BOOK REVIEW

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Studies of near-death experiences (NDEs) tend inevitably to fall into either secular or survivalist modes of thinking, with the question of whether or not the visions can be explained within the physicalist paradigm guiding conclusions from the research. This book by Ornella Corazza, Ph.D., avoids the standard polarity and instead looks at the phenomenon from an Oriental, mainly Japanese perspective. Specifically the author, an NDE researcher at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, is concerned to challenge the tendency towards mind-body dualism in Western NDE research. The book includes a few new Japanese cases, and—on a somewhat different track—a new study of the visions of ketamine users and their considerable parallels to NDEs.

There’s a lot going on here, and I was curious to see whether the book would fulfill its promise of providing a fresh new perspective. To what extent would the author’s Japanese cases confirm the tendency for NDEs in other parts of the world to differ in certain important points from those in Western countries? With regard to ketamine, the publisher’s blurb on the back of the book cover highlights the “challenge to the conventional survivalist hypothesis” posed by the fact that drug users can often have essentially the same experience, which is fair enough, yet seemed implicitly to promise the standard dust-up

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between opposing camps that in other respects the book appeared to try to avoid.

At the outset my attention was caught by the strong antipathy expressed against Cartesian dualism in Western thought. The author’s background as an Italian with a particular interest in Japan—she spent a year at the University of Tokyo participating in the Program on the Construction of Death and Life Studies—is clearly relevant to her multi-cultural approach. I wondered whether there was a clue about her personal preoccupations in an aside in the first chapter that she worked as a professional model in Milan and London for some years and became convinced that real beauty comes from the spirituality of the material body. “Never before,” she lamented, “have we spent so much money on beauty treatments and products, rejuvenation remedies, and so on, pretending to be younger and smarter” (p. 9).

In place of dualism Corazza comes out strongly for the non-dualist and non-reductionist concept of embodiment advanced by Eastern commentators, notably the Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa. This perspective reflects a holistic view of the human body whereby the function of the mind is not only related to the brain but also to the rest of the body. Corazza considered this to be a new and important approach, relevant to both Eastern and Western theories of mind-body as well as to contemporary brain research, and she asserted that it offered “a new and improved understanding not only of what human beings are, but of what they can become” (p. 4). I considered this a bold claim, one that, again, considering the dramatically unembodied nature of NDEs, left me keenly anticipating the direction her argument would take with regard to this particular phenomenon.

Chapter One is chiefly concerned with laying out the attractions of the non-dualist approach to consciousness—describing Husserl’s phenomenology, its influence in Japan, and its recent revaluation in cognitive science as neurophenomenology—and highlighting the need for a recognition of the primacy of lived experience if David Chalmers’ so-called ‘hard problem’ of consciousness is ever to be resolved. Here the reader finds references to William James’ idea that humans have ‘fields of consciousness’ and Rupert Sheldrake’s parallel theory of the ‘extended mind’ formulated in his 2003 book The Sense of Being Stared at and Other Aspects of the Extended Mind.

Chapter Two summarizes NDE reports and research, from myths of afterlife journeys and the origin of near-death studies to examples of actual experiences, with extended quotes. This presentation is quite thorough: Among other things the author covers children’s NDEs; car-
diac arrest studies; the main features of the experience, such as lights, tunnels, paradisial environments; and the transforming power of the experience. A separate section on out-of-body experiences includes reference to the thought and experience of Hiroshi Motoyama, a visionary and healer well-known in Japan, who employed extended meditation in order to exit his body at will.

Chapter Three gets down to the cultural variations in reported experiences with references to well-known examples such as Carl Becker’s Chinese cases, surveys of Indian cases, and Dorothy Counts’s Melanesian cases. The author reported that little research has been conducted on NDEs in Japan, but there have been two major studies: one popular survey in which visions of long, dark rivers and beautiful flowers emerged as a strong theme, and a more scientifically-oriented study of 17 hospital patients of whom eight reported memories during unconsciousness in which, again, clear visions of rivers or ponds largely prevailed. Interestingly, fear, pain, and suffering predominated in five of these eight cases, in contrast to Western NDE research in which distressing experiences are relatively less frequently reported.

