BOOK REVIEW

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When I first attempted to write this review, shortly after the publication of Gracia Fay Ellwood's The Uttermost Deep, I found myself so overcome by the sheer sweep and substance of the book as to feel incapable of adequate (or even intelligible) response. Still struggling to resolve some of the issues raised by the material, I could not think what to say. Both she and the Journal's editor have suffered considerably for that, for which I offer this public regret. That this review and its readers have benefited by a lengthy sabbatical for reflection will, I hope, provide some consolation.

"If there is one thing that is self-evident about Near-Death Experiences," writes Gracia Fay Ellwood, "it is that the explanation for them is not self-evident" (p. 261). One hopes she was chuckling at the understatement as she wrote. This quote appears in the conclusion to her masterful book, The Uttermost Deep: The Challenge of Near-Death Experiences. She continues:

The common themes [of a broad variety of near-death experiences] cannot be dismissed, but neither can the cultural inconsistencies ... The pattern remains a challenge; it strongly suggests survival without compelling one to believe it. (p. 261)

In the relatively brief space of 265 pages, Ellwood examines and
explores those things: the types, themes, patterns, and interpretive frameworks surrounding near-death experiences and how they may contribute to a coherent theory of survival, of life after death.

*The Uttermost Deep* may well be the broadest and most thorough discussion of near-death experiential components yet published anywhere. Examining not only the narrowly focused near-death experience (NDE) literature but scholarly and classical literature as well, Ellwood explores NDE parallels in world religions, a range of philosophical positions concerning them, and related accounts within the parapsychological literature, especially from the 19th century. As a piece of research, the work is stunning. As an overview of interpretations of near-death experiences, it is without parallel.

To begin with—as, indeed, appears in her Introduction—Ellwood is fearless and matter-of-fact, plunging immediately and without apology into acknowledging that certain aspects of NDE accounts appear to be paranormal and “violate some basic assumptions underlying the modern worldview” (p. 10). To readers who may be put off simply by the mention of materialistically suspect themes, I can only say, “Don’t quit yet.” To leave the book because of possibly uncomfortable ideas would be to miss a rich background of information simply not available in one place elsewhere. Rather than offering a defense of one position or the other, Ellwood sets out some basic principles of parapsychological investigation and promptly explores and defines her use of the terms “believer” and “skeptic.”

The author’s approach to near-death experiences is equally straightforward and no-nonsense; she gives us passionate interest, but not a sentimental line in the entire book. A concise and thorough summary of Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* (1975) and *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977) opens the work, mercifully without a repetition of his by-now-over-familiar NDE description, “A man is dying…” By the end of a brisk four-page chapter, she has established her territory and noted the common conclusion of those early days—that “the peaceful and radiant NDE provided a picture of what life after death was like” (p. 19) —but adds, “However, as often happens, what at first seems to be a relatively clear and consistent matter turns out to be complex and untidy” (p. 19). For the next 144 pages, she works her way through the historical, philosophical, and research-based literature on the complexities and untidiness of NDEs and their relationship to the possible demonstrability of life after death.

The book includes a superb and most welcome look at what is known or conjectured about distressing experiences. (Ellwood refers to them,
accurately, as “painful”). Here again, she is nothing if not thorough, quoting the work of P.M.H. Atwater (1994), Barbara Rommer (2000), and the study by Bruce Greyson and myself (Greyson and Bush, 1992), among others, but not overlooking the early contributions of the Evergreen Study (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981), Margot Grey (1985), and the often-maligned Maurice Rawlings (1978). She also provides data from Robert Monroe (1971) and other writers on out-of-body experience (OBEs), as well as literature from pre-20th century religious and parapsychological realms to widen the horizon of frightening visionary experiences.

