly struck with fever and died. Plutarch stated that Enarchus informed him personally about his experience.

Following is case four, anonymus (after Calmet, 1993, p. 151):

During an epidemic of pestilence in Rome, a shepherd of an advocate named Valerian was also infected. After everybody considered him dead, he suddenly regained consciousness. He recounted he was taken to heaven, where he was given the names of the persons who would die at the house of Valerian, but the advocate himself was said to survive. To convince Valerian of the truth of his experience, he spoke words of foreign languages previously unknown to him, including Greek. Apparently, he had gained knowledge of these languages in the intermediate state when he was considered dead. After two days, the shepherd finally died. Sooner or later, everybody named by him was struck by the plague, but, as predicted, Valerian survived.

Discussion

In principle, old narratives on dying and related phenomena need to be considered with caution, because they are likely to be coined, distorted, and embellished on the basis of the respective sociocultural circumstances that prevailed throughout the time of their oral or written transmission (Cuevas, 2003, 2008). Secondly, the inability to properly evaluate to which degree the experiencer was factually “near death” impedes direct comparisons to current NDE discussions in a medical or clinical context. Moreover, especially the last two NDE reports are unduly short; many important details of the experiences seem to be missing. Nevertheless, the four accounts contain features that I consider worth discussing.

Mistake Cases and Correction Cases

In this paragraph, I discuss what I call mistake cases and a subcategory of them, correction cases. The first three of the four ancient Roman NDE accounts contain a feature usually not reported in contemporary Western NDEs: The experiencer was sent back to life because he was mistaken. This error in identity is also contained in the account reported by Gregory the Great. However, such peculiar *mistake cases* are fully absent in the NDE reports of later centuries, and, most notably, in current Western NDE descriptions. These mistake cases are also very common among Asian NDEs, such as in old Tibetan *délok* accounts (Cuevas, 2008), as well as in contemporary

Thailand NDEs (Murphy, 2001) and in Indian NDEs (Osis & Haraldsson, 1997; Pasricha, 1993, 1995, 2008; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). There is also one case report from the island Guam, belonging to the Mariana archipelago in the West Pacific area (Green, 1983), and one from Anatolia in Turkey (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). Even Indian Christians were sent back because of a mistake in person (Osis & Haraldsson, 1997), but to date there are no reports of mistake cases in other contemporary Christian communities worldwide. A comparable mistake case outside Asia is only reported from Kongo by James McClenon (2006), but none is contained in other studies of non-Christian and non-Western cultures outside Asia (e.g., Counts, 1983; Gómez-Jeria, 1993; Kellehear, 2001, 2008; Morse & Perry, 1992; Wade, 2003). However, other incidents of mistake cases might be found in more countries if an increasing amount of NDE reports would be collected on location. To date, the mistake feature appears to be present predominantly in ancient Rome and Asia.

I have always wondered why such a bizarre reason for being sent back to life is part of NDEs. Countless other NDE accounts from all over the world, including Asia, prove that is sufficient to send the NDEr back with an assertive “not yet.” It is particularly striking that these errors in the otherworld bureaucracy are usually due to confusing identical names, very similar names, or persons living close to the NDEr. How and why came this mistake feature of NDEs into play specifically in ancient Rome, Asia including Guam or Turkey, and Kongo?

So far, there are no attempts to answer this question. At least, with reference to the case reported by Gregory the Great, Zaleski stated, “this story clearly belongs to the common stock of tales of death by mistaken identity” (1987, p. 29). Moreover, she referred to an alleged “universality of the lore concerning death by mistaken identity” (1987, p. 216), evidence of which could be found in Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Thompson, 1966). These statements seem to imply that the development and spreading – for whatsoever reason – of dying-by-mistake tales triggered the appearance of the mistake feature in NDEs in the respective countries. In return, with decreasing abundance of such tales – again: for whatsoever reason – this NDE feature gradually got lost in Western countries. Still, it would be valuable to test this hypothesis before taking it for granted. First, I could *not* find explicit references to dying-by-mistake tales in Thompson’s motif index, let alone examples reminiscent of the

experiences described by NDErs. Second, even if such mistake cases should be part of common folklore, it is likewise imaginable that renarrated NDEs triggered the formulation of the respective lores in the first place. Testing the folklore hypothesis could be easily performed by asking Asian NDErs whether they had known about such dying-by-mistake tales before their experiences. If mistake cases are elicited directly by culturally and individually acquired afterlife concepts, we have to expect that every NDEr with a mistake experience must have heard of such tales before, though some may have forgotten about it.