Corazza also here gave details of interviews with three near-death experiencers in Japan, carried out in collaboration with the University of Tokyo. All three were pleasurable, and Corazza contended that the predominance of beautiful environments—gardens, scented flowers, etc.—reflects the strong connection between nature and spirituality in Japan. But she also noted important points of difference with Western NDEs. None of the three studies, it seems, yielded an NDE that included an out-of-body experience, a life review (or panoramic vision), or a tunnel effect or other transition through a period of darkness. Experiencers reported meetings with dead relatives but seemingly not with angels or beings of light. As in Western cases, experiencers encountered borders the crossing of which meant leaving physical, earthly life forever. The borders were conceived in three of these cases as a river—which seems to be a predominant image in Japanese cases, a rainbow bridge across a river, and a wall of golden Light.

In Chapter Four, Corazza discussed the visions brought on by ketamine, a medical anesthetic and popular recreational drug the effects of which appear on the face of it to be remarkably similar to those reported in the context of near-death episodes. Corazza provided a useful description of the background of recreational ketamine use and its effects as well as the results of her own research into a group of 36 users aged between 21 and 45: 23 from continental Europe, nine from the U.K., two from the U.S., and one from Japan. The chapter
offers numerous quoted descriptions of distorted perceptions of time, panoramic life review, a sense of total understanding of the universe, a sense of peace and joy, and meetings with the Light or ‘God,’ as for instance:

The light was very bright and emanating warmth. I could easily stand the heat. It was like facing God. We spoke. I cannot remember what he said, but I remember that I couldn’t lie. It is hard to describe, I never experienced such intensity of feeling. (p. 92)

OBEs were experienced by about a third of the participants, who felt absolutely sure that they had left their bodies and that they existed outside them. Aftereffects included a diminished fear of death and a new interest in yoga and meditation as well as in karma and reincarnation. Ketamine users reported all the main features on the NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983). On the other hand these experiences are atypical—one estimate is that they happen to only 12% of users—and are likely to occur only on a person’s first exposure to the drug.

In Chapter Five, Corazza offered a comparison of ketamine experiences and NDEs, specifically a group of 36 NDEs obtained by Peter Fenwick (available at the Religious Experience Research Centre Archive at the University of Wales, Lampeter). It highlights crucial differences—for instance the relative paucity of a ‘border’ in the former—and ends with a brief consideration of the neurobiological operations in the ketamine experience. The most common feature in both types of experience, Corazza concluded, is the sense of being in another place—a paradisial garden, a forest, and so on—and here Corazza tried to fill what she considered to be a gap in NDE research literature, focusing on the spatial dominance of place. The intuition of one’s death here-and-now, she suggested, renders the temporal dimension of existence less relevant than the spatial domain, which therefore largely prevails, an idea which is supported by the Japanese theory of place (basho). In Buddhism also, temporal consciousness is seen to relate to ego-consciousness, whereas space-consciousness makes a connection to a deeper level of consciousness. Corazza dwelled especially on the importance of the concept of non-homogeneity of space, reflected in geomancy, awareness of the characteristics of locality in siting holy places, and in the Chinese system of feng-shui.

Chapter Seven offers a brief survey of scientific explanations, which Corazza identified as mind-brain identity, psychological, and transcendental; in discussion of each, she articulated its issues and challenges. Perhaps the most interesting point here is the discussion of the
transcendental or survivalist hypothesis, that the soul survives the death of the body, wherein, unsurprisingly given the author's antipathy to body-mind dualism, Corazza suggested that NDEs are proof of something more immediate than survival after death, something that is much more concerned with the here-and-now of human existence. In the final chapter she developed this perspective more fully with regard to the 'body-scheme' of Yasuo Yuasa, which attempts to inspire reconciliation between body and mind by reflecting on the unexplored spiritual potential within the body.

