

# Commentary on Keith Augustine's Paper

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**ABSTRACT:** Keith Augustine claims that near-death experiences are actually hallucinations. However, this proposition has several serious problems that I explicate in this commentary.

**KEY WORDS:** near-death experiences; hallucinations; binary thinking; bi-location; life review; aftereffects.

The primary assertion of Keith Augustine's article is that near-death experiences (NDEs) are "brain-generated hallucinations." Yet nowhere in this article does Augustine define "hallucination." Hence the reader is left not knowing how the author precisely defines the term, which is crucial in light of his thesis. Not providing a definition leaves the reader unable to compare and contrast Augustine's definition with his many points on hallucinations.

Throughout his article, Augustine engages in binary thinking: either NDEs occur outside the body or NDEs are hallucinations created in the brain. Augustine categorically rejects the former and dogmatically accepts the latter without ever considering any other possible explanations for the cases he cites. For example, let me provide three other possible explanations.

First, it may be that most NDEs occur outside the body *and* that some experiences misidentified as "NDEs" are indeed hallucinations, such as in the case of the person who saw the torso of a horse with the head of a man.

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Second, it may be that some cases begin with an NDE and are then followed with a hallucination, such as the woman who “returned to her body” (the NDE) and then “opened her eyes and saw that ‘there was steam coming off of’” her hands (the hallucination).

Third, it may be that living persons seen during a small minority of NDEs, an issue that Augustine discusses in copious detail, might be explained by the construct of bilocation (Alvarado, 2005), which Augustine never mentions, or by some yet to be discovered construct.

Relying on a binary argument for NDEs seems a gross oversimplification for a phenomenon that is so patently complex. Yet no other explanation besides hallucinations is ever considered in Augustine’s paper.

Augustine also makes the claim that the idiosyncratic features of NDEs prove that NDEs are hallucinations. He points out that variations from the prototypic NDE have been reported routinely. However, just because variations exist, it does not necessarily follow that these variations are by that fact itself hallucinations. In fact, if NDEs were hallucinations, I would expect to see many more varied and diverse variations similar to the nearly infinite number of idiosyncratic features reported in dreams.

In addition, Augustine frequently argues his case by citing the exception or the rare or infrequent finding and then generalizing to his proposition. For example, he cites a woman who reported encountering Elvis Presley during her NDE. A reporting of Elvis is extremely rare in the NDE literature, while reporting seeing deceased loved ones is far more common. Citing the exceptions does not, in and of itself, prove the proposition.

Furthermore, Augustine assumes that the NDE life review is due *only* to “random memories” because most life reviews do not conform to the panoramic life review stereotype. However, he never entertains any other assumptions, including the one that the life review might be composed of *selected* rather than *random* memories intended to help the experiencer in some fashion. The latter assumption is precisely what I have found in cases in which a life review has occurred (Serdahely, 1995). Once again, Augustine never explores nor rules out alternative explanations.

Lastly, Augustine never discussed the aftereffects of NDEs. Over the last 30 years of NDE research, the aftereffects of both positive and distressing NDEs have, by and large, been found to have a salutary effect on experiencers, while the same cannot be said for those who

have suffered actual hallucinations, such as from mental disorders, prescribed medications, or illicit drugs. If NDEs are truly hallucinations, then Augustine needs to reconcile this disparity.

### References

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