However, if most of the NDErs claim to be unfamiliar with such tales, things become more complex and would require different explanatory models. Of these, there are three possible kinds:

- 1) For experiencing the mistake feature, one does not need to be familiar with respective folklore explicitly referring to it. It can also be triggered indirectly and subconsciously by specific sociocultural characteristics present in ancient Rome, Southern Asia, Guam, Turkey, and Kongo, but not in contemporary Western cultures where cultural modifications resulted in the decline of mistake cases.
- 2) The mistake feature possesses at least a minimal degree of objectivity. This possibility would allow for speculations whether certain aspects of NDEs correspond to a layer of non-ordinary reality, which might be consolidated (and also modified) by the influence of culture-specific beliefs and experiences, and through interaction with the dying and the dead themselves. Thus, individuals could also experience culture-specific features of NDEs without being familiar with them.
- 3) The mistake feature was aroused by random mutation and was established by natural selection in ancient Rome and Asia, because it constituted a considerable advantage for its bearers in the struggle for survival. Thus, it is encoded in the genes. However, this possibility can be ruled out because (a) there is no detectable evolutionary advantage in the mistake feature for one's offspring, and (b) there is so far no indication that genes control such minor details during altered states of consciousness.

In addition, the whole affair of mistake cases becomes more intriguing, because not only in the first three Roman cases presented

and the one related by Gregory the Great, but also in many Indian cases, the correct persons are said to have died after the mistaken NDER revived – often on the same day or even at the same moment (Osis & Haraldsson, 1997; Pasricha, 2008; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). The death of another individual instead of the NDER is announced in about *one third* of all Indian NDE cases that Pasricha analyzed during the last decades (Pasricha, 2008). I will refer to such cases as *correction cases*. If some of them contain veridical information about the death of other persons, it would become difficult to attribute their contents entirely to culturally or individually acquired belief systems – be they consciously or subconsciously acquired. But, what then could be the ontological status or the meaning of correction cases? Are they indeed objective incidents – factual errors and corrections of agents in the other world? Or should they have the purpose to add a veridical aspect to NDEs, so that the experiencer and the experiencer's associates do not regard it as a mere subjective illusion? In that sense, they might correspond to putative veridical out-of-body experiences (OBEs) in Western NDEs, which seem not to be common among Asian and other non-Western NDEs – perhaps, with the exception of Tibet (Cuevas, 2008; Evans-Wentz, 2000).

However, similar to putative veridical OBEs, mistake cases involving the subsequent death of the announced “correct” person are of importance for NDE research as they could be scientifically investigated. If veridical correction cases could be examined in which the possibility that the NDERs used normal communication channels can be excluded, they would contribute another piece of evidence to those seemingly supporting the notion that paranormal knowledge can be gained during NDEs. Thus, further careful investigation on the issue of mistake cases is desirable, ideally by conducting respective studies in Asia.

Xenoglossy

To my knowledge, the fourth Roman account is unique among NDE literature in that it reports a case of xenoglossy. Xenoglossy is defined as the ability to speak a foreign language without having learned it during waking life. This phenomenon seems paradoxical, but it has been reported throughout history. One of the most famous cases of ostensible xenoglossy is described in the New Testament, Acts, 19:6, when a group of about 12 men spoke “in tongues” as the apostle Paul

laid his hands upon them. Besides several other historical anecdotes including cases pertaining to shamanism (Eliade, 1974), a small number of well-documented cases have been recorded in the context of hypnosis (Stevenson, 1974a, 1976, 1984), survival research (Stevenson, 1974b, 1984; Stevenson & Pasricha, 1980) and mediumship (Bayless, 1976; Bozzano, 1932; Gauld, 1968; Mattiesen, 1968). Even though instances of putative xenoglossy can be expected to be extraordinarily rare among NDEs, it seems worthwhile to look specifically for cases reminiscent of it. At least, there are cases in which NDErs reported different languages being spoken during their otherworld travel (Counts, 1983; Morse & Perry, 1992) or having learned previously unknown prayers (McClenon, 2006). Moreover, of interest in this context are a few cases reminiscent of possessions following a state of assumed death. In such cases, revived persons claim to be another individual after reviving and can show considerable veridical knowledge about the life and death of this particular person, or can display new skills and drastically changed behavior patterns (Pasricha, 1990; Stevenson, 1974b; Stevenson, Pasricha, & McClean-Rice, 1989). Similar to the sudden and unexplained emergence of mental faculties or knowledge apparently acquired during NDEs, reports of sudden unexplained healing and bodily changes attributed to NDEs have been reported since at least more than a century ago (Splittgerber, 1881; for a recent well-documented case see Sartori, Badham, & Fenwick, 2006). Like searching for well-documented correction cases, thorough investigations concerning the puzzling phenomena described in the present section might contribute to answering the enigma whether every aspect of NDEs can be explained solely in terms of brain physiology.

