BOOK REVIEW

Stanley Krippner, Ph.D.
Saybrook Graduate School


In recent years, a plethora of books has been published on the topic of consciousness, but this recent entry by Imants Barušs comes as a pleasant surprise. It takes an original approach to the topic, and develops its subject matter in a way that is internally consistent. Furthermore, the personal experiences of the author and his acquaintances are used to good advantage. The result is a book that is entertaining as well as instructive.

The book’s ten chapters cover such topics as wakefulness, sleep, dreams, hypnosis, trance, psychedelics, transcendence, and death. I would have given meditation a separate chapter, but this topic is included elsewhere, primarily in the chapter on transcendence.

Early on, Barušs observes that there are three perspectives from which consciousness can be approached: the physiological, the cognitive, and the experiential. He then points out that there are at least four basic definitions of consciousness ranging from the behavioral to the subjective, and promises to distinguish among them in his text, with subscripts. The term “altered states” complicates the picture even further; because a baseline is needed to use the term properly, the ordinary waking state of one person (or culture) could be the altered state of some other person (or culture). Barušs objects to pathologizing altered states but notes that there might be life

Stanley Krippner, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at the Saybrook Graduate School and also holds faculty appointments at the Universidade Holistica Internacional in Brasilia, Brazil, and the Instituto de Medicina y Tecnologia Avanzada de la Conducta in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Krippner at the Saybrook Graduate School, 747 Front Street, 3rd Floor, San Francisco, CA 94111-1920; e-mail: skrippner@saybrook.edu.
disruptions, using reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) as an example of the problems evoked by an experiencer's inability to reconcile one's changed sense of reality and value system with those of one's social group.

In his introductory chapter, Barušš devotes considerable space to anomalous information transfer, citing the *ganzfeld* studies in parapsychology as a rigorous series of investigations that appeared to support the notion that mental detection of target material can occur at a distance. He then describes the often-reported association of anomalous experiences (for example, telepathy, clairvoyance) with alterations in consciousness (for example, dissociation, dreaming) leaving it "to the interested reader to consult the details of the arguments and to make up her own mind" (p. 15). Later in the book, several research programs supporting the reality of anomalous phenomena are taken up in detail (for example, past-life experiences, precognition in dreams). Barušš' open-minded discussion of these topics, and his refusal to dismiss them out of hand, is a landmark for a book published by the American Psychological Association, and suggests that the study of anomalous phenomena is slowly finding its place in mainstream psychology.

Following his introduction, Barušš discusses the ordinary waking state of consciousness and what is often called the "experiential stream." Introspection, imagination, daydreaming, sensory restriction, and the sleep/dream cycle are surveyed; controversies are highlighted and unresolved issues are presented. The next section of the book is concerned with what Barušš calls "particularly controversial alterations of consciousness," for example, hypnosis, drug-induced alterations, transcendent states, and "alterations of consciousness associated with death" (for example, NDEs, past-life experiences, mediumship, survival of consciousness after death). The final chapter is a succinct summary of the book's major themes with suggested directions for future research. Barušš' final statement is that alterations in consciousness cannot help but force us "to examine our beliefs about reality," and this examination may inspire "a deeper appreciation of the mystery of life" (pp. 238–239).

Readers of this Journal will find Barušš' discussion of death-related consciousness alterations especially intriguing. In discussing out-of-body experiences (OBEs), he asks whether OBE perceptions are delusional or veridical, concluding that the data in question "have been ambiguous" (p. 213). This leads into a survey of NDE research, illustrated by Michael Sabom's frequently cited Pam Reynolds case.
and followed by "reductionist explanations." These explanations are used as templates for the Reynolds case. Some of them elucidate the case (for example, Reynolds' account was not documented until three years after its occurrence) and some do not (for example, Reynolds suffered a lack of oxygen, but this condition typically leads to fragments of perception rather than the coherent account this experiencer gave). Nonetheless, Barušš speculates that "some version of a reductionist explanation may yet turn out to be correct" (p. 220).

Barušš includes three topics rarely mentioned in other surveys of NDEs: blind people's NDEs, distressing NDEs, and NDEs in non-Western cultures. He notes that "tunnel" imagery is uncommon in non-Western reports, but that "life reviews" sometimes occur in reports from China and India. As a whole, crosscultural studies "strengthen the argument that NDEs cannot simply be experiential byproducts of the physiological changes taking place in a dying brain" (p. 223). Barušš adds that if only one NDE took place during the time that someone's brain was physically incapable of coherent cognitive function, this would lend support to the assertion that "the brain is not the cause of all experience" (p. 224). Once again, Barušš' account of a controversial topic in consciousness research turns out to be balanced, openminded, yet carefully considered.

Barušš chooses a case from Turkey to illustrate purported past-life experiences. Although some impressive correspondences were noted (of the 18 statements the child made about the purported "previous personality," 14 were verified), Barušš noted that the child's parents probably had some acquaintance with the murderer of the "previous personality." On the other hand, the child's birth defect corresponded with the manner of the "previous personality's" death. Some therapists use "past-life regression" as a psychotherapeutic device, but Barušš asserts that "most are probably fantasies" (p. 227). He is more impressed by the reports of previous lifetimes that do not involve hypnosis with its "demands of the social situation" and the "expectations of the hypnotist" (p. 227). As for past-life therapy, I agree with Barušš that there have been so few studies of its effectiveness "that its effectiveness as therapeutic strategy is unknown" (p. 229).

The literature on mediumship is vast and complex; Barušš wisely focuses on the recent investigation in Scole, England, a study that deserves more attention than it has received in either professional or the popular publications. The research team attended 32 meetings of a group of four people who met twice a week for the purpose of contacting spirits. Two members of this group claimed to be mediums;
Barušs notes that “ten different spirits apparently spoke through the two mediums, sometimes in a manner that was uncharacteristic of the mediums” (p. 230). I would have preferred the word “purportedly” to “apparently”; nevertheless, the research team found anomalous markings on 15 rolls of unopened film that they had brought to the meetings. In addition, there were anomalous sounds on some of the audiocassettes, including a portion of Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto that, according to the spirits, was being played by Rachmaninoff himself! Although Barušs raises the possibility of fraud, he notes that the investigators were unable to detect any. However, from my perspective it is important to include a magician on the investigative team, and to include his or her report when it is published.

What does Barušs make of the experiences and studies dealing with death-related alterations of consciousness? Wisely, he leaves “the reader to answer these questions herself” (p. 232). However, he does not dismiss the possibility in knee-jerk style, as would many of his colleagues exposed to the same accounts. Indeed, Barušs continues to provoke the reader into making his or her decision in his final chapter. I would conclude that, in Alterations of Consciousness, Barušs has given his readers an articulate, accurate, and captivating account of people’s capacity to change their ways of perceiving, thinking, and feeling. I know of no better overview of this topic, nor one that covers its bases in a way that is scholarly, enjoyable, and potentially transformational. Barušs’ final chapter demonstrates the impact that altered states of consciousness could make upon “fundamental questions about the nature of reality.” So let readers beware; the contents of this book might change their worldview as well as their consciousness!