Journal of Near-Death Studies

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JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such events, and on such related phenomena as out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, the experiences of dying persons, comparable experiences occurring under other circumstances, and the implications of such phenomena for our understanding of human consciousness and its relation to the life and death processes. The Journal is committed to an unbiased exploration of these issues, and specifically welcomes a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations that are grounded in empirical observation or research.

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Editor’s Foreword

This issue of the Journal contains the second of a three-part dialogue between philosopher Keith Augustine and various commentators on the empirical evidence bearing on the interpretation of near-death experiences (NDEs). Many scientists who have argued in these pages for a particular interpretation of NDEs have done so from a theoretical perspective, proceeding from assumptions (for example, about the neural basis of consciousness) to conclusions about the interpretation of NDEs in light of those assumptions. That approach yielded arguments that were more philosophical than scientific. By contrast, Augustine, although trained as a philosopher, starts with empirical features of NDE accounts themselves and builds a case up from the evidence rather than down from principles. Perhaps the apparent paradox of scientists arguing from philosophical assumptions and a philosopher arguing from empirical evidence reflects the fact that neither the scientific nor the philosophic approach to NDEs by itself yields a satisfactory understanding.

In the last issue of the Journal, Augustine reviewed the evidence for and against paranormal perception during NDEs, with commentaries from myself, social worker Kimberly Clark Sharp, psychologist Charles Tart, and cardiologist Michael Sabom. In this issue, Augustine addresses features in NDEs that suggest they are hallucinatory in origin. We follow his lead article with commentaries by counseling educator Janice Holden, neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick, and hospital chaplain William Serdahely, and with Augustine's response to these commentaries.

These data-based arguments for and against various interpretations of NDEs suggest that no single explanation, at least as it has been articulated so far, accounts satisfactorily for all the data. We undertook this dialogue with the hope of questioning the assumptions of all our explanatory models and of stimulating debate regarding various interpretations of NDEs in the light of the empirical evidence. This debate, we hope, will lead researchers of all persuasions to question their assumptions, to develop more sophisticated formulations of their hypotheses, and to design better research that will test those hypotheses more directly. As a step in that direction, we
conclude this issue of the Journal with five letters to the editor, in response to the previous issue's dialogue on whether paranormal perception occurs in NDEs, from myself, psychologist Kenneth Ring, psychiatrist Raymond Moody, retired law professor Stephen Cooper, and near-death experiencer and therapist Barbara Whitfield.

The next issue of the Journal will include Augustine's review of the roles of cultural influences and temporal lobe phenomenology in the interpretation of NDEs, again accompanied by commentaries by selected scholars and Augustine's response. Again, I encourage readers to consider these arguments carefully and to share their responses for publication as letters in the Journal.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features

Keith Augustine, M.A.
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ABSTRACT: Though little systematic attention has been given to near-death experiences (NDEs) with clear or suggestive hallucinatory features, reports of such experiences strongly imply that NDEs are not glimpses of an afterlife. This paper, Part II of a critique of survivalist interpretations of NDEs, surveys NDEs incorporating out-of-body discrepancies, bodily sensations, encounters with living persons and fictional characters, random or insignificant memories, returns from a point of no return, hallucinatory imagery, and unfulfilled predictions. Though attempts to accommodate hallucinatory NDEs within a survivalist framework are possible, they signal a failure to take the empirical evidence against a survivalist interpretation of NDEs seriously.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences; out-of-body experiences; hallucinatory imagery; survival of death; life review; prophetic NDEs.

Though investigators engaged in survival research rarely acknowledge it, a survivalist interpretation of the phenomena that they study, including near-death experiences (NDEs), is severely undermined by the overwhelming evidence for the dependence of consciousness on the brain (Beyerstein, 1991; Churchland, 1984; Edwards, 1992; Lamont, 1990; Russell, 1957). But even if we disregard the positive neurophysiological evidence against any form of dualistic survival, there remains strong evidence from reports of NDEs themselves that NDEs are not glimpses of an afterlife. This evidence includes discrepancies between what is seen in the out-of-body component of an NDE and what is
actually happening in the physical world at the time; bodily sensations incorporated into NDEs; encounters with living persons during NDEs; the typical randomness or insignificance of retrieved memories during near-death life reviews; NDErs who explicitly or implicitly decided not to return to life when given a choice, but whose lives were restored anyway; hallucinatory imagery in NDEs, including encounters with mythological creatures and fictional characters; and the failure of predictions among NDErs who report seeing future events during NDEs or gaining psychic abilities after them.

The cases cited in this essay show that many NDEs are hallucinations. NDEs incorporating false descriptions of the physical environment have been found not only by different near-death researchers, but by researchers searching for evidence that NDEs are not hallucinatory. This motivation among researchers makes it impossible to estimate the prevalence of NDEs with clearly hallucinatory features. As Bruce Greyson pointed out, the file-drawer problem is a likely factor here: NDE accounts with clearly hallucinatory features may end up filed away indefinitely, while only more dramatic accounts are deemed fit for publication (Greyson, 2000). Similarly, NDEs with obviously hallucinatory traits seem particularly likely to be underreported by NDErs themselves, given the disparity between how real the NDE felt at the time and the realization that it could not possibly reflect reality if, for instance, the NDER communicated with his or her still-living mother in an ostensibly transcendental realm. Given that many NDEs are already known to be hallucinations, it is likely that other NDEs lacking overt hallucinatory features are nevertheless hallucinations as well.

**Out-of-Body Discrepancies**

Some NDErs report that they saw things while ostensibly out of their bodies that did not correspond to what was actually happening in the physical world. Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick reported the NDE of a World War II veteran whose unit came under attack from aerial bombers:

The battery cook (a devout Muslim) came running in panic toward me.... He lay down, touching my right elbow, and calmed himself.... As I looked up one of the Heinkel pilots executed a tight turn over the rim of the wadi and lined up on us.... I flattened out like a lizard on the sand.... 
Instantly I was enveloped in a cloud of beautiful purple light and a mighty roaring sound ... and then I was floating, as if in a flying dream, and watching my body, some dozen feet below, lifting off the sand and flopping back, face downwards. I only saw my own body. I was quite unaware of the two Sudanese lying beside me.... And then I was gliding horizontally in a tunnel ... rather like a giant, round, luminous culvert, constructed of translucent silken material, and at the end of a circle of bright, pale primrose light. I was enjoying the sensation of weightless, painless flight.... I had a feeling it would be more interesting when I reached the light.

... I became aware that I was being 'sucked' back through the tunnel and then into a body that felt rather unpleasantly 'heavy', that the sun was burning my back.... [T]he Heinkels were still firing at us and a cannon shell knocked a saucepan off the truck above my head. This troubled me not at all; indeed I seemed to have lost all sense of fear, but my back felt wet and slimy so I looked over my shoulder to investigate the cause. My back was a red mass of blood and raw flesh.... Then I realised that I was looking at all that remained of Osman the cook, who had been lying beside me. I noticed also that my Bren gunner, who had been close to my other side, had disappeared. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 43–44)

The Fenwicks conceded that it was “quite clear” that this NDEr was not actually observing the physical world when he saw his body from above: “He was unaware of the cook, who had been lying beside him – and was now not simply lying beside him but spread all over his back, where he could hardly have failed to be seen” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 44). Plainly this NDE must have been a brain-generated hallucination.

The Fenwicks also cited the case of a woman who had three spontaneous out-of-body experiences (OBEs) during her second pregnancy. In her third OBE, Mrs. Davey found it difficult to “return to her body” because, “although she was up on the ceiling, she did not see her body” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 41).

In a case from the “Evergreen Study,” conducted at Evergreen State College in Washington, a woman who had had a ruptured Fallopian tube due to an ectopic pregnancy reported seeing things that did not exist in the room while she was ostensibly out of her body:

I saw this little table over the operating table. You know, those little round trays like in a dental office where they have their instruments and all?? I saw a little tray like that with a letter on it addressed (from a relative by marriage she had not met). (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 109)

This woman related her NDE to her sister-in-law, a nurse who was called into the operating room at the time of the NDE. But the nurse
was adamant that there was neither a letter nor a round table in the operating room.

However, the authors noted that there was a small rectangular table for holding instruments called a "Mayo" in the room, and quickly deduced a probable scenario for why this experience took the form that it did: "Notice [Mayo] sounds like 'mail.' She may have heard someone call the tray by name (since hearing is reportedly the final sense to fail at death) and connected it with 'mail'" (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 109). Moreover, the letter seen out-of-body was addressed from the nurse's brother-in-law, which suggests that she might have heard the nurse's name and incorporated that information into her experience as well. What is particularly interesting about this case is that it seems to confirm that out-of-body imagery in NDEs is sometimes obtained directly from scraps of conversation rather than from some paranormal source.

In a study of 264 subjects with sleep paralysis, Giorgio Buzzi and Fabio Cirignotta found that about 11 percent of their subjects (28 people) "viewed themselves lying on the bed, generally from a location above the bed" (Buzzi, 2002, p. 2116). However, these OBEs often included false perceptions of the physical environment:

I invited these people to do the following simple reality tests: trying to identify objects put in unusual places; checking the time on the clock; and focusing on a detail of the scene, and comparing it with reality.

I received a feedback [sic] from five individuals (unpublished data). Objects put in unusual places (eg, on top of the wardrobe) were never identified during out-of-body experiences. Clocks also proved to be unreliable: a woman with nightly episodes of sleep paralysis had two out-of-body experiences in the same night, and for each the clock indicated an impossible time.... Finally, in all cases but one, some slight but important differences in the details were noted: "I looked at 'me' sleeping peacefully in the bed while I wandered about. Trouble is the 'me' in the bed was wearing long johns.... I have never worn such a thing." (Buzzi, 2000, pp. 2116–2117)

Buzzi concluded that his subjects' out-of-body imagery must have been derived from memory and imagination rather than their surroundings at the time (2000, p. 2117).

Melvin Morse reported a near-death OBE where a young girl saw a teacher who was not present in the room and then encountered ostensibly transcendental doctors:

[O]ne child ... could see her own body as doctors wearing green masks tried to start an IV. Then she saw her living teacher and classmates
at her bedside, comforting her and singing to her (her teacher did not
visit her in the hospital). Finally, three tall beings dressed in white
that she identified as doctors asked her to push a button on a box at
her bedside, telling her that if she pressed the green button she could
go with them, but she would never see her family again. She pressed
the red button and regained consciousness. (Morse, 1994, pp. 68–69)

Morse, using open-ended questions, also found a case in which
a child who was clinically dead reported that while she was “above her
body” looking down, “her mother’s nose appeared flattened and
distorted ‘like a pig monster’” (Morse, 1994, p. 67).

The Fenwicks recounted an NDE where the NDEr “observed”
a procedure that never took place during her heart bypass operation:

[S]he left her body and watched her heart lying beside her body,
bumping away with what looked like ribbons coming from it to hands.
In fact, this is not what happens in a heart bypass operation, as the
heart is left within the chest and is never taken outside the body.
(Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 193)

The Fenwicks noted that ribbons are indeed tied to arteries during
an operation of this sort, attributing the false perception to mis-
identification. However, it is difficult to see how a person truly out-of-
body with vivid perceptual capabilities could confuse arteries,
ribboned or not, with a beating heart lying next to her outside of her
body.

Other NDErs have reported seeing friends out-of-body with them
who are, in reality, still alive and normally conscious. The Evergreen
Study included a clearly hallucinatory NDE after a major car accident:

Well, then I remember, not physical bodies but like holding hands,
the two of us, up above the trees. It was a cloudy day, a little bit of
clouds. And thinking here we go, we’re going off into eternity ... and
then bingo, I snapped my eyes open and I looked over and he was
staring at me. (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 110; ellipsis
original)

The authors of that study added: “In this incident a woman had lost
consciousness but her male companion had not. In the experience, she
perceived the two of them in an out-of-body state, yet her friend never

OBErs who do not lose consciousness before their experiences often
report watching their bodies continue to perform coordinated actions,
as if they were still in control of their bodies, while nevertheless
apparently viewing them from above. Recalling an OBE while on
patrol for the first time, chasing an armed suspect, a police officer reported:

I promptly went out of my body and up into the air maybe 20 feet above the scene. I remained there, extremely calm, while I watched the entire procedure — including watching myself do exactly what I had been trained to do. (Alvarado, 2000, p. 183)

After the suspect had been restrained and the danger was over, the officer returned to normal consciousness. Another OBEr, who had been running for over 12 miles training for a marathon, reported:

I felt as if something was leaving my body, and although I was still running along looking at the scenery, I was looking at myself running as well. (Alvarado, 2000, p. 184)

This ability to “hover” above the scene and continue to function as if “in” the body simultaneously strongly suggests the hallucinatory nature of these experiences. In some sleep disorders, for instance, subjects are able to exhibit “directed” behavior, such as sleepwalking and sleep eating, even though they are evidently not normally conscious. Taking on an extraordinary new perspective while functioning normally otherwise makes much more sense if OBEs are occurring “in” the body all along, rather than in some remote discarnate entity.

Finally, Harvey Irwin noted other intriguing examples of hallucinatory OBEs, such as reports of “seeing the physical body as if from a height of 30 feet (9 meters) or more ... [when] this would have entailed seeing through the roof and the ceiling of the house” (Irwin, 1999, p. 223). If something leaves the body and perceives the physical world during OBEs, he asked, “why do some OBErs report distortions in reality (e.g., [nonexistent] bars on the bedroom window), and how are some experients able to manipulate the nature and existence of objects in the out-of-body environment by an effort of will?” (p. 233).

