

More Things in Heaven and Earth: A Response to “Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features”

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ABSTRACT: In this response, I offer alternative arguments and conclusions to those Keith Augustine offered regarding discrepancies between some near-death experiencers’ (NDErs’) reports of events they perceived during their NDEs and objective information available about those events. I discuss limitations of anecdotes that leave open alternative interpretations of NDErs’ narratives, assumptions regarding attentional and perceptual processes in the out-of-body state, and assumptions regarding the nature of consciousness. I also describe the method and results of a preliminary analysis of more than 100 cases of out-of-body NDEs that, I believe, provide a more accurate view overall of the phenomenon of apparently nonphysical veridical perception during NDEs.

KEY WORDS: out-of-body experiences; dissociation; embellishment; cross-cultural studies; temporal lobe; materialism; skepticism.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V, lines 166–167

What I have come to call “apparently nonphysical veridical perception” (AVP) has been a longstanding professional interest and focus of mine (Holden, 1988, 1990, 2006). In AVP, a near-death

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experiencer (NDER) reports having perceived events during either the material, physical or the transmaterial, nonphysical aspect of the NDE, events that should have been impossible for the NDER to perceive considering the location and condition of the NDER's physical body, and objective evidence in consensus reality later corroborates the accuracy of the NDER's perceptions.

When I first read Keith Augustine's paper, I was impressed. In only a very few places did I consider his statements to be unfounded, for example, that "the near-death literature is rife with wildly irresponsible claims about NDErs gaining psychic abilities, healing powers, and accurate prophetic visions of the future after their NDEs." In my reading of the works of most near-death researchers, they were merely presenting the self-reported claims of NDErs, and not endorsing the objective accuracy of those claims. Overall, I thought Augustine had compiled a list of persuasive arguments that brought AVP into serious doubt, thereby supporting the hypothesis that reduces consciousness to a product of the brain that dies with the brain, and refuting the hypothesis that consciousness exists independent of the brain and may survive its death.

However, as I have pursued my own analysis of some of the material he presented, I have become less convinced. In this response, I will describe that analysis.

Before I do, however, I want to step back and make one point that I made in a recent presentation (Holden, 2006) and that several other near-death researchers and theoreticians have made before me: that, from a purely scientific perspective, NDEs can never "prove" the ongoing functioning of consciousness after physical death. Scientific proof would involve verifiable and reproducible data, such as questionnaire responses and interview material, from irreversibly dead people. Personally, I have found the irreversibly dead to be highly unreliable participants in systematic research on postmortem consciousness, and no researcher I know has had any better success than I, although Gary Schwartz (Schwartz and Simon, 2002) might take issue with this point. The most that we can ever learn from near-death experiences is the nature of consciousness among, in the most extreme condition, the *reversibly* dead. Even a clear preponderance of evidence favoring the survival over the reductionist hypotheses can only *point to the possibility* of the *ongoing* survival of consciousness after death. Such evidence cannot *bridge* but can only *narrow* the gap in the leap of faith regarding ongoing postmortem consciousness. Belief in life after

death must, as far as I can tell, remain to some degree a matter of inference.

Thus, in my view, both the reductionist and survivalist hypotheses remain worthy of consideration, and the most we NDE scholars can do at this point is evaluate the *weight* of evidence for each. That weight of evidence includes both the presence of data that seem to support one hypothesis over the other and the presence of alternative explanations regarding those data that challenge the viability of that support. These are the two evidentiary lines I pursue in this response.

Out-of-Body Discrepancies

Most of my focus will be on Augustine's list of anecdotes involving apparent discrepancies between NDErs' out-of-body reports of events in the vicinities of their bodies and objective information about those events. In this section, I will discuss three kinds of problems with the analysis he presented: limitations of anecdotes that leave open alternative interpretations of NDErs' narratives, assumptions regarding attentional and perceptual processes in the out-of-body state, and assumptions regarding the nature of consciousness. In the next section, I will describe the method and results of a comprehensive analysis of more than 100 cases of out-of-body NDEs that, I believe, provide a more accurate view overall of the phenomenon of AVP during NDEs.