From my point of view, the book covers a great deal of ground, supplying a basic foundation in the main issues and challenges inherent in NDE research, providing some new studies, and offering a particular and, as far as I'm aware, relatively unexplored perspective in terms of the spatial element of consciousness. I found the book to be clearly written and the research summarized well and with a good deal of relevant detail, taking account of secular neurobiological and psychological approaches as much as transcendental ones in an even-handed way. However, it did not altogether surprise me, given the scale of its ambition, that the book fell somewhat short in terms of providing satisfying conclusions to its lines of enquiry.

On the multi-cultural aspect it struck me, reading Corazza’s summary of the existing research, how static the debate has remained over the past two decades. There is clearly huge potential significance in the contents of people’s NDEs in different parts of the world: What role does culture play here, and to what extent—if at all—does it validate the skeptical argument that the experience is ultimately formed by the human imagination and is, therefore, hallucinatory? If afterlife myths and literary motifs, such as the device of mistaken identity that shows up in English medieval stories, are reflected in actual NDE reports, as apparently happens in India, what conclusions are warranted? At one point Corazza seemed to address this question, claiming to find clear points of relevance to near-death studies of the Japanese myth of the Goddess Izanami. This argument would have been exciting if true, but I found her reasons tenuous and insufficiently supported by the research that she described. What really interested her was the importance of place (basho) in the Japanese approach to transcendental states, and although this is certainly an interesting topic, I was left feeling somewhat uncertain about its relevance to NDEs in general or, indeed, Japanese versions of them in particular.

For me the most interesting part of the book was the survey of ketamine users, and although parallels to NDE reports have been known
for some time, I found it useful to have detailed quotes and to observe the striking parallels between the two. Yet here, too, I found an uneasy balance between information and argument. It turned out that Corazza did not attempt to find justification for either the survivalist or the reductionist approach, as other authors have done. Not that this necessarily mattered; instead, the author again took the opportunity to discourse on the spatial element and the quality of ‘non-homogeneity’ that she found equally present in both types of experience and considered researchers to have neglected. I was intrigued by this entire discussion and thought it might eventually yield a new insight, but the section drifted back to describing other aspects of the research before I had fully grasped what point exactly the author was trying to make.

Perhaps somewhat belatedly I realized that the idea of the body as a ‘higher form of knowledge’ that Corazza promoted is simply what in transcendental discourse is often referred to in terms such as ‘higher consciousness.’ All humans presumably possess higher consciousness but largely remain unaware of it unless they have a unitive experience, for instance by means of an NDE or a ketamine trip. Corazza used the term ‘extended body’ to describe it, whereas Yasuo Yuasa wrote of the ‘quasi-body’ imbued with *ki* energy, a psychophysiological entity “that cannot be properly accommodated within the dualistic paradigm of thinking” (p. 136). The point seems to be to place this higher consciousness in a ‘this-world’ context, something that people can aim to understand in the here-and-now rather than see as belonging exclusively to post-mortem existence. Corazza argued that this approach, if developed in further research, will help humanity “glimpse a new world-view by offering us a better understanding not only of what we are, but also of what we can be” (p. 139). I agree that we can all benefit from that perspective. Yet it seems to me that an experience that is already so replete with meaning—to the extent that it changes lives and has caught the imagination of millions of people—hardly requires reinterpreting in this way in order to become fully accessible or to make us focus on the ‘here-and-now’.

In the end I was left feeling that the book was governed by the need—perhaps inevitable in a sympathetic academic study—to find meaning in the phenomenon of NDEs while avoiding religious or spiritual talk, on the one hand, or pandering to clearly unsatisfactory reductionism, on the other. How better to meet that need than by emphasizing the relevance of NDEs to the living while at the same time disavowing the mind-body dualism which—albeit for quite different reasons—is so deeply suspect in some secular scientific circles. None
of this critique is to deny the book’s many worthwhile qualities or the author’s commitment to offering an interesting new perspective; it is simply to point out the challenges involved in undertaking the kind of task Corazza undertook and making it work.

References