As the Fenwicks pointed out, if OBEs and NDEs are hallucinations, we should expect there to be major discrepancies between the psychological image — what the person sees from up there on the ceiling, which will be constructed by the brain entirely from memory; and the real image — what is actually going on at ground level. Mrs Ivy Davey, for example, did not see her body, although her body was clearly there. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 41)

As we have seen, discrepancies between what was seen out-of-body and what was actually happening in the physical world are found in spontaneous OBEs, in NDEs where a real or perceived threat of
imminent harm triggers an OBE, and in NDEs that include an OBE along with other NDE components, such as a tunnel and light.

**Bodily Sensations**

In other NDEs, bodily sensations are incorporated into an experience that, on the survivalist interpretation, is assumed to take place in a soul separated from the normal physical body. The Fenwicks reported an NDE during a hernia operation where a bodily sensation was felt well into the experience:

> I left my body and went walking towards a very bright white light which was at the end of a long tunnel. At the same time I could see three figures standing at the end of the bed and I kept wishing they would go away so that I could go to the light, which to me was lovely and warm. Just as I neared the light I felt a stab in my thigh. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 91)

With that stab in the thigh this NDE ended. But if NDEs were literally journeys of one's "spiritual double" traveling through the physical world, free of the normal physical body, and entering a tunnel into the afterlife, one should not have any sensations arising from the normal physical body during any part of an NDE.

Also notice that although this NDEr reported leaving his body, "walking" toward a bright light at the end of a long tunnel, and finally getting close to the light, when he felt a sharp pain the experience immediately ended. He did not report "backtracking" through the tunnel and back into his body. At one moment he was close to entering the light; at the next he was back in his bed. If it was necessary for this person's double to "travel" to get from his body to the light, would he not have to travel back from the light to return to his body? The lack of a "return trip" also implies a hallucination that was suddenly interrupted by a sharp pain.

The Fenwicks provided us another case where bodily sensations were incorporated into an NDE. A Royal Navy sailor leaning against some chains was accidentally electrocuted when plugging in a badly connected portable fan. After hearing himself screaming, seeing flashes of electricity "licking around" his body, and hearing a roar, his body laid motionless on the ship's deck, but his mind was racing:

> I seemed to be floating in a beautiful velvet-like darkness, feeling completely at peace away from the frightening flashes. I seemed to be going through a tunnel angled slightly downwards when suddenly I
found myself standing in a field of beautiful yellow corn.... I felt comfortable and appeared to be wearing a blue gown.

Suddenly, on the distant horizon I saw something that appeared to be a train, in fact a blue train. At first ... I hadn't noticed gentle music in the background plus the quiet rumble of the blue train.

For some unexplained reason I appeared to get closer to the train, which stopped in front of where I was standing. I could see people in the carriages beckoning to me and telling me to climb aboard....

Then, again almost as if by magic, I was in the train compartment with the faceless passengers, who, I noticed, seemed to be dressed in the same way as I was....

Then it began to happen. I felt a pressure on my shoulders and a strange sensation as I began to rise. It didn't make any sense – I felt I was being pushed down yet I was going up....

The speed of my ascent became faster and I felt a feeling of anger mixed with regret. I didn't want to go back. Suddenly I came to and was lying face down on the deck of the frigate passageway. My colleague was pushing on my shoulder blades in the old Holger-Nielson method of resuscitation. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 154-55)

This NDEr was baffled as to why he felt being pushed down when he was rising up out of a train. But his bodily sensation makes perfect sense if NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations which sometimes incorporate information from the senses, just as a person may dream about going to the bathroom when sleeping with a full bladder.

Remarkably, Morse mentioned a childhood NDE that occurred while the child was conscious and talking to nurses – but a person relating an experience could hardly be supposed simultaneously to be leaving his normal physical body and traveling elsewhere:

Boston Children's Hospital described a total of 13 pediatric NDEs. Seven of these experiences were told to nurses immediately after recovery, and one was reported during the experience. (Morse, 1994, p. 70; italics added)

Living Persons

Some NDErs report seeing living persons while in an ostensibly transcendental realm. The Fenwicks reported the case of a woman who encountered her live-in partner after a hysterectomy had caused heavy bleeding and an NDE:

I was outside my body floating overhead. I saw doctors and nurses rushing me along the corridor....
I recall floating in a very bright tunnel. Everything seemed so calm and peaceful. At the end of the tunnel [was] my father, who had died three years previously....

As I said, the feeling of calmness was indescribable. I heard music.... I heard someone calling me. I turned and saw his face at the other end of the tunnel. It was Fabio [the man she was living with]....

Like most people I had a tremendous fear of death. Now ... I have lost that fear of the unknown because I truly believe I have had a preview. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 32–33)

But Fabio was alive and normally conscious during his girlfriend’s NDE, so he could not have possibly really been calling her inside a tunnel to another world. Clearly we can encounter both the living and the dead in NDEs, just as we can in dreams. This implies that it would be just as irrational to suggest that real people inhabit the NDE world as it would be to suggest that they inhabit the world you encounter in your dreams.

William Serdahely reported a case of a woman whose NDE was triggered by a sexual assault: “One of the female NDErs saw a living female friend in her ‘windsock’ tunnel. The friend told her to go back to her body” (Serdahely, 1995, p. 189). Serdahely elaborated, offering a psychological explanation for what triggered this NDE:

The NDE or OBE is tailored specifically to fit the needs of that person. For example, the woman who was sexually assaulted was able to dissociate from the trauma by having an out-of-body experience. The [living] friend she encountered in her experience was a “big woman” who worked for the sheriff’s department that had jurisdiction for the county in which the assault took place and appeared to the NDER in her sheriff’s uniform. (Serdahely, 1995, p. 194)

Melvin Morse reported the following NDE of a young Japanese boy:

A 4-year-old boy, who had fulminant pneumonia, described floating out of his body and coming to the edge of a river. His [living] playmates were on the other side, urging him to go back. There was a misty bright light on the other side. (Morse, 1994, p. 70)

The Fenwicks cited an intriguing case that lacked feelings of peace. When Richard Hands was 9 years old, his appendix was removed but complications led to an NDE:

The first [image I recall] is of looking down on a body on the operating table, being fussed over by green-clad surgeons and nurses. I couldn’t actually see the face – someone was in the way – but I assume it was mine. This image is particularly vivid, and despite its goriness is not associated with any pain or distress, even in recall.
The second image is of a blackness with a pinpoint of light far off in the distance. I feel drawn towards the light, but there is a terror and a feeling that I do not wish it to pull me towards it. My [living] mother is with me in this scene, trying to pull me back from the light. There is also a wind rushing past, towards the light. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 173)

Clearly his mother was not actually present in this “blackness” with light, since she was alive and normally conscious at the time. Interestingly, Hands never attached any spiritual significance to his NDE. Initially he thought that it might have been a reaction to anesthetics, but when interviewed was inclined to see it as an unrelated physiological event.

In the Fenwicks’ sample only 50 percent of those who had NDEs when they were between 3 and 9 years old reported becoming more religious afterward; by 16 or older that figure rose significantly to 90 percent (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997). Given that adults have more complex religious concepts than children, it is not surprising that adults are more likely to attach religious significance to an unusual experience that occurred when they narrowly escaped death.

Susan Blackmore reported that an NDEr who was suffocating after an operation encountered the medical staff trying to resuscitate her in a light at the end of a tunnel:

[I was] struggling along a dark tunnel in which someone was trying to hold me back. The figures in the bright light at the end of the tunnel proved to be the ward sister and her staff trying to resuscitate me. (Blackmore, 1993, p. 227)

As Blackmore pointed out, cases like these do not “make much sense if you think the beings seen in NDEs are ‘real entities’ inhabiting another realm” (Blackmore, 1993, p. 227). But they make perfect sense if NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations. The fact that living persons are occasionally encountered in NDEs severely undermines survivalist interpretations of NDEs.

Morse and others have found that encounters with living persons were more commonly reported in childhood NDEs than in the NDEs of adults. This is not surprising given that children generally know far fewer people who have died than adults do. While NDEs where living persons are encountered are relatively rare, apparently they still make up a significant fraction of all reported NDEs: 14 percent of the Fenwicks’ 350-person sample of NDErs encountered living persons in their NDEs (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 79).
Random Memories

Another feature which suggests that NDEs are not perceptions of an external afterlife reality is the random nature of the life review. Raymond Moody's artificial composite of NDEs portrayed the life review as a personally significant "learning experience" where one is judged either by other beings or by oneself for past wrongdoings. While this characterization does fit some cases – and indeed is found even in people who face life-threatening danger but never really come close to death (Blackmore, 1993, p. 183) – the frequency of "learning experience"-type life reviews appears to have been exaggerated. At least one researcher sympathetic to the survival hypothesis has found that most near-death life reviews do not fit this pattern.

Life reviews are generally rare in NDEs. The Fenwicks found recalled memories in only 15 percent of their 350-person sample. A similar incidence (13 percent) of life reviews among NDErs was subsequently found in a more representative prospective study of NDE incidence and transformation (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001). Thus, in the Fenwicks' sample the incidence of recalled memories is comparable to that of encounters with living persons. Their 350-person survey is one of the largest retrospective surveys of NDEs ever compiled. Their findings contrast sharply with portrayals of the life review popularized by Moody and others.

For example, the Fenwicks found only one person in their sample who had recalled a "learning experience"-type life review during his NDE. Here is the sort of life review typically found in their sample:

The seconds that went by as the car was turning [over] for me seemed an eternity.... Then, suddenly, I became detached from my worldly body – I was seeing my life flash before me, recalling my family, friends, the man on the bus, the lady in the shop – and feeling confused but happy. At this time I was in a tunnel-like black space. Just beyond a light was glowing invitingly. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 57)

This is hardly the "morality play" life review we have come to expect from the popularized picture of NDEs. Blackmore acknowledged that a physiological explanation of such a coherent life review would appear implausible to many:

[In NDEs] there is generalized amplification of [brain] activity and so lots of memories can be invoked all at once or in sequence. You might then object that such generalized activity could only produce random
memories and not the connected and meaningful experiences of the near-death life review. (1993, p. 216)

But, remarkably, the Fenwicks almost always found random memories in their sample:

Although 15 per cent of the people we questioned said that scenes or memories from the past came back to them during the [near-death] experience, most of these were simply fragments of memory, sometimes quite random memories. Only about half said the memories that came back to them were 'significant'. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 116)

The Fenwicks concluded that near-death life reviews “are not necessarily particularly significant memories. They seem just as likely to be random moments plucked haphazardly from memory, trivial events or people or places” (1997, p. 118).

These findings imply that the memories recalled during NDEs are barely distinguishable from the flashbacks of temporal lobe seizures. While this is not flatly inconsistent with a survivalist interpretation, it is readily explicable on physiological models of the NDE, making a survivalist interpretation unnecessary.

Threshold Crossings: Returns From the Point of No Return

Some NDErs encounter a barrier or divide felt to be a threshold between life and death: a fence, gate, door, river, line, mist, even “the light at the end of the tunnel” itself. Kenneth Ring even found a case where a woman ferried across the River Styx during her NDE (Zaleski, 1987). Those NDErs who encounter a threshold typically state that they were told or somehow knew that if they crossed it, they could not turn back and return to life. This prompted the Fenwicks to ask: “If the whole [near-death] experience is psychological, then why hasn’t someone crossed the barrier and come back to tell the tale?” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 111).

The Fenwicks speculated that the answer may be that we cannot psychologically form an image of our own deaths. This may be why we never “die” in our dreams, for example. But the explanation that NDEs are literally glimpses of an afterlife is flatly inconsistent with features of some of the very NDEs that the Fenwicks have found.
A better answer than either of these possibilities is that some NDErs have indeed crossed a divide thought to be a point of no return, or otherwise decided to stay in the “NDE world” when given a choice, and yet still returned to life. An NDEr cited earlier was beckoned to board a blue train “into the afterlife” and did so, though his experience ended with the sensation of being resuscitated. Did not boarding the blue train seem a lot like crossing a “point of no return”? But if this NDEr had really crossed a final threshold in another realm, why did he eventually “come to” on the deck of the frigate?

The NDEr reported that the passengers had beckoned him to board the train, implying that doing so would be a decision to cross a point of no return. Moody, for example, reported the case of a nurse giving birth for the first time who found herself sailing across a large waterway being beckoned by dead relatives to join them. The nurse reported immediately telling them that she was not ready to die, implying that she automatically knew that crossing over to the shore would be going past a point of no return (Blackmore, 1993). In the Fenwicks’ case the NDEr actually did board the blue train—he did appear to cross a point of no return—yet still returned to tell the tale anyway.

This NDEr did not describe boarding the train explicitly as crossing a point of no return, but it certainly seemed reminiscent of the one-way trip across a river felt to be a point of no return described by other NDErs. Ultimately, the Fenwicks conceded this:

David Whitmarsh meets no barrier. When people on the train beckoned to him he was actually able to go aboard. Nothing seemed to be holding him back or preventing him from boarding. One feels that David was well on his way [to the afterlife?] when resuscitation intervened. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 155–156; bracketed comment added)

But if his double had already detached from his normal physical body and was well on its way to “the other side,” how could he have felt his resuscitation, and how could it have brought him back into his body? We would expect these features if he had been “inside” his body the entire time and bodily sensations eventually became part of his hallucination.

Serdahely reported a case where an NDEr explicitly said that she crossed a barrier between life and death and yet still was restored to life:

One of the three [NDErs told to return] was instructed apparently by a deceased grandmother not to cross a line in front of her. The OBEr did cross the line, at which point the grandmother said, “I told you
not to cross the line.” The older woman “got right in [her] face” and said, “You are to go back now!” (Serdahely, 1995, p. 191)

After a near-death life review in 1978, Tom Sawyer both was given a choice and decided not to return to life, but nevertheless recovered:

I was given a choice. I could return to normal life or become part of this light.... I chose to stay and become part of that light. I then had the feeling of going through the tunnel in reverse, and I slammed back down into my body. (Harris and Bascom, 1990, p. 129)

If NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations, nothing would seem to prevent experiences where NDErs decide not to return to life, or cross a “point of no return,” but find themselves restored to life anyway; and in these cases we find exactly that.