Possibility of Alternative Interpretations of Anecdotal Narratives

A major limitation of anecdotes is incomplete information and, at least in some cases, narratives that can be interpreted more than one way. For example, in the case Augustine referenced of the World War II veteran's experience under fire by the Heinkels, the interpretation of Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick (1995), that the NDEr's experience was hallucinatory because it did not include the cook's physical remains that were splattered across the back of the NDEr's physical body, is plausible. However, it is based on the assumption that the Heinkels made one acute strike. The NDEr's consciousness purportedly left the material domain and entered the nonmaterial domain of a tunnel with a light; we cannot know how much time passed or what transpired in the material world while the NDEr's consciousness was purportedly elsewhere. We know only that when the NDEr perceived his consciousness to have returned to his body, "the Heinkels were still

firing.” That firing might have been a *subsequent* strike following the *initial* one in which the NDEr’s body rose and fell; hence, the cook’s demise might have occurred not during the initial but during a *subsequent* strike, after the NDEr had “left” the material world. This equally plausible sequence of events would explain why the NDEr did not observe the cook’s demise and how the comrade who had been close at the NDEr’s other side when his consciousness went to the immaterial domain was nowhere in the vicinity when his consciousness returned: the comrade might have left in the interim.

This latter interpretation is substantiated by numerous out-of-body experience (OBE) and NDE researchers’ findings that OBEr’s sense of time passage is frequently distorted (Green, 1968; Greyson, 1983; Irwin, 1985; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982). Susan Blackmore found that OBEr’s were completely unable to specify the duration of their experience (1984, p. 231). Although I found that NDEr’s could sometimes estimate the passage of “earthly” time during their NDEs (Holden, 1989), no study, to my knowledge, has addressed the degree of accuracy of such estimates. Thus, the NDEr in the above case may have been unaware that several minutes of earthly time had passed during the nonmaterial portion of his NDE, minutes during which additional strafes and subsequent injuries and other events may have occurred.

I want to be clear that I am not arguing for the latter interpretation as “the right” one but only as an equally plausible one to the interpretation that Fenwick and Fenwick (1995) made and with which Augustine concurred. My point here is that this case, like many retrospective narratives, is open to alternative interpretations without clarity as to which is accurate and which a misinterpretation.

Assumptions Regarding Attentional and Perceptual Processes in the Out-of-Body State

In the same case cited above, the NDEr saw only his own body and not that of his comrades who were lying right beside him. Other NDEr’s have described selective attention, in some cases their attention being drawn to their own physical body to the exclusion of adjacent material. I would argue that narrowed or selective attention does not constitute evidence of hallucination. My own recent experience serves to illustrate this point.

Early one summer evening, my husband drove us in his car to a restaurant. It was still broad daylight, and I was looking out the

windshield in front of me as we drove along without speaking and with the radio playing softly. A few blocks away from our house, he commented, "I wonder if our neighbors realize their tree is actually lying in the street, constituting a major road hazard." "What tree?" I inquired. He looked at me in disbelief. "Didn't you see the tree? It was lying halfway into the other side of the street." Indeed, I had not seen it, but when we returned from the restaurant, I saw it clearly when my husband had to steer around it to avoid hitting it.

Thus, I was convinced that on our way to the restaurant, it had, indeed, been lying well within my range of vision and, by virtue of its anomalous location, was very deserving of my attention; but I had not seen it. The fact that I did not see it does not mean that I was not actually driving down the street or that my limited perception was hallucinatory. It just means that I was preoccupied with other mental activity.

Such preoccupation fits with many NDErs' descriptions of their selective, and sometimes exclusionary, perception in the out-of-body state. My experience suggests that such selectivity and exclusion, in and of themselves, do not justify a conclusion that the NDEr's perception was hallucinatory.

On a closely related note is Augustine's example of Mrs. Davey's experience of not seeing her physical body. Her experience echoed other NDErs' previous similar reports (Counts, 1983, p. 131; Myers, Austrin, Grisso, and Nickelson, 1983, p. 135; Poynton, 1975, p. 115). Raymond Moody (1975, p. 40) found some NDErs who, in their OBEs, lacked a desire to see their physical bodies, and Margot Grey (1985, p. 37) found some who reportedly had the desire to do so but were unable.

