

BOOK REVIEW

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Mindsight: Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind, by Kenneth Ring and Sharon Cooper. Palo Alto, CA: William James Center for Consciousness Studies/Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1999, 217 pp. + xix, \$12.95, pb.

I approached *Mindsight: Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind* with my usual anticipation in reading work done by Kenneth Ring, who is known to me personally and through his scholarly writing over many years of research into near-death experiences (NDEs). Together with his co-author, Sharon Cooper, he has produced another fascinating book reflecting research into apparent “mindsight” of people who have either been blind from birth, became blind at a later date, or have severely impaired vision. It is interesting to note that the publisher of this book, the William James Center for Consciousness Studies, in the tradition of its famed namesake, is reflected so well in the very careful introspective/phenomenological approach of the authors. Our current obsession with scientism is encapsulated in the introduction to this book by Charles Tart, and made me realize that the lost art of making scientific data interesting is being revived by Ring. While one cannot conclude with certainty any of the many questions about the capacity of blind people to see during NDEs, the authors have done a marvelous job of careful introspective phenomenological dissection of the reports. This study represents an excellent piece of qualitative research in a tradition spawned in the field of anthropology and gaining increasing popularity.

Ring and Cooper’s style is to address the reader as a skeptical but openminded person, with the arguments for and against each

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proposition carefully described and considered, along with a review of other research information, including literature. This is a style popular in scientific writing of the 19th century, perhaps best demonstrated in the writings of Sigmund Freud. I am personally very responsive to that style because it allows me to see how the authors have developed their ideas, as well as what those ideas are.

There are seven chapters in *Mindsight*, which is marred only by an unfortunate case of a probably spurious NDE that was included in the appendix. Ring and Cooper are to be congratulated for admitting that the data already in print were unreliable. Ring's interest in NDEs and out-of-body experiences (OBEs) is also counterbalanced with his interest in the longstanding debate within parapsychology over whether the OBE is an extrasomatic state, valid in its own right, in which the mind exists separate from the brain, or only a retrospective reconstruction based on sensory cues, as proposed primarily by the prominent English psychologist, Susan Blackmore (1993). Work with people congenitally blind due to rubella cataracts has shown that when they regain sight following surgery, they need to be taught how to see again, a rather long and complex process. So examining people blind from birth, with partial sight, or who have become blind later in life serves as a fascinating crucible for a look at the interesting question of whether one sees with the eyes or with the eyes of the mind, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe proposed.

Mindsight addresses three questions: Do blind people have NDEs and, if so, are they similar to or different from those of sighted persons? If blind people do report NDEs, are they visual in nature? And are such claims of vision in blind people corroborated by other witnesses, who can confirm the veridicality of the blind NDEr's testimony?

The sample was a convenience one, consisting of volunteers interested in being research subjects drawn from organizations for the blind and from readers of the newsletter of the International Association for Near-Death Studies. Individuals were subjected to a screening interview and then a formal interview, together with follow-up calls as needed. Conversations were audiotaped and transcribed. Thirty-one qualified individuals were interviewed. The majority of subjects were women, and the age range was from 22 to 70. They were all Caucasian and mainly Christian, with a wide variation in educational attainment. Twenty-one had had NDEs, 16 of them reporting at least one OBE in addition to their NDE; the remaining 10 reported only OBEs. Approximately half the sample had been blind from birth and the other half had lost their sight after 5 years of age. Six had minimal vision.

Ring and Cooper concluded that the blind have familiar, rather typical, beatific NDEs similar to those described by Raymond Moody (1975), and that a number of subjects, including some blind from birth, described clearly visual perceptions. That is, in some way they knew how to see, perhaps the most unusual finding of the study. Ring and Cooper were careful to make sure that they did not suggest this to the subjects. One chapter addressed corroborative evidence which established that these experiences did occur as described. Although this is the weakest section of the book, in at least one case the evidence seems to be quite strong. Unfortunately, the idiosyncratic nature of these experiences does not often allow corroboration with any degree of certainty.

The final chapter attempts various explanations assuming that the blind in fact can see in a way rather similar to visual perception. Ring and Cooper consider traditional explanations like the dream hypothesis; retrospective reconstruction; blindsight, a term that refers to apparent vision by cortically blind individuals; skin-based vision, a term derived from experiments that suggest qualities in the skin allow light perception; and transcendent awareness or eyeless vision. The final section reflects the authors' views in a theory of transcendent awareness, encompassing Jenny Wade's (1996, 1998) holonomic approach to nonlocal consciousness. This approach hypothesizes that there is a physically transcendent source of awareness that predates life and survives bodily death.

This carefully written book would be of interest not only to those fascinated by NDEs and parapsychology, but also to those interested in the philosophy of knowledge, particularly how one answers questions and how one asks answerable questions. Fascinating as all this material is, Ring and Cooper—and Tart—seem to commit an error common to scientism and dualism, while criticizing it as a methodology. Instead they invoke dualistic theories and expect that the nature of their data will transcend the limitations of logical positivism. Since the publication of Tart's groundbreaking article on states of consciousness in *Science* (1972), the most prestigious scientific journal on this continent, the subsequent three decades have hinted at new scientific paradigms. I have felt for a long time that we truly need a new paradigm in science: Glen Gabbard and I wrote a book many years ago (1984) in which we tried to bring our ideas together in a non-reductionistic way in a chapter called "The Mind/Body Trap." Ring and Cooper's findings in this carefully written and stimulating book may provide additional hints as to what a new scientific paradigm must accommodate.

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