Who Makes the Decision to Return?

Blackmore was impressed by the fact that so many NDErs were uncertain about just who made the decision for them to return to life (Blackmore, 1993). Moody also found that many of his subjects were unsure of how or why they returned to life:

The accounts I have collected present an extremely varied picture when it comes to the question of the mode of return to physical life and of why the return took place. Most simply say that they do not know how or why they returned, or that they can only make guesses. (Moody, 1975, p. 79)

Many NDErs appear to be reaching, after the fact, for some sort of explanation for why they returned to life, when none was apparent in the NDE itself. Some NDErs in the Fenwicks’ sample openly wondered why they were “sent back,” for they found no reason to continue living; after their NDEs they continued working menial jobs, for instance. Blackmore’s conclusion about the “decision to return” is poignant here:

So who does make the choice to return to life? ... There does not seem to be a clear answer. It could be that there are genuine choices available to some NDErs and not others; that some can really make a choice and others have it made for them.... It seems more likely that they are all trying, and with difficulty, to describe something that is not either their own choice, nor someone else’s choice. (Blackmore, 1993, p. 232)

When you wake up from a dream, do you suppose that one of your dream characters decided to wake you up? Or that you woke up
because in this dream world you made a decision to wake up? Or does your dream end simply because your brain is no longer in the right electrochemical state for the dream to continue? I think this last explanation is the best one, even in lucid dreams where the dreamer has some control over dream content. Occasionally, a dream character may even pronounce that a dream is coming to an end, or a lucid dreamer may seem to have the ability to end a dream. In such cases, it is likely that a physiological change, from an external sound to a change in one’s wakefulness, causes dream content to coincide with actually waking up.

A similar explanation seems plausible for the so-called “decision to return” in near-death experiences. In the study by Pim van Lommel and his colleagues, only 5 out of the total 62 NDErs (8 percent) even reported encountering a border between life and death; this was the least common element found (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001). Most NDErs simply find themselves “back in their bodies” with no idea of how they transitioned back to normal consciousness, just as we would expect if the physiological conditions necessary to maintain hallucinations had disappeared.

**Hallucinatory Imagery**

One feature rarely noted in popular NDE accounts is hallucinatory imagery. When accidentally electrocuted, one man encountered a *mythological creature* during an NDE:

> The next thing I remember, there was a cloud and a male, related to Jesus, 'cause he looked like the pictures of Jesus. He was in this chariot type [thing] ... the torso was a horse, everything above the torso was a man with wings; sort of like a Pegasus except instead of a horse’s head it was a man ... and he was beckoning to me ... and I kept backing up.... I remember telling him no, I had too many things to do and there was no way I could go now. Then the clouds sort of filled over and as it filled over I hear Him say, “O.K.!” (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 116; ellipses original)

Perhaps a centaur with the head of a man resembling depictions of Jesus and the body of a winged horse is waiting to guide us into the afterlife in a chariot; but the fantastic quality of this and other NDEs strongly suggests that NDEs are hallucinations.

In one of the Fenwicks’ cases a hospitalized man had an OBE following a heart attack where he was flying as a “junior member” in
a formation of swans he had seen earlier; while flying, the landscape appeared to regress quickly backward in time. He “saw” a cathedral being built and men in medieval garb sailing on large lakes (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997). Such fantastic imagery suggests that this NDE was a hallucination; it seems absurd to ask whether swans were really flying with him backward in time.

In his 1982 study *Recollections of Death*, Michael Sabom found a rather bizarre case which also suggested that NDEs are hallucinations. Sabom’s subject I-21 reported feelings of peace, bodily separation, traveling through a dark void, and encountering a light after a heart attack, but also encountered “four unknown nurses” who interrogated him “about possible ‘subversive activities’” (Sabom, 1982, p. 210, Table XIII).

Notably, Sabom also found encounters with living persons during NDEs. In case I-8, a woman encountered her living children in her NDE but did not communicate with them, and case I-24 included an encounter with a living granddaughter (Sabom, 1982).

From time to time Western reports describe the NDE world in uncomfortably familiar terms, mirroring the transient technological advances of present-day living. After being resuscitated from a heart attack, for instance, one woman reported “watching details of her life being noted down ... [by] a computer” (Zaleski, 1987, p. 129). Serdahely also found cases of rather prosaic medical imagery seen in NDEs:

One male respondent said he traveled through a tunnel on a cart or gurney on his way to being greeted by his deceased father, godfather, and coworkers, all of whom beckoned him into the light. I had previously come across an NDEr who indicated he had been transported to the light in an ambulance-like vehicle. (Serdahely, 1995, p. 189)

In a case from the Religious Experience Research Centre archives (RERC account 3583), a hospitalized woman had an unusual NDE that started as an OBE. After moving through the ceiling, instead of seeing her Australian hospital from above, she found herself on a Russian battlefield “piled with dead men,” Russian tanks, and machines. Then she found herself in a hospital run by nuns where a screaming woman giving birth was silenced by nuns “stuffing a pillow on to her head to stop her cries” (Fox, 2003, p. 283). Then she felt ill, back in her bed, wondering if her NDE was caused by medication.

In another of the Fenwicks’ cases, a woman had an NDE during a particularly bad case of influenza. She reported an OBE, floating up
to a green field containing a large tree "with a brilliant white light on
top," and meeting her deceased father. When her father waved her
away, she returned to her body, opened her eyes, and saw that “there
was steam coming out of my hands” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997,
p. 29). The Fenwicks conceded that the steam was one of the
"hallucinatory qualities" of her experience and speculated that her
high temperature might have produced it (1997, p. 30).

Sometimes a prototypical NDE will incorporate terrifying halluci-
natory features. After skidding on black ice, wrecking his car, and
pulling out other passengers, a student collapsed and had to be
resuscitated at the scene of the accident. While on life support in the
hospital, he had two heart attacks and reported the following
distressing NDE:

I was in a tunnel and sensed I was travelling towards a brightish light
hidden behind a bend in the cave.... I felt I was simply floating – I did
not have the use of my arms or legs at all....

As I passed round the bend in the cave I saw a giant Dracula-type of
mouth opening. I say 'Dracula' because there were two monstrous
fangs with blood dribbling off them.... I gained the instant impression
that if I proceeded towards the mouth, it would shut and the teeth
would slice me in two and kill me. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997,
pp. 190–191)

The student woke up screaming for his mother, was comforted by her,
was given a tranquilizer, and then slept for a few hours.

Morse recounted the NDE of a 4-year-old boy who almost drowned
after the car he was in skidded on ice and plunged to the bottom of
a river. The boy reported accidentally going to "animal heaven" and
speaking to a bee after losing consciousness:

I went into a huge noodle.... It wasn't like a spiral noodle, but it was
very straight, like a tunnel. When I told my mom about nearly dying,
I told her it was a noodle, but now I am thinking that it must have
been a tunnel, because it had a rainbow in it....

I was being pushed along by a wind, and I could kind of float. I saw
two small tunnels in front of me. One of them was animal heaven and
the other one was the human heaven. First I went into the animal
heaven. There were lots of flowers and there was a bee. The bee was
talking to me and we were both smelling flowers. The bee ... brought
me bread and honey because I was really hungry. (Morse and Perry,
1994, p. 4)

He reported going next to "human heaven," which he described as
a "regular old castle," encountering his dead grandmother, hearing
loud music, then finally simply “waking up” in the hospital surrounded by nurses (Morse and Perry, 1994, p. 5).

Interpreted at face value, this NDE implies that life after death is not limited to humans, mammals, or even vertebrates. While we cannot rule out the possibility that persons may encounter insects in the afterlife and have discussions with them, it seems more likely that this NDE was a hallucination, and unlikely that one's double would feel a bodily sensation like hunger in the afterlife, satisfied only by astral nourishment.

In another case, a childhood NDE was also triggered by nearly drowning. In this NDE, an 8-year-old girl encountered seven other children, a butterfly, and a deer:

I was in a garden, right behind a bush.... [T]here was this one, big, large tree and there were children playing a game.... I saw a bunch of flowers, there was a butterfly and a deer next to me who I felt lick my face.... The children saw me and they beckoned me to come over.... [W]hen I finally decided to step over ... then I felt this heavy tug, like a vacuum and then I was forced out and the next thing I knew I was back in my own body. (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 112)

Here another favorite insect of children was encountered in an NDE (cockroaches and mosquitoes are not reported) along with a very popular wild animal.

In other NDEs, sentient plants are encountered: one woman reported worrying about the flowers she was stepping on in her NDE, when the flowers telepathically communicated to her that they were all right (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997)!

Occasionally even dead celebrities are encountered in NDEs. In one of Moody's cases, a middle-aged woman who had shaken hands with Elvis Presley as a child reported encountering Elvis in her NDE. After having an OBE during surgery, she reported:

I then entered into a dark round tube or hole. I could call it a tunnel. I seemed to go headfirst through this thing and suddenly I was in a place filled up with love, and a beautiful bright white light....

As I walked through this meadow I saw people separated in little bunches. They waved to me, and came over and talked to me. One was my father who had died about two years before....

Just as I turned to go, as I felt myself being drawn back, I caught sight of Elvis. He was in this place of an intense bright light. He just came over to me, and took my hand, and said: “Hi Bev, do you remember me?” (Morse and Perry, 1992, pp. 109–110)
While an Elvis sighting in an NDE may not be as problematic for a survivalist interpretation as an encounter with a living person, it seems unlikely that a real glimpse of the afterlife would include a greeting from a deceased celebrity.

In a case sent to Ring by a Canadian researcher, another NDEr described an exceptionally detailed NDE world where he encountered Albert Einstein. After touring spotless streets that “appeared to be paved in some kind of precious metal,” talking to a street sweeper, listening to a choir of angels, and viewing an art gallery:

Next we materialized in a computer room. It was a place of great activity, yet peace prevailed. None of the stress of business was present, but prodigious work was accomplished. The people seemed familiar to me, like old friends. This was confusing, because I knew there to be present those who lived on earth still, and those who had passed on. Some of them I knew by name, others by reputation; and all had time for me.... One of them was Albert Einstein.... He asked me if I would care to operate the computer. (Kellehear, 1996, p. 14)

There is a fantastic quality to this story, such as transferring from place to place “instantly,” as if by magic. The fact that this NDEr claimed to see people who were still alive in this supposed afterlife environment also points to its hallucinatory nature.

But if encounters with conscious plants, talking insects, and dead celebrities are not enough to give you pause about accepting NDEs as visions of an objective afterlife reality, perhaps NDEs that include encounters with fictional characters will. Morse reported that a 10-year-old boy had an NDE where he encountered a video-gaming wizard who loved Nintendo and said to him: “Struggle and you shall live” (Abanes, 1996, p. 116). Karl Jansen similarly reported finding childhood NDEs that included encounters with video game and comic book characters:

Claims that near-death experiences are always identical, regardless of the set and setting, are contradicted by the variety actually found in published reports.... For example, instead of a tunnel and angels, East Indians may describe the River Ganges and a particular guru. A child having a NDE may “see” his or her still-living friends and teachers, or Nintendo and comic book characters, rather than God. (Jansen, 2001, p. 96)

In a collection of pediatric NDEs published in 1990, Serdahely even found a case where a girl encountered an old stuffed animal. Morse summarized the case as follows:
A 10-year-old girl had a full cardiopulmonary arrest while in the intensive care unit after spinal surgery. She described her experience 2 years later, stating she was “peaceful and relaxed, and remembered seeing a whitest blue light at the end of the tunnel. She saw the shadow of a dog, and also a white lamb that was loving and gentle, which led her back to her body.” Her parents reported at age 2, she had a lamb that doubled as a music box that was her favorite stuffed animal. (Morse, 1994, p. 62)

One of the most bizarre types of NDEs is the “meaningless void” experience that usually occurs during childbirth. In a typical case, a 28-year-old woman became unconscious when given nitrous oxide during the birth of her second child, but when her blood pressure suddenly dropped, she reported:

I was aware ... of moving rapidly upward into darkness. Although I don't recall turning to look, I knew the hospital and the world were receding below me, very fast.... I was rocketing through space like an astronaut without a capsule, with immense speed and great distance.

A small group of circles appeared ahead of me, some tending toward the left. To the right was just a dark space. The circles were black and white, and made a clicking sound as they snapped black to white, white to black. They were jeering and tormenting – not evil, exactly, but more mocking and mechanistic. The message in their clicking was: Your life never existed. The world never existed. Your family never existed. You were allowed to imagine it. You were allowed to make it up. It was never there. There is nothing here. There was never anything there. That's the joke – it was all a joke.

There was much laughter on their parts, malicious. I remember brilliant argumentation on my part, trying to prove that the world – and I – existed.... They just kept jeering.

“This is eternity,” they kept mocking. This is all there ever was, and all there ever will be, just this despair....

Time was forever, endless rather than all at once.... Yes, it was more than real: absolute reality. There's a cosmic terror we have never addressed. (Greyson and Bush, 1992, p. 102)

Since meaningless void experiences paint a far-from-gleaming picture of what the dying sometimes experience, many New Age near-death researchers are reluctant to accept them as visions of another world. Ring, for example, ultimately concluded that meaningless void experiences “are not true NDEs as such but are essentially emergence reactions to inadequate anesthesia” (Ring, 1994, pp. 20–21).