Predictions

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the fourth case report contains also a precognitive element in that the shepherd correctly predicted the names of those to die and those to survive the plague. Of course, the validity of such propositions cannot be evaluated retrospectively. Still, it is of interest that among Greeks and Romans, it was a widespread assumption that the souls of the dying are increasingly capable of freeing themselves from material constraints as death approaches – then being able to see into the future, and more (e.g., Cicero, 2008). Besides the conceptually related correction cases

discussed above, there are abundant anecdotal reports of veridical predictions that the dying have made, particularly concerning the subsequent death of others (examples in Splittgerber, 1881, pp. 80-108). Sometimes, such predictions allegedly escalated to mass phenomena during epidemics of pestilence (du Prel, 1971; Splittgerber, 1881). Perhaps these anecdotes are more than mere anecdotes. At least, it may be wise for those attending to the dying to be prepared for the dying to provide possibly accurate predictions, in case attendants become involved in respective critical situations. It seems that some healthy persons, often soldiers at war (Splittgerber, 1881) but also terminally ill patients (Osis, 1961; Splittgerber, 1881) are able to correctly anticipate their own time of dying. Sometimes, these anticipations of patients contradict the medical diagnoses and the personal estimations of close family members and defy the possibility that death came due to autosuggestion. Among the examples reported by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley (1992) is a case of a patient who died according to his prediction but earlier than others had expected. The subsequent autopsy revealed that he did not die as a direct result of the cancer from which he suffered but because a fatal blood clot travelled to his lungs. Like the other issues discussed above, this field is open for careful future investigation.

Addendum: Tunnels Revisited

The second report by Lucian contains a reference to a “chasm” through which Cleodemus was conducted to reach Hades. Passing through chasms or narrow ravines is a widespread feature of non-Western NDEs and dying concepts (e. g. Cuevas, 2003, 2008; Kellehear, 2008; Wade, 2003). In his book on Tibetan délok, Cuevas (2008) examined one case of a lama of the 16th century who obviously passed through a chasm, “a long narrow passageway” surrounded by black rocks, into a more open afterlife landscape (p. 64). However, in another Roman account not presented in this paper – also attributed to Plutarch by Calmet (1993) – the NDEr “was sent back into his body as through a channel, and urged on by an impetuous breeze” (p. 165). A channel-like feature associated with wind is also found in délok accounts. A monk living in the 18th century recounted: “Then I was pulled by a crossed vajra [a Tibetan ritual device] into a black column of wind. Suddenly in a single moment many thousands of suns appeared and I had the sense that I was engulfed in light” (Cuevas,

2008, p. 109). The resemblance of the two ancient Roman accounts and the two *délok* accounts is striking. Moreover, especially the report comprising a “black column of wind” would also fit in any current Western NDE treatise on dark tunnels and subsequent experiences of light. Thus, these examples indicate that variations of structural NDE features signifying a state transition (such as passing through a chasm, a tunnel, or mere darkness) are not absolutely limited to a given cultural context, despite their seeming to vary in prevalence.

Summary and Conclusions

The four ostensible NDE cases from Roman times presented above contain features of mistake cases, correction cases, xenoglossy, and a prediction. Notwithstanding their questionable authenticity, they constitute interesting case reports. They share considerable similarities with contemporary NDEs from Asia, specifically in their containing mistake cases and correction cases. The peculiarity of these cases has so far not received much attention. Yet, I hope to have shown how detailed assessments aimed at formulating explanatory models for their origin (and, in Western NDEs, for their decline) might contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping the structure and contents of NDEs. This point is especially valid for correction cases because they hold the potential to become verified by respective investigations. Likewise, the Roman report containing xenoglossy and the prediction is of interest in this regard. Such features seem to be related to a set of similar phenomena that have been reported and documented in parapsychology and research on near-death states for more than 100 years (for other unusual phenomena related to near-death states, see e. g. Alvarado, 2006).

A topic of discussion in the field of near-death studies is the enigma of whether experiences people report during near-death states can be explained solely in terms of brain physiology or whether at least some experiences indicate mind functioning apart from brain. Recently, NDE researchers have discussed this enigma primarily with reference to veridical NDE OBEs. Should other paranormal features, such as those involved in the four cases reported herein, be substantiated, they might provide important supplementary information to assist in the resolution of this enigma. To conclude, I hope that these four cases contribute to the field of near-death studies in at least three ways: for their historical significance, to raise awareness of unusual features in

near-death states, and, ideally, to motivate continuing investigation into such unusual cases for their potential to help resolve the mind-brain enigma.

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