The question is, again, whether incomplete visual perception of the entire "available" scene during an OBE necessarily justifies a conclusion that the experience was hallucinatory. As previously stated, I do not believe it does.

The example involving the "Mayo" seemed clearly to be a hallucination. Penny Sartori (2004, 2006) found in her prospective hospital study that some patients clearly hallucinated on the basis of auditory cues during their resuscitations. I believe two points are worth mentioning in this regard. First, Sartori found that the hallucinations differed in several notable ways from the NDEs, rendering the two experiences qualitatively distinct. Nevertheless, the "Mayo" patient's experience may not manifest such a clear distinction. This possibility

leads to my second point: Even if *some* NDEs are proven to be hallucinatory, logic prevents the conclusion that *all* NDEs are necessarily hallucinatory. That conclusion seems especially premature in light of other points I discuss below.

Giorgio Buzzi's (2002) report of OBE perceptual errors among people with sleep paralysis corresponds to similar previous reports of OBE perceptual errors. Celia Green first observed that induced OBEs tended to contain more perceptual errors than spontaneous ones, and she also observed that the incidence of out-of-body extrasensory perception is "particularly common in connection with ... experiences which occurred at the time of an accident or illness in hospital" (1968, p. 120), an observation suggesting relatively greater accuracy of perception with proximity to actual physical death. To date, this possibility remains untested but, again, as a plausible possibility, argues for the prematurity of any conclusion that *any* near-death out-of-body perceptual errors mean that *all* near-death OBEs are hallucinatory. This line of reasoning applies to several more of the cases Augustine presented that contained perceptual errors.

Assumptions Regarding the Nature of Consciousness

Augustine accurately represented some cases of NDErs who reportedly had not lost consciousness yet, from a vantage point apart from their physical bodies, observed their own coordinated actions. In addition to those Augustine cited, a noteworthy case is that of Yvonne Kason (2000), a physician whose NDE occurred after a plane crash into an icy Canadian lake while her physical body was swimming.

Augustine's perspective on these experiences rested on the assumption he apparently holds, and shares with many other scholars, that consciousness is a unitary phenomenon located in the body. As Pim van Lommel (2004), Bruce Greyson (2003), and Fenwick (2005) have asserted, this assumption is exactly that: a plausible yet unproven assumption for which some evidence of equally plausible alternatives exists. Considerable evidence supports the possibility that consciousness is not the simplistically unified, or physically generated, or necessarily physically located phenomenon that most contemporary humans usually experience it to be (Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, and Greyson, 2006).

Regarding the cases of bodily sensations during NDEs that Augustine found, his reasoning rests on a dualistic assumption: that

consciousness is *always either* in or out of the body. This dualistic thinking may be appropriate when applied to phenomena of consciousness in the gross physical world. It also may be, but is perhaps even less necessarily, appropriate when applied to phenomena of consciousness that may transcend that world. According to quantum physicists, phenomena at subatomic levels do not function by the same “rules” as phenomena at the gross physical level. It is possible that “superatomic” phenomena also function differently, such as being located in two places at once, even when subjective experience is of one location. Again, I am not arguing for the accuracy of the latter conjecture but merely its plausibility, given what is known in current quantum science about variability in the “rules” about how phenomena function at various “levels” of reality.

Regarding Augustine’s citation of cases of NDErs who encountered living persons in their NDEs, the hypothesis that such encounters are the hallucinatory manifestation of the NDErs’ minds has merit. However, as I see it, nothing he presented disproved the possible validity of other hypotheses. For example, near-death perceptual experiences may take a form that the individual’s recently dephysicalized consciousness is most likely to recognize and accept. Especially in the cases of young children who presumably have not yet accumulated a number of caring deceased persons, a transcendent benevolent entity seeking to encourage ongoing physical existence might most effectively appear in the form of a living person known to the NDEr. This hypothesis is compatible with my observation that the living person is almost always an intimate of the NDEr or an authority with whom the NDEr has a caring and trusting relationship. Again, I am not arguing for the validity of these latter hypotheses but, rather, their plausibility in light of the evidence Augustine presented.