There is something disingenuous about Ring taking this position. On the one hand, Ring and like-minded researchers have argued that
protoypical Western NDEs are evidence for an afterlife at least in part because they are consistent across accounts, feel real, and have a transformative effect. At the same time, Ring argued that meaningless void experiences are merely reactions to anesthetics, even though they are also consistent across accounts (different people report similar experiences), feel real, and have a transformative effect – albeit a negative one: "our preliminary observations indicate that ontological fear is a common result of the experience" (Greyson and Bush, 1992, p. 109).

In fact, meaningless void experiences probably are reactions to anesthesia, given their rare incidence and tendency to occur during childbirth, when anesthetics are almost always administered. The point is that meaningless void experiences have the same characteristics that have been used to justify viewing more standard NDEs as glimpses of an afterlife, yet are rarely themselves seen as actual visions of another world.

Ring's argument is a tacit admission by a major near-death researcher that a person can have an experience near death that has commonalities with the others' experiences near death, feels incredibly real, and produces lasting transformations, even though it is only a hallucination. If meaningless void experiences can be reasonably viewed as hallucinations, so can prototypical Western NDEs.

In her 1997 book In A World of Their Own, Madelaine Lawrence also acknowledged that persons sometimes experience hallucinations near death, after finding reports of visions of the Grim Reaper in her cardiac patients.

In 1926, Heinrich Klüver systematically studied the effects of mescaline on the experiences of its users. In addition to producing potent hallucinations characterized by bright, "highly saturated" colors and vivid imagery, Klüver noticed that mescaline produced four recurring geometric patterns he called "form constants": lattices, including honeycombs, checkerboards, and triangles; cobwebs; tunnels; and spirals (Blackmore, 1993; Bressloff, Cowan, Golubitsky, Thomas, and Wiener, 2002).

Klüver's form constants have appeared in other drug-induced and naturally occurring hallucinations, suggesting a similar physiological process underlying hallucinations with different triggers. And they also appear in NDEs. After a heart attack, one man from the Evergreen Study had an NDE that included seeing a lattice ("grid") or cobweb, one of Klüver's form constants:
The more I concentrated on this source of light the more I realized that it was a light of a very, very peculiar nature... it was more than light. It was a grid of power ... if you could imagine the finest kind of gossamer spider web that was somehow all pervading, that went everywhere. (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 111, ellipses original)

A similar NDE was reported by Johann Christophe Hampe, in his book published prior to Moody’s coining the term “near-death experience” in Life After Life:

I was moving at high speed towards a net of great luminosity. The strands and knots where the luminous lines intersected were vibrating with tremendous cold energy. The grid appeared as a barrier that I did not want to move through, and for a brief moment my speed appeared to slow down. Then I was in the grid. (Fox, 2003, pp. 57-58)

Other form constants have also periodically appeared in NDEs. Carol Zaleski notes that, among the variety of “paths” that NDErs have taken to the NDE world, some NDErs have found themselves “spinning in vertiginous spirals” rather than traveling through a tunnel or darkness (Zaleski, 1987, p. 122). While tunnel experiences are well represented in Western NDE reports, the occasional presence of other hallucinatory form constants, such as lattices, cobwebs, and spirals, suggests that NDEs are hallucinations.

**Unfulfilled Predictions: Psychic Inability**

Despite the contributions of serious neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, 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. These unsubstantiated assertions recall those of crop circle researchers who have “discovered” that the wheat found in crop circles has been genetically altered. P. M. H. Atwater, for example, claimed that NDErs looked younger after NDEs when before-and-after pictures are compared, and claimed that NDErs’ “energy fields” interfered with electronic devices like watches and microphones.

In Heading Toward Omega, Ring (1984) claimed that many of his NDErs had “prophetic visions” of the future of humanity, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, marked climate change, economic collapse, and humanity on the verge of nuclear annihilation. “Massive
upheavals” were to start in the 1980s and end with world peace just after the dawn of the new millennium (Fox, 2003).

But despite repeated assertions of widespread and even quite frequent paranormal abilities manifesting after NDEs, no NDErs, so far as I am aware, have ever volunteered for a controlled experiment to test their alleged psychic powers. Given that such a demonstration would easily validate their claims, one simple question begs for an answer: Why not?

Cases where predictions have failed to come to pass suggest that NDErs have not attempted to demonstrate their psychic powers experimentally because they have no powers to demonstrate. Apparently NDErs’ predictions are no different than those of other modern-day prophets: either vague enough to cover almost any event, or specific but unfulfilled.

Dannion Brinkley’s NDE visions provide an excellent example of unfulfilled predictions. After lightning struck the telephone line he was using in 1975, he was thrown across the room, lying on the floor looking up. His searing pain was replaced with a feeling of peace and he found himself looking down on his body until paramedics loaded him onto an ambulance. He reported next seeing a tunnel forming in the ambulance, which came to him and engulfed him while he heard rhythmic chiming. He noticed a light ahead and rapidly approached it until it surrounded him. A silver form emerged, which he identified as an empathetic “being of light” emitting all the colors of a rainbow. The being engulfed him, causing him to review the events of his life. Next they both “flew” into a city of crystalline cathedrals where Brinkley arrived at a “cathedral of knowledge.” His guide disappeared, only to be replaced by 13 others behind a podium when he sat down on a bench. As each being approached him, a “box” appeared on its chest, which “zoomed” out toward his face, showing a “television picture” of a future world event. Brinkley was restored to normal consciousness in the morgue just shy of a half hour since he was struck by lightning (Brinkley and Perry, 1994). He also claimed to have spectacular psychic abilities since his NDE.

In his best-selling Saved by the Light (Brinkley and Perry, 1994), Brinkley often gave dates to the prophetic visions shown to him. They included visions of an Israeli settlement spreading into Jordan until Jordan was replaced by a new country. This was to be followed by a war between Israel and an alliance of Russia and a “Chinese-and-Arab consortium” over “some incident” in Jerusalem (Brinkley and
Perry, 1994, p. 35). An alliance between Saudi Arabia, Syria, and China was to be made in 1992 to destroy the American economy, while Saudis were to give money to North Korea in order to destabilize Asian markets. By 1993 Iran and Iraq were predicted to have both chemical and nuclear weapons, including an Iranian submarine with nuclear missiles on a religious mission to stop the shipment of oil from the Middle East.

Brinkley claimed to have foreseen the Chernobyl incident in 1986 and the 1991 Gulf War during his NDE, but these occurred well before the publication of his book. Chernobyl was supposed to be followed by another nuclear accident in 1995, which was to have contaminated a northern sea to the point that ships would not travel through it.

He also saw “border disputes and heavy fighting between Soviet and Chinese armies” over a railroad taken by the Chinese (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 39). China then invaded and took over half of the Soviet Union, including Siberian oil fields. Brinkley confessed that in his NDE he did not know that the Soviet Union would fall.

He also predicted the collapse of the world economy “by the turn of the century,” resulting in “feudalism and strife” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 39). The government closing of banks in the 1990s was to be followed by “the bankruptcy of America by the year 2000” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 40). America would cease to be a superpower “sometime before the end of the century” due to two horrific earthquakes which weakened the economy to the point that starving Americans waited in long lines for food.

Brinkley envisioned a terrorist attack prior to 2000 in which a chemical released into a French city’s water supply killed thousands in response to the French publication of “a book that infuriates the Arab world” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 41).

Brinkley also saw democracy replaced with a fundamentalist government in Egypt in 1997. In his final visions people in towns all over the world ate their dead out of desperation, “weeping as they cooked human meat” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 42). Meanwhile, wars in Central America and South America broke out, leading to the formation of socialist governments in all of the countries of this region before 2000. As a result, millions of refugees crossed the American border, forcing our government to deploy troops to the border to push the refugees back across the Rio Grande, destroying the economy of Mexico. Again, all of this and more was predicted to happen before 2000.
Elaborate as these visions are, none of the events predicted to occur after *Saved by the Light* was published in 1994 have come to pass. Brinkley's prophetic visions appear to be no different from those of any other run-of-the-mill prophet. Even the Fenwicks commented that while "pre-publication happenings came into Dannion's head with pinpoint accuracy..., those events due to take place after 1994 are foretold with less precision" (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 167). Brinkley did tend to be vague in places, omitting dates or using phrases like "some incident" or "sometime before the end of the century." But his predictions were precise enough for us to recognize that nothing even close to them came to pass when he predicted they would.

It would not be surprising for NDErs to come back from "the other side" with vague or false predictions if NDEs are a particular kind of brain-generated hallucination. But if NDEs were literally journeys of one's double into "the next world," it would be surprising for denizens of that realm to offer false information. In Brinkley's case particularly, it would be surprising for otherworldly beings to provide him with accurate predictions about future events occurring before the publication of his book, but false predictions about events occurring after the book was published. Might Brinkley have exaggerated claims about the accuracy of his pre-publication predictions?

Exaggerated claims of psychic power are not limited to NDErs who write best-selling books. Journalist Art Levine tested the reputed powers of a woman who had three NDEs and claimed to have predicted the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Levine noted that, although he carelessly supplied some information about his life, she revealed nothing about him that could not have been guessed by the average person, and many of the details she provided were flat wrong:

Her initial results were promising. During that first interview, for instance, she casually demonstrated her skills by asking, "How's your low-back pain doing?" and mentioning in a vague way problems I'd had with my father. I didn't know whether to be amazed or just chalk it up to a lucky guess anybody could make about a middle-aged Jewish guy....

After a long wait, she began speaking. "You had two avenues of education, but you took a break in one and totally shifted gears," she pronounced. Since I always intended in college to be a writer, even though I dropped a course or two along the way, Shoemaker's reading wasn't off to a very promising start. Later, when discussing my work, she claimed that I once planned to have a medical career, but now, as
an investigative reporter, "you've gone into medicine through the back door." Wrong again: I never once in my life thought of becoming a health professional.

... I became worried when she claimed that I was developing Crohn's disease, a serious, painful inflammation of the small intestine. But because she also asserted that I suffered from regular headaches, I felt relieved – that's one health complaint I don't have. But since I'm actually at risk of digestive problems because of an anti-inflammatory medication I take, I didn't take chances: I later asked my doctor to look for signs of the dreaded Crohn's disease. There weren't any.

She didn't seem to be much more accurate when discussing my parents. "I get a missing of the father. It's almost like he's not around; you're not able to converse as much. The brilliance of his mind isn't the same," she said. Later, she gave additional poignant insights: "Your father's health is wavering." There is, as it turns out, a good reason for all this: He's dead, a little detail that she missed. She also described my mother: "I get your mother as spunky. She can be quite feisty, and she has her own set of rules." Perhaps, in the afterlife, she has adopted this new personality. She died several years ago in a tragic accident, but when she was alive, she was generally bossed around by my domineering father. (Levine, A. Tunnel visions: People who claim to have seen the light come out of the dark. Posted on http://www.citylinkmagazine.com/archives/031903coverstory.html on March 19, 2003)

That some NDErs are given false visions of the future in their NDEs, or get a false sense of having psychic powers they do not have, is not flatly inconsistent with a survivalist interpretation of NDEs; perhaps otherworldly beings supply us with false information during NDEs, or NDErs become more skilled at self-deception than at precognition after their NDEs. But false prophecy and psychic inability are exactly what we should expect if NDEs are not really journeys into another realm. And the proclivity of many NDErs to claim paranormal abilities they do not have should make us wary of uncorroborated claims of paranormal perception during OBEs (Augustine, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Many near-death researchers interpret NDEs as evidence for survival of bodily death. Because many people would like to know that there is an afterlife rather than simply take the notion on faith, the study of NDEs tends to attract researchers who already believe
that they provide evidence for survival. NDEs are a natural lure to survivalists, since they offer the prospect of bolstering belief in survival and of offering hints about what exactly is going to happen to us when we die. Aside from cases where the persons encountered during NDEs are obviously culture-bound projections or could not possibly reside in the afterlife at the time of the experience, many near-death researchers urge us to take what NDErs report at face value. If an NDEr reports feelings of peace, an OBE, traversing a tunnel, and entering an illuminated garden where he or she encounters a deceased grandfather, researchers often advocate interpreting the account literally. We are typically encouraged to think that the NDEr really left his or her physical body, traveled through the physical world in a disembodied or astrally embodied state, traversed a tunnel from the physical world to a transcendental realm, and actually communicated with his or her deceased grandfather. It is only when an NDE contains obviously hallucinatory features that such near-death researchers resist interpreting it as a literal glimpse of the afterlife.

But how do near-death researchers sympathetic to the survival hypothesis explain hallucinatory NDE characteristics? Typically, they invoke a rather ad hoc rationalization: whenever culturally conditioned or other clearly hallucinatory features are found, the NDEr must have made a mistake. For example, one could argue that when NDErs report encountering living persons “on the other side,” they must be misidentifying the person seen.

Here survival proponents urge us not to take NDErs’ accounts at face value; at the same time, they expect us to accept the “core NDE” as reflecting some afterlife reality. The standard explanation is that NDE features inconsistent with literal glimpses of an afterlife are interpretative embellishments, but that the core NDE, whatever that is said to be, really reflects another reality that awaits us after death. Morse, for example, wrote: “The core NDE is then secondarily interpreted according to the age and culture of the person experiencing the event” (Morse, 1994, p. 70). Atwater, by contrast, implied that living persons seen in NDEs either represent an early hallucinatory phase of an otherwise veridical experience or are comforting disguises taken on by transcendental beings:

There is another greeter, though, who is sometimes encountered – a living person – more commonly reported by children than by adults. This may be a favorite teacher, the kid down the block, a friend or
a relative. Does this fact call into question the validity of near-death imagery? No, and here's why.

In every case I have thus far investigated where this occurred, the living greeter did not remain in the scenario any longer than it took to alert or relax the experiencer. Once that happened, the living greeter disappeared, and imagery more common to near-death states emerged as the episode deepened. It is almost as if the sole purpose of living greeters is to ensure the continuance of the episode so that it can become more meaningful. They don't “stick around” like other greeters usually do. (Atwater, 2000, p. 12)

No doubt recalcitrant proponents will simply continue to give a new spin to evidence that otherwise appears to falsify a survivalist interpretation of NDEs.