Beyond this amplitude of information, what makes the Ellwood contribution special is that she does not succumb to the emotional trap of trying to explain the experiences away (“It wasn’t really that bad, now, was it?”) nor to any presupposition that she knows why they occur. She is like a botanist—though I am also reminded of forensic pathologist Henry Lee—picking her way carefully through the evidence, overlooking nothing, taking it all in, seeing how the pieces fit together. Her willingness to tolerate ambiguity is refreshing:

[Some] explanations reflect the good news that many who have painful NDEs do in fact respond to them as to a much-needed wake-up call. But since radiant experiences also trigger spiritual awakenings, we have not yet pinpointed the reasons why some are painful. Besides, some persons have had painful and radiant experiences in quick succession with no noticeable change of heart between them, and occasionally experiences will begin with peace and happiness then become painful, or vice versa. (p. 95)

This is a welcome antidote to the many too-glib commentaries surrounding this topic.

Although Ellwood’s focus in The Uttermost Deep is near-death experiences, the foundation of her interest is how much can be known about survival. This is why she looks so intently at the painful experiences, seeing in them “the most troubling moral ambiguity of all: the possibility that a good and spiritually aware person may plunge at death into a scene of meaninglessness or alien horror, as certain painful NDEs suggest may happen” (p. 219). Her sensitivity to this moral ambiguity is notable and perhaps unique in the literature.

Leading into the exploration of survival issues, Ellwood notes, “One reason people with very different positions about life after death have so much trouble communicating is that their different ways of thinking are not brought out into the open” (p. 146). So saying, she describes the “paradigmatic mind” as one bound by a rigid worldview;
the "data-led mind" that bases conclusions on evidence; and the "wishful-and-fearful-thinking mind" that bases decisions on feelings about an issue.

Observing that she is herself "a data-led thinker," Ellwood sets out to examine the topic of life after death. Of three chapters specifically about survival, the first two are a careful survey of philosophical approaches to mind/body questions and of the arguments for and against the probability of survival. It does seem possible that reading them in the context of the three models of thinking would be a particularly interesting exercise for anyone with a paradigmatic or wishful-and-fearful-thinking tendency, simply to observe the data-led approach in action.

Here — the "botanist" again — Ellwood holds up each position for the reader's inspection, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each, what it contributes to the whole, and, if it is to be discarded, why she thinks so. If only as an exercise in intelligent and fair-minded discussion, the chapter would be a treat; as an introduction to mind/body issues for any neophyte philosopher, it is a downright marvel.

The third survival chapter, "Documented Evidence for Survival," looks at "the records of psychical research [including] many studies of apparent communication with the deceased" (p. 172). She divides them into four categories, having to do with mediumship, apparitions, spirit influence in daily life, and reincarnation, and examines each with her usual thoroughness.

It seems to this reader that the material in this chapter, although abundant, may not have the same quality as, say, her discussion of philosophical positions about mind/body interactions or her commentary on interpretations. Despite that, and whatever one's view of the well-documented attempts to capture the butterflies of psychic experience, Ellwood's material provides a concise, balanced, and informative introduction to the field of psychic research and experience account.

The final section of The Uttermost Deep, "Interpretive Frameworks," would all by itself be worth the price of the book. "Anyone who has something to say about the subject of life after death is interpreting — interpreting ideas, images, experiences, and/or evidence," writes Ellwood (p. 208). Brava! By now the reader knows already there will be no shoot-from-the-hip conclusions in this work, but it is nonetheless a pleasure (at least to another data-led mind) to see this stated so clearly.

That said, Ellwood looks carefully at three types of interpretive
framework from which people have commented about survival. They include the agnostic; multi-world; and one-world (three varieties, described below). The agnostic framework, represented by John Wren-Lewis (1992) and Carol Zaleski (1987), "is an approach in which the issues of one world or many, survival or extinction, are left open; we do not know. Some hold that we can never know" (p. 208). Because by definition this framework contributes nothing to the exploration of survival, Ellwood describes the Wren-Lewis and Zaleski positions but carries them no farther.

