Letters to the Editor

William James and Near-Death Experiences

To the Editor:

Five generations ago during the 1901–1902 academic year, the great American psychologist and philosopher, William James, gave a series of lectures at Edinburgh on “The Varieties of Religious Experience,” which were subsequently published in a book of the same title (James, 1936). I believe that many of the insights discussed in those lectures are relevant today to the understanding and study of near-death experiences (NDEs), in particular his insights into mysticism, medical materialism, and religious science.

NDEs are religious mystical states of consciousness. James defined mystical states of consciousness as those states characterized by ineffability and noetic quality. Transiency and passivity are characteristics that he found were usually but not necessarily always associated with the mystical state. As to the characteristics of the mystic range of consciousness, he wrote: “It is on the whole pantheistic and optimistic, or at least the opposite of pessimistic. It is anti-naturalistic, and harmonizes best with twice-bornness and so-called other-worldly states of mind” (James, 1936, p. 413). Incidentally, “twice-bornness” essentially referred to one’s waking up to the realization that one is a spiritual being.

Of course, James had much more to say about the mystical state (and therefore, presumably NDEs, which are a form of mystic consciousness) than this brief summary. Rather than dwell on these matters, I will emphasize discussing what James thought NDEs (or the mystic states associated with NDEs) tell us about the nature of reality. Specifically, he addressed the question: Does the mystic range of consciousness “furnish any warrant for the truth of twice-bornness and supernaturality and pantheism which it favors”? (James, 1936, p. 413). Here is a summary of his response:

(1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
(2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

(3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith. (James, 1936, p. 414)

James gave a long and very interesting discussion of the above points. I think readers of this journal will, by and large, agree with much of the above, although perhaps having some doubts or questions about item 2. The essence of the arguments that James produced in support of item 2 is that the mystic range of consciousness produces many more, and indeed, in some ways, contradictory effects than just those experienced in the religious (or positive) mystical states. In particular, many of the productions of insane states of mind qualify as mystical states, but they would undoubtedly not inspire faith and belief to the rational consciousness. Thus, in essence, when one chooses mystic states (or productions of NDEs) to support various characterizations of reality or even religious belief, one is already using reason to determine which components of mystic states to use in such support. The mystic state, in itself, has to be weighed carefully before it is utilized in support of any description of reality. As James emphatically wrote: “Once more, then, I repeat that non-mystics are under no obligations to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature” (James, 1936, p. 418).

“Medical materialism” is a term perhaps unfamiliar to the modern mind. It refers to that philosophy of science that holds that all of reality is explainable or potentially explainable on the basis of physical science. Thus, even mystic states of consciousness are just the result of patterns of interactions among particles and fields or even more modern formulations of the particle-field idea (namely, quantum fields and their quanta). Some would conclude from this philosophy that such a lowly origin of mystic states (or NDEs) greatly reduces their spiritual value. Here is a snippet of James’ cogent thinking on these matters:

Medical materialism seems a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysterical, Saint Francis of Assisi as an
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hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. Carlyle's organ-tones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental overtensions, it says, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably), due to perverted actions of various glands which physiology will yet discover.

And medical materialism then thinks that the spiritual authority of all such personages is successfully undermined. (James, 1936, pp. 14-15)

The essence of James' response to the above reasoning was given succinctly as follows: “In the end it had to come to our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots” (James, 1936, p. 21). He thought NDEs (mystical experiences in general) should be evaluated systematically and empirically on the basis of their “immediate luminousness” by which he means by their “philosophical reasonableness” and their “moral helpfulness.” In everyday terms, the value of NDEs is their value on the thought and action of those affected by them directly and indirectly. This approach is undoubtedly not foreign to many readers of this journal.

James clearly wrote that in many cases one's personal religion requires aesthetic richness that may be "institutional and complex, majestic in the hierarchic interrelatedness of its parts, with authority descending from stage to stage, and at every stage [having] objects for adjectives of mystery and splendor, derived in the last resort from the Godhead who is the fountain and culmination of the system" (James, 1936, pp. 449-450). Nevertheless, in his discussion of religious philosophy, he made a strong and compelling case for creating a Science of Religions. His case for such a science would be applicable to the creation of a Science of NDEs. A small sample of his writing on this matter clearly shows his intent:

The spontaneous intellect of man always defines the divine which it feels in many ways that harmonize with its temporary intellectual prepossessions. Philosophy [Science of Religions] can by comparison eliminate the local and the accidental from these definitions. Both from dogma and from worship she can remove historic incrustations. By confronting the spontaneous religious constructions with the results of natural science, philosophy [again Science of Religions or of NDEs] can also eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous. (James, 1936, pp. 445-446)
might not eventually command as general a public adherence as is commanded by a physical science. Even the personally non-religious might accept its conclusions on trust, much as blind persons now accept the facts of optics—"it might appear foolish to refuse them" (James, 1936, p. 446).

Clearly William James favored taking a systematic, empirical approach toward studying varieties of religious experience among which would be included NDEs. Yet, as readers of this journal know, scientific research requires funding, which means some or several sectors of society have to give such research political and ultimately financial support. Such political support is sometimes forthcoming if the scientific research appears to promise societally useful technological applications. Developing a safe, voluntary, therapeutically supported technology for inducing NDEs seems to be desirable. Many groups of people could potentially benefit from the spiritual impacts of such NDEs, such as prisoners, wayward youth, and terminally ill persons. Chuck Colson (1979) of the Nixon administration, in his Christian prison ministry, found that if inmates underwent a Christian conversion experience, they sometimes completely changed their lives for the better and became ultimate contributors to society. Perhaps, appropriately technologically induced NDEs could achieve the same ends and perhaps at a higher success rate.

Native Americans were known to go on vision quests to seek spiritual guidance in many matters including finding one's calling while still young. Such a quest involved mental preparation and bodily mortification. Even Jesus Christ mortified his body when he went on his 40-day fast in the interest of gaining spiritual clarity and insight before starting his world-changing ministry. Perhaps technological aids for facilitating vision quests could be developed for our times. I strongly suspect that such aids would be similar to technologically induced NDEs. Indeed, the ancient rishis, illumined sages of India, developed yoga, a science of gaining spiritual insight and transformation. Yoga is arguably a rather difficult approach to inducing NDEs. Perhaps western technology could make the process easier, safer, and more democratic.

Finally, terminally ill persons who have not had a naturally induced NDE might desire a technologically induced NDE for the purpose of giving them, possibly, a peaceful spiritual realization of the context and purpose of their lives. I want to emphasize that technologically induced NDEs probably do not have to be traumatic to body or mind if appropriate techniques are evolved. Many technological aides to spiritual transformation using machines or drugs already exist or are being developed.
experimented with, but it might be of particular interest to journal readers to consider the efforts of psychologist and hypnotist P. W. Schenk (1999), who has developed an extremely noninvasive approach to giving his patients some of the benefits of the NDE using hypnosis. In any case, consideration of the matters discussed in this paper may contribute to a rejuvenation of commitment to the ideals that were behind the creation of IANDS.

References


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