References


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
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 OBErs’ sense of time passage is frequently distorted (Green, 1968; Greyson, 1983; Irwin, 1985; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982). Susan Blackmore found that OBErs were completely unable to specify the duration of their experience (1984, p. 231). Although I found that NDErs 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 NDErs 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 de-physicalized 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 transmaterial 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 transmaterial 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 transmaterial 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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Commentary on “Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features”

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ABSTRACT: In this response to Keith Augustine's paper, I discuss the question of the nature and causation of near-death experiences (NDEs) with hallucinatory features. The attribution of hallucinations to either a brain mechanism or a peek into the afterworld raises fundamental questions about both the epistemology and ontology of our neuroscience, and of our scientific models of an afterlife. It also raises questions about the physiological state of the brain giving rise to NDEs that arise in very different situations and are clearly unlikely to have a unitary cause. These fundamental questions can be answered only in proper prospective trials when both the brain physiology and psychological variables of the experiencer are known.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; out-of-body experience; epistemology; ontology; models of consciousness.

Keith Augustine’s paper examines what he calls “near-death experiences with hallucinatory features,” and asks whether these features are brain-generated hallucinations or a glimpse into the afterlife. The paper is essentially about the epistemology, or the nature and grounds of our knowledge, and the ontology of near-death experience (NDEs). Without a full understanding and description of the philosophical grounds on which this article implicitly draws, it is
not possible to attempt an answer to the questions it puts forward (Beauregard, 2007; Schwartz, Stapp, and Beauregard, 2005).

First, it asks questions about hallucinations. A hallucination is defined as a sensory experience that is not based on a physical perception and that is not shared between people. Thus the auditory hallucinations of schizophrenia that can be seen to correlate with activations in the auditory cortex are private to the individual and not based on any external sensations. If one was looking at a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) image of a hallucinating schizophrenic brain and was able to see this in real time, one could certainly see a reflection of the experience, but this would not change our definition of it as a hallucination, as we would not have access by direct perception to the experience itself (Halligan, 2002).

The ontology and epistemology of a brain-based hallucination is fairly clear. It is based on the assumption that brains exist in a physical world and that internal stimulation of brains gives rise to a set of phenomena that we call hallucinatory perceptions, and that these can then be divided up as they are by neuroscience. It must be recognized, however, that even hallucinations that we think we understand are ephemeral, in the sense that they are subjective descriptions that are given to us. We have to take on trust that the person reporting a hallucination is experiencing this. A hallucination has no objective reality, but is simply a subjective description of the experience by the experiencer. We have learned to codify what people report into categories and thus the hallucinations have some quasi-categorical status, but that is as far as we can go in our understanding of their nature (Beauregard, 2007; Schwartz, Stapp, and Beauregard, 2005; Velmans, 2002a, 2002b).

When we come to glimpses of the afterlife, the situation becomes much more difficult, so a precise definition is required. What is an afterlife? Presumably Augustine makes the assumption that an afterlife is a continuation of consciousness after the physical death of the brain. This raises profound questions as to the nature of the physical world in which we live and how we obtain information about it. Unfortunately, Augustine does not define an afterlife and thus it is difficult to know what structure he is suggesting as the basis for the afterlife experiences. Is he suggesting that the afterlife is composed of matter and that it is a realm into which one can peek, rather like a glimpse through an open door? And is he suggesting that the rules which apply to this peek are similar to the rules which apply when
looking through an open door in this world? It would seem to me that if this is his assumption, this needs to be stated. Another view of the afterlife could be that it is somehow a continuation of personal consciousness. This would imply that the memories, psychical structures, and understanding of the experiencer continue in some dimensional space where consciousness exists after death. If this were so, then this afterlife would be very similar to this life, and I do not know how one could easily draw a distinction between the two. There are, of course, other alternative models of the nature of the afterlife that have been reviewed elsewhere (Fontana, 2004), but the ones I have taken span most other views.

The question that Augustine sets us is whether the private experience of an individual to which we do not have access, except by description, should be allocated to one of the two classes of experience described above: brain-based hallucinations, or a peek into the afterlife. It seems to me that this quest is doomed from the outset, because there are no clear ways that we can differentiate between the two. There is not, it seems to me, a falsifiable hypothesis. Both sets of experiences are hallucinations by definition: that is, they are subjective, not shared, and have no external sensory basis. They would seem to be brain-based, except in the cardiac arrest model described below. But having said that, how can we go on to decide that they are not also a peek into some other reality, say an afterlife? We have to be guided, as one does for any sensory experience, by the meaning that the experiencer attaches to it. It is easy then to relate them to some common reality that we all share.

For example, if my patient tells me that he or she is being followed by agents of the British Security Service, commonly known as Military Intelligence, Section 5 (MI5), with ray guns that they shine at him or her at night, then I can test this against my knowledge of MI5 behavior and the likelihood that they are indeed doing this, and it then becomes clear that this experience of my patient is a paranoid persecutory hallucination. If, on the other hand, my patient says that he or she walked into a beautiful garden that was full of the most exotically colored flowers, and says furthermore that this was for him or her a peek into the afterlife, on what grounds can I dispute this, without a set of falsifiable criteria that I can apply to the afterlife?

The next problem I found with Augustine’s paper is that he has not looked at the causes of near-death experiences. He treats near-death experiences as if they are a unitary phenomenon. The data, however,
are very much against that. In our retrospective study of more than 300 NDEs (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995), near-death experiences occurred when people were relaxing in front of the fire, when they were dreaming at night, spontaneously during the day, or when people were intensely frightened. All these states have underpinning them the normal physiological functioning of the brain, although different systems are involved, such as wakefulness, rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, or intense emotional arousal. NDEs also occurred when people were “ill” (usually not clearly defined), or when people were seriously ill or under anesthesia. All these states, by contrast, have an abnormal brain physiology and a disruption of normal functioning, although the precise details of this would have differed between cases. Ten percent of our cases had their NDEs during the clinical death of cardiac arrest, when the heart had stopped, respiration had ceased, brainstem reflexes were absent, and brain function could not possibly support consciousness. A look at this list does not suggest that there could possibly be a common neurophysiological mechanism. It does suggest that there may be several mechanisms that lead to a common experience, but until this is sorted out it, is impossible to understand the biological/psychological nature of the near-death experience.

This one fact in itself could point towards a common reality that is accessed by different routes, but here again we are back with epistemology and ontology. Testing the “afterlife peek” hypothesis would suggest that peeks into that reality are also almost independent of brain pathology or physiology, so what then is the structure of that reality and how will we know it when we see it? Perhaps we are back again to asking those who have the experience what it means to them. Clearly the way forward is a proper prospective trial where we can have some control over the psychological and physical variables.

**Out-of-Body Experiences**

In this section of his paper, Augustine treats out-of-body experiences (OBEs) in different physiological states as if they all had the same physiological mechanism, just as he did with NDEs. What is clear from the literature is that spontaneous out-of-body experiences are very common, that there is no disruption of normal neurophysiological functioning, and that they are probably dissociative states in which the experiencer will gain no veridical perception away from the body. Indeed, as Augustine has pointed out, except in rare cases, tests of
obtaining "objective" information from this dissociated state usually fail (Murray and Fox, 2005).

The subjective description of the "reality" into which the subject "goes" depends on his or her belief system. These OBEs are not to be confused with experiences of sleep paralysis, which have a different physiological state; the ascending actions of REM sleep; or with those partial OBEs induced by stimulation of the temporal lobe. There are also reports of out-of-body states being associated with confusional states due to operation or illness, or post-ictal confusional states, which again will have separate physiological mechanisms. Doubtless, some of these mechanisms may be present during near-death experiences, but without a clear definition of the cause of the NDE and the relationship of the OBE to it, it is not possible to proceed much further. The most interesting OBE, in my view, is that of the cardiac arrest NDE, when the heart has stopped and the brain is nonfunctional, but yet the experiencer reports an OBE. Here we have a known physiology: severe brain anoxia with electrical silence and an unconscious patient. It is then important to test and to verify objectively whether the experiencer really did have the NDE when unconscious and was able to gain veridical information (Parnia and Fenwick, 2002).

The OBE that is said to occur during cardiac arrest is one situation where near-death experiences can contribute to our understanding of brain-mind mechanism. During cardiac arrest, all the signs of clinical death are present. Yet about 10 percent of patients claim that while they were unconscious they had a near-death experience, and a small proportion of these claim that they had an OBE in which they were able to obtain veridical information, usually about the resuscitation procedure (Greyson, 2003; Schwaninger, Eisenberg, Schechtman, and Weiss, 2002; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001). If their claims could be verified, they would indicate that brain and mind are somehow separate, a hypothesis that could point towards a continuation of consciousness after death, although of course it would not prove it. It would certainly raise challenging questions for our current neuroscience (Parnia, 2007). This is the one experiment that would help us to differentiate the hypothesis of a "peek" into the afterlife by a mind independent of a brain from a dissociative state, which would be impossible in a nonfunctioning brain. Up-to-date, full reviews of theories of consciousness involving mind-brain independence and the evidence for those theories have recently been published.
In summary, the value of Augustine's paper is that it raises questions about epistemology and ontology in neuroscience. What his paper makes abundantly clear is that many of the putative mechanisms of NDEs have been suggested by authors who have no proper grasp of the width of the field or the phenomena of NDEs, or of the very wide range of mental and physiological states that underpin these experiences. Most could not possibly apply to NDEs as a whole, and many are simplistic, for example, that they are due to sleep paralysis, or that they are due to temporal lobe epilepsy, a confusional state that never has a clear narrative experience. To answer the questions that Augustine raises, a proper prospective clinical trial is required, so that we can gain a proper understanding of brain physiology and psychology at the time of the event, with all the difficulties that this entails.

References


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.
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


"Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features" Defended

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ABSTRACT: Three preceding commentaries present even-handed and thoughtful criticisms of "Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features." The commentators and I agree that near-death experience (NDE) reports are sometimes open to multiple interpretations, that different kinds of NDEs should be distinguished according to their diverse physiological mechanisms, and that transformations following NDEs but not other hallucinatory experiences require special explanation if NDEs are hallucinations. In this reply I discuss the most significant areas of continuing disagreement.

KEY WORDS: false perceptions; bilocation; ad hoc hypotheses; diversity of NDEs; NDE transformations.

I greatly appreciate the even-handed and thoughtful commentaries on "Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features" provided by Janice Holden, Peter Fenwick, and William Serdahely. Since the commentators often gave insightful comments, I will largely restrict my response to the most significant areas of disagreement.

Holden's first main point is that anecdotes are sometimes open to multiple interpretations. I concur that her possible alternative interpretation of the report of an NDE during an aerial attack in World War II relies on an "equally plausible sequence of events" as the interpretation that the NDE contained out-of-body discrepancies. However, this approach can go only so far: alternative interpretations...
may account for some potentially hallucinatory experiences without requiring one to see them as hallucinations, but will undoubtedly not account for all of them. For example, in Robert Crookall’s Case 731 the subject explicitly reported seeing bars on his bedroom window during an OBE that did not exist and that “prevented” him from leaving the room (1972, pp. 89–90).

Holden’s second main point is that failure to note a feature of the physical environment during an out-of-body NDE provides evidence of selective attention to detail, not of hallucination. She asks “whether incomplete visual perception of the entire ‘available’ scene during an OBE necessarily justifies a conclusion that the experience was hallucinatory.” Again, while selective attention may account for some perceptual omissions, it cannot plausibly account for all of them. She notes, for instance, Margot Grey’s observation of NDErs who reported wanting to see their physical bodies during their out-of-body NDEs but nevertheless failing to do so. Similarly, Oliver Fox reported that, in the majority of his induced OBEs, he could not see his normal physical body lying on the bed despite specifically looking for it there (Fox, 1962).

Though Holden writes that “preoccupation fits with many NDErs’ descriptions of their selective, and sometimes exclusionary, perception in the out-of-body state,” in fact it accounts only for selective attention. Those who not only wanted to see their bodies during their OBEs but were actively looking for them could hardly be said to be victims of selective attention to detail or preoccupation with other things. No obstacle, physical or mental, was blocking their perception. Exclusionary imagery, then, is better explained in terms of hallucination than veridical perception of selective details. Indeed, by failing to offer any conceivable explanation for exclusionary perception, Holden implicitly concedes that there is none other than hallucination.

Both of Holden’s main points, then, fail to show that we cannot be justifiably confident that genuine discrepancies between NDE content and consensual reality exist. More striking examples are instances of false perception: “perceiving” objects during OBEs that are not there, such as Crookall’s report of seeing nonexistent bars on a bedroom window. How does Holden explain cases containing invented objects as anything other than reports of hallucinations? Just what sorts of perceptual errors would, according to Holden, render a given NDE a hallucination?

Next Holden considers the significance of bodily sensations incorporated into NDE content. She writes that the assumption “that
consciousness is *always either* in or out of the body” may be true of “phenomena of consciousness in the gross physical world,” but is not necessarily true of “phenomena of consciousness that may transcend that world,” just as the assumption that physical objects have a definite location seems true of “superatomic” phenomena but not of subatomic particles in a superposed state. To say that any aspects of the human mind “transcend” the gross physical world is to say that they somehow extend outside of it, to *elsewhere*. But that another world may function according to different laws does not really help, as the bare *possibility* that one’s astral duplicate can simultaneously “occupy” the physical body *and* travel elsewhere is not an argument for the plausibility of such bilocation. Alternatively, perhaps NDErs’ physical bodies are like voodoo dolls whose manipulation can affect their astral duplicates no matter where their ethereal doubles are located.