Multi-world frameworks (Egyptian, Sumerian, Christian fundamentalist, folk Buddhist) maintain "hard boundaries, so to speak, between our public physical world and the world or worlds of the afterlife. The gates are controlled by supernatural beings or forces that human minds cannot probe or understand; we can only obey, accept, or try to appease" (p. 208).

By a one-world framework Ellwood means "a view of the universe as capable of being explored extensively by human minds and means [and in which] things are related to other things in more or less regular ways of cause and effect" (p. 208). Although materialism is a one-world framework, it denies the possibility of survival and is left, with Wren-Lewis and Zaleski, outside the remainder of her discussion. Other one-world views "are much more promising" as avenues of exploration (p. 218).

One-world frameworks that affirm the possibility of life after death may be gradualistic, the assumption, as in Theosophy and Spiritualism "that the kind of consciousness developed in physical life continues and develops in afterlife experience" (p. 218); projectionist, the assumption, as in Tibetan Buddhism and in Kenneth Ring's Heading Toward Omega (1984), that the mind projects its images so they appear to have an independent reality; or initiatory.

The several initiatory interpretations display forms of a metanarrative "in which the central event or events are painful experiences out of which develop joy and transformation ... examples of a cosmic pattern of initiation that is necessary to ultimate fulfillment" (p. 229). The pattern is central as the hero's journey in Joseph Campbell (1949) and Northrop Frye (1975), also Michael Grosso (1985), Stanislav Grof (1985), and the Western mystical path. It may, to some extent, overlap the projectionist view.

What this review misses capturing, for lack of space, is a remarkable texture, for lack of a better term, in the Ellwood presentation. For example, a good many writers on near-death experiences have
mentioned the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Faulker and Goulet, 1994/16th century BC). Ellwood not only mentions it, she notes its proper title — the *Book of Going Forth by Day* — describes its cultural background, explores commonalities with modern NDEs and wonders about their sources, referring easily to similar New Testament themes. The section is a small jewel of clarity. She does the same with Sumerian afterlife conceptions, and with Buddhist — Indian, Chinese, Pure Land, and Tibetan — and she does it all lucidly, readably, and in fewer than 20 pages.

Throughout, her writing displays this deftness. In fact, following her agility through so much information from so many areas — the field botanist/philosopher/literary critic/historian leading the amateur — can be a challenge. It is helpful that the book includes 19 pages of notes/bibliography and a detailed index.

Ellwood draws no categorical conclusions, makes no sweeping declarations. What she does is explore with us the territory of near-death experiences and their relationship to the question of life after death, especially as concerns painful NDEs and their implications. Where she takes us is here, in the conclusion of the book, in her comparison of the projectionist and initiatory interpretive frameworks:

In the full projectionist position only the Ultimate, the Light, is really real; to find salvation from suffering and evil is to penetrate the illusion of separateness, and to realize for oneself that the Oneness (or the Light/Void) is all there is ....

... Thus to the NDEr enduring tormenting beings or chaos or cosmic loneliness, and to the story's anxious listener, the projectionist response is: When you see with clear consciousness, there is nothing to fear; the situation isn't real; you are already "home."

For some whose approaches are essentially gradualist or initiatory, however, the NDEr, the journey and some or all of the beings encountered along the way are real .... [E]ssentially, conscious beings are more than projections; they have an existence in their own right. They may be aware of their Creator/Source, or may be ignorant or partially asleep. Their decisions make a difference; they can become evil, can do harm to others and themselves. They can suffer terribly; they can help and heal. But there is a cosmic pattern to which they belong, a .... story with a happy ending. From these perspectives the response to evil and to the prospect of cosmic pain is: With your eyes on the prize, control your fear, choose to love; you will be "home" in the morning. (pp. 264–265)

To read *The Uttermost Deep* is to encounter a book of remarkable yet accessible scholarship, moral principle, and intelligence. It is a
book to highlight and go back to. Whether we can claim survival may be up to each of us to decide; Ellwood's venture leads to a high place from which we can at least see clearly where we are.

References