Yet another hypothesis rests, again, on the possibility that a living individual’s consciousness may function in more than one “place” at the same time and usually unbeknownst to that person. Again, an assumption about the nature of consciousness beyond the typical sense of exclusive identification with a physical body, and a hypothesis that the “rules” that consciousness seems to follow in the physical body are operational for consciousness in all of its manifestations, should, in my opinion, be acknowledged as assumptions. Also again, I find it hard to imagine what evidence might be available to provide sufficient weight to favor strongly one of these hypotheses over the other.

Analysis of Apparently Nonphysical Veridical Perception in Near-Death OBEs

Augustine responded to Fenwick and Fenwick's (1995, p. 41) quotation about "major discrepancies" between a near-death OBEr's psychological image and consensus reality regarding the scene by stating that the cases he had cited illustrated exactly such discrepancies. However, just as citing only cases involving no perceptual errors can give a false impression of the overall picture of perceptual accuracy during near-death OBEs, so can citing only those involving errors. I became interested in the proportion of erroneous versus accurate accounts of apparently nonphysical veridical perception.

To create this comparison, I used every source I could find that was published up to Moody's seminal 1975 book on NDEs and all systematic studies since 1975 with more than one participant (Holden, 2006). I did not include single case studies or other reports in which the authors had not specified data collection procedures. The complete listing of these cases is the subject of a journal manuscript currently in process.

I found 107 cases of apparently nonphysical veridical perception: 89 involving a material aspect only, that is, perceiving the material, physical world; 14 involving the transmateral aspect only, that is, perceiving nonmaterial, nonphysical phenomena; and 4 involving both aspects. Using the most stringent criterion, that a case would be designated as inaccurate if even one detail of the account were found not to correspond to consensus reality, I found that only 8 percent of all cases involved inaccuracy, including 8 percent of the cases involving material phenomena and 11 percent involving transmateral phenomena. Furthermore, 37 percent of the cases involving apparently completely accurate perception were determined to be accurate by independent, objective sources such as the follow-up investigation of the researchers reporting the cases, including 38 percent of the cases involving material phenomena and 33 percent involving transmateral phenomena.

It is possible that authors are more likely to report cases involving accuracy and that they are more likely to discount or dismiss those involving inaccuracy, thereby overreporting the former and underreporting the latter, a phenomenon known in research as the "file drawer effect"; however, for lack of objective data, this matter must, for now, remain in the domain of conjecture. I acknowledge these and other limitations of my research methodology but, in the current context, perceive my method to be equivalent to Augustine's.

To Augustine's credit, I found only one erroneous case (Cook, Greyson, and Stevenson, 1998) that he had not cited in his paper. What struck me was the robustness of my results that, among all reports I could find, those containing even a single error represented a small minority, and they were strongly outweighed by the incidence of reports that appeared completely accurate and had been objectively corroborated.

These results certainly support Augustine's contention that some NDEs contain perceptual errors. However, as I have argued, they do not justify the conclusion that all of those experiences were hallucinatory. Furthermore, they certainly call into question how an allegedly hallucinatory phenomenon could produce only 8 percent of cases with any apparent error whatsoever and 37 percent of cases with apparently completely accurate content that had been objectively verified. In short, Augustine's assertions and conclusions rest on a questionable interpretation of a highly selective and exclusive sample. Using a more complete sample and the application of logic regarding the plausibility of various interpretations, the weight of anecdotal evidence appears to me to contradict what Augustine has asserted.

Conclusion

In the end, I am grateful to Augustine for inspiring me to conduct the literature review I just described. Prior to this initiative, the extent to which, in the professional literature, anecdotal descriptions of out-of-body perception corresponded to consensus reality was unknown. Researchers in the field now have a more solid base from which to proceed in the ongoing debate of the "reality" of near-death experiences. It is my hope that that debate will proceed with more explicit statement of the models of reality that underlie various arguments, and that it will move substantially toward resolution by the results of hospital research on veridical perception during NDEs.

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