Similarly, Holden proposes that encounters with living persons are explicable by the alternative hypothesis that NDEs “may take a form that the … [NDEr] is most likely to recognize and accept.” Instead of granting that living persons are seen more often than deceased ones in childhood NDEs simply because children tend to know far fewer deceased persons than living ones, she hypothesizes that “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 is quite an extravagant alternative. Instead, perhaps some NDEs start out as hallucinations and then, like Pinocchio, somehow “become” real. That NDEs are hallucinations whose content is derived from NDErs’ imaginations in order to fulfill a psychological need in the face of a threat to well-being is a simpler and far more plausible explanation than that of impersonation by purely hypothetical celestial beings. We have *far better* evidence that hallucinatory altered states occur than we have that *any* “transcendent entities” exist.

Furthermore, a transcendent entity could be said to take any form imaginable, including those of fictional characters and mythological creatures. Similar points apply to alternative explanations for unfulfilled prophetic NDEs: while it is possible that transcendent entities offered NDErs false visions of the future, or that humanity changed its ways just in time to avert disaster, such responses are hackneyed and inane compared to the most likely explanation for false NDE prophecies.

Bodily sensations and encounters with living persons in NDEs are unquestionably *compatible* with “the possibility that a living individ-
ual's consciousness may function in more than one 'place' at the same time and usually unbeknownst to that person.” But if we allow this hypothesis into our pool of live options, why stop there? Perhaps the characters in our dreams are “unaware bilocations” of friends who may be shopping at the time, or transcendent impersonators; this is no less consistent with the actual content of our dreams. Shall we pretend that these explanations are really on a par with the hypothesis that dream characters are nothing more than a product of the dreamer's imagination? If not, then similar counterexplanations for NDEs with ostensibly hallucinatory features are equally implausible relative to the chief explanation for them. To suggest that no conceivable evidence could “provide sufficient weight to favor strongly one of these hypotheses over the other” is analogous to maintaining that the theories that crop circles are formed by spirit activity, extraterrestrial intervention, or meteorological vortices are as plausible as the hypothesis that they are created by human activity.

These counterexplanations seem entirely ad hoc: there appears to be no independent reason to postulate something as exotic as bilocation to account for bodily sensations or encounters with living persons in NDEs other than to save a survivalist interpretation of NDEs. Without some positive reason for invoking them apart from accounting for such NDEs in survivalist terms, they appear simply to explain away otherwise contradictory evidence. Clearly a survivalist interpretation can be amended with any number of ad hoc modifications when confronted with ostensibly inconsistent evidence; but such evidence does, on the face of it, undermine that interpretation. That NDEs are hallucinations explains apparent discrepancies between NDE content and consensual reality more simply than, and much better than, a survivalist interpretation qualified with various ad hoc amendments. Ad hoc explanations simply supply a way to dismiss evidence inconsistent with one's theories.

Finally, these alternatives make any inferences about the nature of NDEs given their content unfalsifiable, making the conclusion that any particular NDE is a hallucination given its content unreachable; for any possible discrepancy between NDE content and consensual reality can be explained away in this manner. One might as well hypothesize that the beings encountered in “bad LSD trips” are transcendent malevolent entities seeking to increase psychonauts' anxiety most effectively by appearing in a maximally frightening form. Moreover, these hypothesis-saving devices cut both ways: An
entrenched hallucination theorist could just as easily explain away reproducible experimental evidence of veridical paranormal perception among certain OBE adepts as fantastically unlikely coincidence, but coincidence nonetheless. The point of introducing these sorts of evidence is to test our interpretations against the actual data that have been collected. Ad hoc counterexplanations undermine that aim effectively by treating the data as irrelevant. If such drastic measures are acceptable, then what is the point of doing research in the first place?

When Holden writes that “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,” she misunderstands the purpose of my survey. It was never my intention to suggest that NDEs with overtly hallucinatory features are at all typical or even common among NDE reports. I never overstated their frequency, characterizing them as occasional at best, and noting, for example, that only 14 percent of the Fenwicks’ cases included encounters with living persons.

Holden rightly characterizes my selection of cases as “highly selective and exclusive,” but that is irrelevant. What is problematic for a survivalist interpretation is not the frequency of such NDEs, but that they occur at all. Serdahely makes the same mistake when he complains that I inappropriately generalized from “the exception or the rare or infrequent finding” in making my case, noting my inclusion of an Elvis sighting in an NDE and writing: “A reporting of Elvis is extremely rare in the NDE literature.” Serdahely seems to think that if such instances are rare enough, they provide no grounds for doubting a survivalist interpretation of most NDEs. But this is like arguing that the reliability of regressed memories of Satanic ritual abuse is not undermined when only a small minority of cases include demonstrably false memories of the disposal of human remains. For any analogous phenomenon, it is virtually assured that only a small number of cases will be detailed enough to reveal truth-claims that can subsequently be tested against consensual reality. Such specificity in anecdotes is almost inherently rare, and consequently the discovery of discrepancies between reports and consensual reality will be at least as rare as those anecdotes themselves.

For the sake of argument, let us presume that Holden’s survey of the professed accuracy of NDE details compared against consensual reality in published accounts is representative of all published
accounts, all reports of NDEs whether they are published or not, and even all NDEs whether they are reported to anyone else or not. In that case, I am happy to concede that only 8 percent of NDEs contain discrepancies between NDE content and consensual reality. But I fail to see the significance of such a finding. Only 8 percent of prototypical Western NDEs include a barrier or border between life and death (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001), but NDE researchers do not regard this element as insignificant because of its infrequency.

If something leaves the body and perceives the physical world during out-of-body NDEs, and occasionally travels into some kind of objective afterlife environment, then on the face of it discrepancies between NDE content and consensual reality should not occur. Citing her own survey as confirmation, Holden concedes that “some NDEs contain perceptual errors,” but adds that such errors “do not justify the conclusion that all of those experiences were hallucinatory.” Certainly not all such errors are indicative of hallucination, but most of them are best explained in those terms. Overall, Holden’s counter-explanations of out-of-body discrepancies, bodily sensations, and encounters with living persons – to say nothing of more explicitly hallucinatory imagery – are logically possible, but inadequate as explanatory hypotheses.

Finally, Holden writes that even if some NDEs are hallucinations, “logic prevents the conclusion that all NDEs are necessarily hallucinatory.” Undoubtedly, the existence of hallucinatory NDEs does not prove that all NDEs are hallucinations. But NDEs with overt hallucinatory features do give us some grounds to suspect that NDEs that are not so explicitly hallucinatory are hallucinations as well. Suppose that a certain percentage of “alien abductees,” whose experiences are typical of those of other alien abductees in all other respects, report being abducted in very public places, contrary to the consensual reality established by innumerable other observers. If we set aside potential ad hoc counterexplanations, such as that aliens can blank out the memories of all else who are present, we can quite reasonably conclude that, at least for this percentage of abductees, alien abduction experiences are imaginary. But the discovery of otherwise indistinguishable discrepant alien abduction experiences would cast serious doubt about extraterrestrial visitation being the cause of alien abduction experiences, especially in light of our background knowledge that there has never been a single indisputable instance of extraterrestrial visitation. Would not all alien abduction
Fenwick objects that trying to classify private experiences as either "brain-based hallucinations, or a peek into the afterlife" seems "doomed from the outset" because we cannot conclusively distinguish between the two: neither categorization is falsifiable. In principle, one could construct a concept of the afterlife so broad that any conceivable private experience could be construed as a vision of an afterlife. For instance, a disembodied mind might generate a solipsistic environment that could very well consist of entirely illusory features: in effect a brain-free hallucination. Conversely, one could define hallucinations so broadly that every human experience could be construed as a hallucination. But despite these caveats, we routinely diagnose certain experiences as hallucinations and others as veridical. Ostensible "afterlife experiences" may not be directly testable insofar as we have no reliable "roadmap" of an afterlife to check against, but this does not mean that the content of such experiences cannot offer us strong grounds from which to infer their true nature.

Next Fenwick criticizes my paper for failing to address the causes of NDEs. I largely sidestepped the issue here because the causes of NDEs are not yet known, only speculated upon. He also criticizes me, rightly, for treating NDEs as if they were a single phenomenon, but I might be forgiven for unreflectively following the apparent milieu of near-death studies on this point. It seems to me that the vast majority near-death researchers have been treating NDEs as a single phenomenon in the sense that Fenwick outlines, rather than as a simplifying label for a variety of different experiences. Researchers have certainly acknowledged that prototypical Western NDEs are experientially quite different from the occasional "hellish" NDEs or "meaningless void" experiences, and that some NDEs mix elements of these different experiential types. But to my knowledge only one study has sought to distinguish types of NDEs systematically in terms of their undeniably diverse physiological triggers (Twemlow, Gabbard, and Coyne, 1982). I am no less guilty of this shortcoming, and am grateful that Fenwick has brought it to our attention.

Fenwick lists some of the physiologically diverse conditions precipitating NDEs, arguing that a neurophysiological mechanism common to all of them is highly unlikely, but that "there may be several mechanisms that lead to a common experience." He adds that I treat OBEs and NDEs "in different physiological states as if they all
had the same physiological mechanism,” but that the literature reveals that “there is no disruption of normal neurophysiological functioning [in spontaneous OBEs], and that they are probably dissociative states in which the experiencer will gain no veridical perception away from the body.” Finally, he reiterates that common spontaneous OBEs are distinct from those accompanying sleep paralysis, rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, electrical stimulation of the temporal lobe, epileptic seizures, and cardiac arrest. (It is notable that several of the clearly hallucinatory cases I cited were cardiac arrest NDEs.) Ultimately, he suggests that prospective trials in which researchers “have some control over the psychological and physical variables” might reveal “a common [transcendental] reality that is accessed by different [neurophysiological] routes,” but it is unclear what variables would need to be controlled.

In fact, my paper is silent about psychophysiological mechanisms because they are both speculative and secondary to my central point. But for the record, it is undoubtedly true that there is no one mechanism for generating NDEs; I have already noted that fear alone, absent any clear physiological trigger, can generate NDEs (Augustine, 2007). Clearly, the illusion of perceiving from somewhere outside of the body can be generated by a variety of different physiological mechanisms. Harvey Irwin (1985, 2000) has addressed the variability of OBE triggers, hypothesizing that what is physiologically crucial is extremes in arousal - either very high (for example, a near-death crisis) or very low (for example, meditation) states of cortical arousal - combined with psychological dispositions like high capacity for absorption and strong need for absorbing experiences.

According to Serdahely, I am guilty of a major oversight in maintaining that NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations without ever defining the term “hallucination.” I took it for granted that the term would be widely understood without admitting of significantly different possible meanings, just as near-death researchers routinely do when using terms like “veridical perception.” I think that most definitions are, for the purposes of my paper, essentially equivalent. Nevertheless, I am happy to offer a definition here: A hallucination is a sensory perception of an object, entity, or environment that does not exist outside of the mind of the percipient. In short, a hallucination is a nonveridical sensory perception.

Serdahely also takes issue with my “binary thinking” about the ontological status of NDEs, but I am unconvinced that it is
problematic. Researchers obviously can introduce any number of complicated alternatives to either of the two most straightforward interpretations of NDEs: that NDEs are purely internal mental models, or that they are perceptions of an external environment by discarnate persons. But the additional complexity that such “middle ways” bring to the question does not, it seems to me, provide any explanatory advantages over the more straightforward explanations, and these alternatives often bring in disadvantageous conceptual problems. Consider so-called “field theories” of survival, in which the “mind field” always extends beyond the body but we only become aware of this during OBEs. Irwin asks: “is the mind field distributed uniformly throughout the cosmos or is it more ‘dense’ in the vicinity of the physical body? Does the mind field ‘expand’ to achieve access to very distant locations or does its nonphysical status imply that the field perpetually encompasses all locations?” (Irwin, 1985, p. 258). Without strong empirical grounds for taking such hazy alternatives seriously, we have no reason to treat them as accurate representations of how consciousness operates.

Like Holden, Serdahely offers alternative interpretations of some of the cases I cited. First, he points out that some ostensible NDEs with hallucinatory features may not be NDEs at all. This is a fair point, which I anticipated, since for most of the published retrospective accounts there was no evidence that researchers administered the NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983) in order to identify NDEs. So my limited criteria for identifying NDEs were whether near-death researchers categorized an experience as such, whether the accounts included experiential elements of the prototypical Western NDE, and whether the experiences were precipitated by some perceived or actual threat of harm. Nevertheless, I tried to allay the possibility of misidentification by including as many different clear NDEs with hallucinatory features as I could find. Consequently, potential misidentification of experiences that are not NDEs could account only for a small number of the cases I cite. The same could be said of the possibility that some NDE reports are entirely fabricated.

Serdahely’s objection that, if NDEs are hallucinations, we should see “many more varied and diverse variations [in NDE content] similar to the nearly infinite number of idiosyncratic features reported in dreams” is also a fair point. This is a topic I will take up in the next issue of this Journal, where I acknowledge that prototypical Western NDEs are much more stereotyped than dreams. Exactly why this is so
is unclear at the moment, but one possible explanation is that similar physiological mechanisms produce similar experiences in different individuals given their similar "hard-wiring," though that seems hard to reconcile with extant crosscultural data on NDEs. Another is that there are common sociocultural stereotypes about what is to be expected at or following death, and that these expectations shape the content of NDEs. I will address this issue later, but suffice it to say that further research is needed to answer this question confidently.

Regarding my discussion of the Fenwicks' discovery that their sample of near-death life reviews consisted of almost exclusively random memories, Serdahely complains that "the life review might be composed of selected rather than random memories intended to help the experiencer in some fashion," and that I never consider any such possibility. But this is explicitly not what the Fenwicks found, and I cannot be faulted for neglecting Serdahely's findings about a small sample of NDErs when I was addressing the Fenwicks' findings concerning a much larger sample.

