

Commentary on Keith Augustine's Paper

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ABSTRACT: Keith Augustine has provided a useful survey of the psychological and neurological correlates of near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences. The empirical findings he cites may prove awkward to accommodate under current separationist accounts of these experiences, although proponents of the separationist approach may be able to refine their theories so as to enhance their predictive power in this regard.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences; mind-body models; psychological correlates; cultural variation.

Keith Augustine offers a reasonably broad review of the psychological and neurological correlates of near-death experiences (NDEs) and out-of-body experiences (OBEs). I commend him in this endeavor for resisting the common skeptical construction of these data in pathological terms; currently available evidence certainly does not justify the universal pathologizing either of these experiences or of the people who have them. By the same token Augustine might usefully have analyzed also the empirical findings of studies that have sought to investigate specifically pathological psychological characteristics as potential correlates (for example, Dalton, Zingrone, and Alvarado, 1998–99; Greyson, 2000; Irwin, 2000).

The paper also concedes that the literature on psychological correlates does not actually disconfirm the separationist account of NDEs and OBEs, the hypothesis that mind may actually separate

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from the body during such experiences. Nonetheless Augustine argues strongly that the separationist view does not anticipate these correlations and at best could accommodate them only by contorted rationalization after the fact. This argument is constructive in signaling to proponents of the separationist approach that their theories must be formulated not simply in terms of "something left the physical body" but also in relation to what is held to be happening neurologically and psychologically to the experiencer during this circumstance. Refinement of the separationist approach along these lines is essential to the fundamental scientific requirement of devising a theory with substantial predictive power.

At the same time, in weighing the potency of Augustine's criticism of separationist theories one must also be cognizant of the fact that most of the available evidence attests not to correlates of the *occurrence* of these experiences as such but to correlates of the *report* of the experiences. This point potentially undermines Augustine's rhetorical challenge, "Why would people with certain *psychological* characteristics have a greater ability to leave the body?" Thus, even under a separationist view it could well be argued there may be something psychologically or neurologically distinctive about people who are willing to *acknowledge* having had such an anomalous experience as an NDE or OBE. I certainly would not argue that this alternative is likely to be the most efficacious account of the empirical findings, but neither am I persuaded by Augustine's imputation that the data for psychological correlates are irrevocably inconvenient for the separationist approach.

Augustine's review also provides a useful service in collating studies that suggest the diversity of NDEs both within and across cultures, and his call for further, more extensive investigations of NDEs in nonWestern cultures surely is laudable. Again, however, he seems to be overstating his case in asserting that advocates of the separationist view have a vested interest in seeking to demonstrate that NDEs are fundamentally thematically homogeneous across all experiencers because there can be only one "afterlife reality." Regardless of their ultimate theoretical inferences, most contemporary scientific researchers of NDEs and OBEs strike me as being relatively objective in their efforts to identify the nature and the characteristics of these experiences. I know of no such researcher who denies, for example, that at least some of these experiences show clearly hallucinatory elements, and thus individual NDEs and OBEs are bound to

incorporate some idiosyncratic features. Early researchers may have been mistaken in implying the homogeneity of postmortem existence as depicted in NDEs, but in all fairness the data available at the time were open to such an interpretation. In any event, the active researchers of today seem generally to be receptive to the view that NDEs are not uniform. It is unclear if this means that proponents of the separationist view are conceding the existence of multiple “afterlife realities,” but it entails too great a leap in logic to conclude that, because NDEs show some diversity, all such experiences must be wholly hallucinatory.

References

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