Finally, Serdahely writes: "Augustine never discussed the [primarily salutary] aftereffects of NDEs.... [T]he same [effects] cannot be said for those who have suffered actual hallucinations.... If NDEs are truly hallucinations, then Augustine needs to reconcile this disparity." There are at least two possible explanations. First, most NDErs had their NDEs as a result of coming close to death. NonNDErs who come close to death experience similar, but less robust, transformations as NDErs (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001). This alone is sufficient to explain transformations accompanying hallucinations at the brink of death but absent from those occurring under other, non-life-threatening circumstances. Second, NDErs report more marked transformations than those who come close to death without ever experiencing an NDE. This means that NDErs report an additional transformative effect on top of that produced by coming close to death, and that additional effect requires an explanation.

And there is, in fact, a ready one: the fact that the vast majority of Western NDErs take a survivalist interpretation of their NDEs (Augustine, 2007, p. 207). Pim van Lommel and colleagues found that, between their 2-year and 8-year follow-up interviews, NDErs' belief in life after death had increased slightly, while their interest in spirituality, social attitudes, and the meaning of life increased dramatically, indicating that "this process of [salutary] change after [an] NDE tends to take several years to consolidate" (van Lommel, van
Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001, p. 2043). This, in turn, suggests that “NDE transformations do not result from the NDE itself, but ... from the added layers of meaning and interpretation NDErs place on their NDEs” (Augustine, 2007, p. 210). In my view, a survivalist interpretation of NDEs among most Western NDErs is primarily responsible for the additional transformative effect found among NDErs.

This hypothesis is directly testable by constructing a prospective study in which NDErs are asked about how they interpret their experiences, allowing researchers to analyze the different transformative effects reported by survivalist, nonsurvivalist, and uncertain NDErs. If I am right, one would expect to see the same sorts of transformations among nonsurvivalist NDErs that have been found for nonNDErs who came close to death. Alternatively, if future research falsifies that prediction, I suspect that it will be difficult for advocates of the hallucination hypothesis to provide another plausible candidate for the source of the additional transformative effect reported by NDErs. Only time will tell.

References


Letters to the Editor

Responses to Augustine’s “Does Paranormal Perception Occur in Near-Death Experiences?”

To the Editor:

Keith Augustine acknowledged in his response to my commentary on his article, “Does Paranormal Perception Occur in Near-Death Experiences?” that my data show that NDErs “as a whole were not particularly prone to embellish” their accounts (Augustine, 2007, p. 271). However, he added that “it remains to be seen whether NDErs who, in particular, report ... NDEs with paranormal elements, are prone to embellishment, such as those claiming veridical paranormal perceptions during out-of-body NDEs, accurate prophetic visions shown to them during their experiences, or encounters with recently deceased persons they did not know about at the time of their NDEs” (pp. 271–272). Actually, that evidence does not remain to be seen, because I had already reported it in my study that Augustine cited. In addition to documenting that NDE Scale scores in general were not embellished over a period of two decades, I presented data showing that purportedly paranormal and transcendental NDE features were not embellished but actually declined nonsignificantly over time, including claims of precognitive visions, extrasensory perception, encounters with mystical “presences” or deceased spirits, and out-of-body experiences, which actually diminished significantly over the two decades (Greyson, 2007).

Augustine reported what he described as “relevant, albeit indirect, survey data” bearing on the beliefs of near-death researchers, in an effort to establish their cognitive bias, but none of the studies he cited in fact involved near-death researchers, even indirectly. He noted that a study of the beliefs of Parapsychology Association members showed that very few thought that the evidence supported a belief in survival. However, that survey was conducted in 1975, before the term “near-death experience” had been coined and the phenomenon described (McConnell and Clark, 1980), and therefore had absolutely no
relevance for whether parapsychologists considered NDEs evidence for survival. He also cited a survey of physicians showing greater belief in survival than among other scientists, but that survey is irrelevant to the beliefs of near-death researchers, as only a small handful of the 700,000 physicians in this country have studied NDEs. Likewise, his citation of a survey of beliefs among the general population can hardly be assumed to reflect near-death researchers' beliefs.

Augustine cited the titles of Raymond Moody's books as evidence of his belief in survival of death. In his later book *The Last Laugh* (Moody, 1999), Moody specifically disavowed any responsibility for those titles and attributed the suggestions that NDEs promoted belief in survival to his publishers' and editors' distortion of his work:

> The truth is, in their pursuit of riches and for the sake of sensationalism, publishers/editors hacked so much out of what I wrote that for a long time I haven't recognized myself in those books. The covers that publishers stamp with untruthful exclamations like, "Scientific proof of life after death!" are a constant headache and a continuing source of embarrassment. Hype like that sells books, maybe, but it mangles the credibility of the subject.

> [T]here may be no such thing as life after death.... I'm afraid I may have helped to make people feel "certain" about the existence of life after death because of my work in reporting near-death experiences. This is ironic, since I have never been certain.

> What I am saying is that I have never equated – and I never meant to equate – my reporting of so-called "near-death experiences" with a declaration on my part of the unquestioned existence of "life after death." The media did that. And my publishers did that, with the way they edited and marketed my book. I never assumed myself to be reporting the experiences of people after death, nor have I ever reached the conclusion that because people were having certain kinds of experiences when they were near to death, an ongoing "life" after death had now been proven beyond question. The purpose of my first book, in fact, was to raise the question, not to answer it....

> Yet, the visions of the dying offer no such positive proof. (Moody, 1999, pp. viii and 8–9, italics in the original)

I understand and agree with Augustine's distinction between what near-death researchers say and do and what they believe or hope to find. However, I would extend that same argument to all researchers, not just those who study NDEs. There is no reason to suspect that those who espouse a purely materialistic view of mind-brain relationships are less biased than those who espouse a dualistic view. All research should be held to the same standard of replicability, whether or not it supports the researcher's hypotheses.
I find it peculiar that when confronted with the absence of empirical foundations for his speculations, Augustine repeatedly defended himself by arguing that he never claimed that the bias or embellishment or sensory cuing he postulated for NDE accounts actually existed, but rather simply that they might have existed, as if that provided a reasonable argument for anything. Speculating on what might have occurred, without any empirical indication that it actually did, amounts to an irrefutable (and therefore unscientific) argument. One might as well argue that the demonic possession is responsible for all NDEs. Of course, there is no evidence that demonic possession plays a role, but since we have no evidence that it doesn't, then it might be true. Likewise, Augustine argued that we have no evidence that NDErs embellish their accounts or derive them from subtle sensory cues or that researchers are biased, but since we have no evidence that those things did not happen, then they might have. (Actually, we do have such evidence that NDErs do not embellish their accounts, as noted above.)

I agree with Augustine that the evidence from NDEs so far does not establish a definitive case for survival of death, or even a definitive case for mind separate from brain. The evidence that we have at this point allows multiple interpretations. In the face of such ambiguous data, Augustine privileges the materialist interpretation because he believes the antecedent probabilities are higher for that viewpoint. Where he and I differ is in our estimates of those antecedent probabilities. I think there is sufficient evidence from other lines of research suggesting independence of mind and brain (Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, and Greyson, 2006; Radin, 1997) that the materialist interpretation of NDEs should not be granted special privilege over others. Perhaps most importantly, he and I agree on the need for further research and for better data.

References


To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Keith Augustine’s article on paranormal perception in near-death experiences (NDEs) in the Summer issue of the Journal (Augustine, 2007a) and his subsequent response to commentaries on that article (Augustine, 2007b). However, before addressing some of Augustine’s critique and commentary concerning my own work and views, I would like to enter a couple of qualificatory statements.

First, having formally withdrawn from the field of near-death studies in 2000, I am, as it were, “coming out of retirement” after seven years of silence in order to address some of the issues Augustine raised. Second, I must confess that I do so reluctantly because I am convinced that debates of this sort rarely settle anything. Disagreements between materialists and believers in some sort of transcendent reality have been raging since the days of Democritus and Plato and have never been resolved by either argument or evidence. And even since the beginnings of Spiritualism in the middle of the 19th century and extending through the subsequent rise of psychical research and finally into the modern era of near-death studies, nothing fundamentally has changed. Any reader familiar with the history and personages of the aforementioned domains will recognize that the
contentions, pro and con, in this Journal are merely replays of the same tedious speeches that have been declaimed throughout the years as believers and skeptics have faced off against each other.

It is therefore both naive and preposterous to think this comes down in the end to the matter of "evidence." It does not. People believe and will continue to believe what they do based on personal temperament, worldview, and the normative structure of their reference groups. Thus, in my opinion, this exercise in opinion-mongering is a fruitless undertaking. For the purposes of the following remarks, I will just have to pretend that things are otherwise, but I have no illusions that my words will change anyone's mind.

In order to keep this letter to a reasonable length, I will restrict my comments to just three sections of Augustine's papers. First, I would like to address his views on the veridicality issue in NDE target identification studies; next, I will concern myself with his critique of my research on NDEs in the blind; and, finally, I will respond to his interpretation of my views on the matter of life after death, expressed in his response to Bruce Greyson's commentary (Greyson, 2007).

To begin with, I am in complete agreement with Augustine's summary of the evidence in controlled studies attempting to find evidence of veridical perception during NDEs. While the evidence for such perceptions is abundant from anecdotal sources, as I have already pointed out in Chapter Two of my book Lessons for the Light (Ring and Valarino, 1998), there is so far no evidence at all from controlled studies. Thus, the burden of proof remains on the proponents of this argument.

When it comes to Augustine's critique of the research on NDE in the blind as reported in my book Mindsight (Ring and Cooper, 2007), however, most of his objections can be easily refuted or otherwise dismissed.

Augustine seemed to rely pretty much on Mark Fox's earlier critique of this research (Fox, 2003) and initially made reference to Fox's questioning the fact that our blind respondents seemed to "see" without difficulty, whereas it is well known that when congenitally blind persons recover their sight in later life they often experience significant visual confusion and frustration. However, if Augustine had read our book carefully, he would have seen that this same distress was sometimes reported by our congenitally blind respondents when they found themselves "seeing" for the first time. Take Vicki Umipeg, for example, one of our prime cases. When first asked
how well she coped with her initial experience of seeing, Umipeg told the interviewer:

I had a hard time relating to it [i.e., seeing]. I had a real difficult time relating to it because I've never experienced it. And I was something very foreign to me.... Let's see, how can I put it into words? It was like hearing words and not being able to understand them, but knowing that they were words. And before you'd never heard anything. But it was something new, something you'd not been able to previously attach any meaning to. (Ring and Cooper, 2007, p. 42)

Later Umipeg remarked to me that this experience was not only strange and distracting to her, but actually frightening. So visually relating to things of the physical world at first by blind NDErs is not necessarily always the immediately easy perception that Augustine implied.

Similarly, Augustine, again citing Fox, suggested that perhaps the narratives of blind NDErs were merely confabulations based on the now familiar accounts of these experiences that have had long been disseminated in the media. But some of our principal cases in this book, such as those of Umipeg and Brad Barrows, for instance, were based on near-death incidents that took place in 1973 and 1968, respectively, years before there was any attention at all to NDEs in the media. Indeed, the very term “near-death experience” was not even coined until late 1975 when Raymond Moody's groundbreaking book on this subject, Life After Life, was published.

A related objection that Fox made and Augustine again repeated was that NDE testimony regarding an experience that occurred many years before is to be distrusted as unreliable. This simply shows a lack of direct familiarity with NDErs. In my experience, most critics of NDE research have not spent much, if any, time actually interviewing persons who have had NDEs. I personally do not know anything about Augustine's credentials in this regard, but many of my NDE researcher colleagues have personally interviewed or talked with hundreds, if not thousands, of such persons, as I myself have done. And all such qualified researchers would, I am sure, attest to the fact that the great majority of NDErs who had their experiences many years before their interview will state without qualification that in recalling their NDE, it “was like it happened yesterday,” or will use phrases to that effect. The living memory of NDEs tends to be indelibly implanted and is remarkably stable, even down to small details many years after the event. Just the other day, in fact, an NDE researcher
told me about a woman NDEr who had recently died of Alzheimer's disease. By the time of her death, she no longer recognized those who were talking to her, but she remembered her NDE to the last. And as Greyson pointed out in his commentary to Augustine's article, repeated administration of the NDE Scale to experiencers on two occasions two decades apart showed no change in their recollections of their NDEs (Greyson, 2007).

Another of Fox's arguments, again parroted by Augustine, was more puzzling to me. Fox apparently thought that, because congenitally blind NDErs sometimes do not see at first see in color, their accounts are somehow suspect. But why should we necessarily expect those blind from birth to see immediately in color, when the concept of color may be entirely meaningless to them? For instance, to me one of the facts that made Umipeg's testimony more credible was that, whereas she could detect form, she had no real understanding of the color of objects. All she was aware of was different "brightnesses" of light, and she later wondered whether that was what sighted people meant by "color."

The next reservation that Augustine cited from Fox really made me wonder how desperate some critics may be to search for anything, no matter how farfetched, to question the integrity of those whose work they wish to discount. I am referring here to Fox's apparently finding it remarkable that Sharon Cooper and I were able to locate 21 blind NDErs, something he called (apparently into question) "a remarkable achievement." But the argument about the antecedent improbability of finding as many as 21 such cases is not an argument at all; it is mere insinuation of the rankest sort. What did Augustine (quoting Fox) mean to imply by this? That we made it up? That we did not do the work? On the contrary, we beat the bushes for years trying to find such cases, and Cooper, my research colleague and co-author who actually did most of this work, was indefatigable in her efforts, working with great conscientiousness with as many as 11 different organizations to locate such persons. Perhaps Augustine would like to look at our files and records to assure himself that what we reported was based on the actual interviews we conducted for our research.

As for the snide implication that one should distrust Umipeg's testimony because her case was originally brought to our attention by Kimberly Clark Sharp, that is really close to impugning the integrity of four people - Sharp, Cooper, Umipeg, and myself - and hardly deserves even to be dignified by a response. Still, I am sure if Augustine were to take the trouble to talk to Umipeg directly, he
would be convinced that her account is absolutely authentic, however he might choose to interpret it.

When we come to Augustine's final criticism based on Fox's book, we can at least and at last once again find ourselves on common ground. Fox here claimed that the corroborative evidence Cooper and I provided for veridical perception in the blind was less than definitive and that more research was needed before we could have greater confidence that such perception truly can occur in the blind. This, of course, was precisely what we wrote in our book. We believed that our data and the corroborative evidence we provided were highly suggestive, but they were not conclusive, and we, too, encouraged more research on the subject.

However, Augustine, again following Fox, would seemingly upbraid us for failing to try to provide more evidence from potential witnesses. But, on the contrary, we did provide such evidence, especially for the cases where there was a reasonable possibility for external events originally reported by a blind NDEr to be corroborated by others. (See, for example, the extensive documentation provided for the case of Nancy, in Ring and Cooper, 2007, pp. 109–120). In our defense, we furthermore already had made plain the sheer difficulty that would confront any researcher attempting to do a similar investigation in searching for corroborative evidence of this kind:

The reasons, of course, will be apparent: In many cases (and here Vicki's and Brad's can stand as prototypes), the reported NDEs or OBEs took place so long ago that it is no longer possible to know precisely who the witnesses were or, even if their names were known, where to locate them. In other instances, potential informants have died or were not accessible to us in our interviews. As a result, much of the testimony of our respondents is dependent on their own truthfulness and the reliability of their memories. (Ring and Cooper, 2007, p. 97)

To sum up this section of my rebuttal, Fox and Augustine were certainly well within their rights to argue that the case for veridical perception in the blind has not been conclusively established. That was also our conclusion and it remains a challenge to other researchers to establish the claim. Nevertheless, I trust it will be clear to most readers that almost all of their specific objections to our research are either specious, unwarranted, or unfair. In addition, we believe that any openminded reader of our research, taking the evidence provided as a whole, would agree with us that the case for veridical perception in the blind is nevertheless very plausible, and
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that the accounts provided by our respondents are not easily explained away by any purely naturalistic explanation proffered so far.

Finally, let me respond to Augustine's statements in his response to Greyson's commentary about my belief in life after death, and some of the facts he alleged to support his interpretation that I am an obvious, if sometimes covert, believer in an afterlife. I will not speak to the issue of what other NDE researchers as a whole believe about this matter, since Greyson (2007) has adequately addressed that issue in his commentary. But for the record, and for Augustine's information, I can certainly attest that I never initiated my own study of NDEs because I believed in life after death, as any person who knows me well can readily confirm, nor has that at any time been the basis of my interest in the subject. None of my work has ever been directly concerned with establishing the case for life after death, as a close reading of my last major book on NDEs, Lessons from the Light (Ring and Valarino, 1998), would make clear. Moreover, if Augustine had ever attended any of my many public lectures on NDEs or had sat in on any of my classes on this phenomenon, he would doubtless would have heard me say, whenever the subject of the implications of NDEs for life after death came up, something like the following: "The once nearly dead are not the irretrievably and forever fully dead, so NDE research itself can never definitively answer this question. Besides, the dead are notorious for never returning the questionnaires we send them."

Joking aside, when it comes to Augustine's specific inferences about my beliefs, again some of them were simply fatuous. For example, he alluded to my curriculum vitae, making reference to my work on "prophetic visions." If he had read the article in question, he would have seen that it had nothing whatever to do with life after death. Similarly, my interest in providing evidence for veridical perception was not in itself motivated to prove life after death, but only to demonstrate that such perceptions may not be explained by conventional means. It is a long leap from that to asserting claims for life after death, and I have never taken that leap.

However, what Augustine should realize and what I certainly acknowledge is that after having spoken to many hundreds of NDErs, if not more than a thousand (for I have lost track by now), I have long become aware that from the standpoint of NDErs themselves, there is generally no doubt that the end of physical life is not a dead end. They confidently assert that there is something more. It has been my role and privilege often to speak for the many NDErs who do not write
books or give public talks, and in doing so, I have often tried, as accurately as possible, to reflect the views of those NDErs whom I have chosen to represent. In doing so, I have tried to speak in their voice so that they would be heard, not me. In this respect, the evidence from NDEs is, I believe, highly suggestive that some form of consciousness continues after death; the abundant NDE testimony I have heard and read convinces me, as it does most others, of that. Augustine of course is free to reject such testimony or to insist that it does not prove anything. I can certainly agree with him on the latter point, but I cannot disregard what NDErs have shared with me over a period of more than twenty years, and I dare say that if Augustine had had the opportunity I did during the time I was active in the field, he might well find himself concurring with me. In any case, I encourage him to look into the matter for himself by cultivating direct contact with NDErs.

For my part, I appreciate having had a chance to have my say on these matters, whatever the response to them may be, but I will now again take my leave of the field and happily cede further discussion and debate to others.

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To the Editor:

Can veridical perception experiments prove or disprove the reality of out-of-body experiences? Keith Augustine seemed to think so, in his excellent, critical paper on the subject (Augustine, 2007a) and his subsequent response to the accompanying commentaries (Augustine, 2007b). So let me say first how much I admire his fine contribution. I especially appreciate his incisive analyses of stock tales like “Maria’s Shoe” and “Pam Reynolds’s Story.” Overall, however, I do not think his skeptical probing went deep enough. Hence, I will look at two difficulties he skipped over, or did not address.

The first difficulty regards the matter of the messages purportedly received by near-death experiencers. Veridical perception experiments contemplate transmitting a message to a person in an out-of-body state. So, what sort of message should it be? The studies that Augustine mentioned used symbols, figures, simple animations, or nonsense. He mentioned these proposals without comment or analysis. Perhaps more consideration is needed on the question of signage. Some of these experiments were conducted years ago and were widely publicized and discussed. Accordingly, it is already public knowledge that signs or symbols may be hidden near the ceiling in critical care areas of hospitals. Hence, reporting seeing such a sign could conceivably occur in some near-death experiences due to suggestion. Investigators therefore need to rule out mere guessing or coincidence. Thus, the choice of a sign to use is of crucial importance.

Whatever sign one may choose will create its own set of difficulties. Consider symbols, for example. Symbols come in various distinct types. So here, to simplify, “symbol” will mean “ideogram.” All Western ideograms are composed of only four simple elements: straight lines, circle segments, spirals, and dots, which can be put together in numerous different combinations and arrangements. So, how accurate must a subject’s description of the symbol be, to count as a hit?

Past experience indicates that some investigators might be prone to interpret the results liberally; for example, “Well, she didn’t say anything about spirals, but she did see the straight lines and dots.” The problem is therefore that of narrowing down the criteria to exclude such post hoc rationalizations. And similar ambiguities of interpretation would also arise with any other type of symbol anyone could choose.
Or, alternatively, consider geometrical or other figures. Many people "see" such figures in the hypnagogic state, during the onset of sleep. Others see them during the aura of migraines. And pressure on the retina causes people to see entoptic phosphenes, which are luminous, colored patches with complex, geometrical patterns.

Plainly, then, various physiological disturbances produce visions of geometrical figures. By analogy, we might expect the same of physiological extremes associated with the near-death state. Thus, some may object to the use of geometrical figures in veridical perception experiments. For, presumably, one object of the sign is to exclude alternative explanations, such as physiological causes.

Apparently, another object of the sign is to draw attention to itself. Thus, Penny Sartori used symbols "mounted on brightly coloured day glow paper to attract attention" (Sartori, 2004, p. 35). And that points to another kind of difficulty.

Everything we know about the mind, including capacities like attention, comes from studying minds in bodies. So, in designing studies of veridical perception during out-of-body states, personal narratives of out-of-body experiences are all anyone has to go on. That is the only basis for guessing, for example, whether "brightly coloured day glow paper" retains its attention-getting properties when we are out of our bodies.

In that regard, it is enlightening to revisit the famous shoe on a ledge that attracted Maria's attention. Apparently, she noticed the shoe because it was an anachorism, that is, a thing which is somehow out of place. Tigers roaming African jungles in Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan novels are a well-known literary example of an anachorism, as tigers in reality are native only to Asia.

Anachorisms are an effective device for attracting attention. That is why they appear so frequently in the news. Think of all the stories of children stuck in wells, bears wandering New Jersey suburbs, or whales swimming up rivers. Clearly, anachorisms attract attention. So an object out of place might seem a logical choice for a visual target in these experiments.

Nevertheless, the investigators Augustine mentioned used abstract signs rather than objects. Something abstract or symbolic was substituted for something physically concrete. Of these, Madelaine Lawrence's nonsense sentences were a peculiarly appropriate and historically significant choice. As Augustine noted, Lawrence's electronic sign "contained a nonsense statement like 'the popsicles
are in bloom' and I changed it randomly. It was nonsense so that no one could say he overheard a conversation about the words on the sign" (Lawrence, 1997, pp. 158–159).

I will not speculate about what might have been in Lawrence's mind when she chose nonsense sentences for her sign. Instead, what follows puts her choice in a historical context that may be enlightening. For, in religion, magic, and literature, nonsense has been a gateway to the afterlife world. I describe numerous examples in a forthcoming book, *The Secret World of Nonsense*.

Shaman songs consisted of nonsense syllables and meaningless refrains combined with other, meaningful parts to create a unitary effect. Supposedly, singing these songs magically transported shamans to the other side. Certain shamans of Siberia, when crossing the barrier to the other world, cried out to the audience: "By the power of [nonsense] songs we cross it!" (Eliade, 1964/1951, p. 201).

Similarly, Lucian of Samosata (A.D. 117–180) made fun of the magical nonsense words Greek psychagogues used to call up the spirits of the dead (Lucian, 1961/2nd century). *The Greek Magical Papyri* (Betz, 1986) consisted of recipes for magical procedures for attracting love, casting spells, and evoking the deceased. These documents were recovered from the desert sands of Egypt and are about 2,000 years old. They were written in Greek and represented the commonplace practices of Greek folk religion. The recipes for calling up apparitions and making contact with the dead contained plenty of strange-sounding nonsense words, for people believed that the right combination of nonsense words could project paranormal powers.

This ancient magical belief was preserved in children's literature and popular entertainment. I could cite dozens of examples, but an easily accessible, representative instance was the movie *Beetle Juice* (Burton, 1988), a comedy about life after death in which a medium began a séance by chanting a nonsensical formula of words to summon spirits of the dead.

Nonsense symbolizes transitions between this world and the afterlife world. Nonsense is also integral to other transitional states. Many people "hear" snippets of nonsense during the hypnagogic period, while drifting to sleep. Indeed, some of these nonsensical snippets sound a lot like the very example Lawrence used! Moreover, people who talk in their sleep commonly talk nonsense.

Numerous medical conditions can make people talk nonsense. These conditions include overwhelming stress; psychosis; strokes and
transient ischemic attacks; intoxication with substances like nitrous oxide, ethylene, or mercury; and delirium stemming from terminal illness.

The above considerations indicate that people may be more likely to talk nonsense when they are near death. So using nonsense sentences in veridical perception experiments would not eliminate the possibility of a subject producing the sentence by coincidence. Even so, nonsense is a magnet for attention. In fact, nonsense attracts and holds attention more effectively than most prosaic, meaningful language. So, in that respect, nonsense would be a good choice for an experimental sign.

However, nonsense is confusing. For example, it is known that when people hear nonsense words, they blame themselves for their incomprehension, rather than the speaker. They conclude that they are becoming hard of hearing, or losing their minds. So is it wise to place nonsense sentences where dying people might see them? Some people have reported that they felt confused at first when they found themselves out of their bodies. Would seeing a nonsense sentence under those trying circumstances interfere with their reality testing?

My point has to do with signs in general. Any sign chosen for these experiments would present its own, distinctive set of unanticipated complications.

Other signage factors would affect investigators' interpretations, too. For example, in Sartori's study, eight patients had out-of-body experiences, but none reported seeing the symbols. She explained that “not all of the patients rose high enough out of their bodies and some reported viewing the situation from a position opposite to where the symbols were situated” (Sartori, 2004, p. 38). So, to preclude this possibility, investigators would need to post signs at multiple spots around the room. And since it is a matter of height, the various signs would need to be placed at different altitudes. The signs could be arranged in a series, from lowest to highest. The lowest sign might read: “Out of your body? Come back soon.” Then, the middle sign could say: “Return to your body immediately!” And the uppermost sign could say, “Prepare to meet your Maker.”

The second difficulty that I wish to address involves the “transcendent fallacy.” Generally, people feel certain that their personal near-death experiences are genuine glimpses of a world beyond death. That is largely because of the ineffable, super-real or hyper-real quality of this experience. They typically report that things in the near-death experience seem “more real than real”!
That was what William James (1902) identified as the self-certifying, noetic quality of mystical experiences. This near-death consciousness also seems to flow outside of the space-time continuum and into another stream of reality. Time and space as we know them do not figure into the transcendent world envisioned in personal narratives of near-death experiences. That afterworld of love and light is timeless and spaceless, according to a mountain of testimony.

Suppose that a person gets out of his or her body, sees a hidden sign, returns to the body, and accurately reports the sign to investigators. Positive results like that in these experiments would transform basic concepts of what human beings are. Even so, it would not be proof of a life after death, for out-of-body experiences apparently take place within the known framework of time and space.

Near-death experiences are made up of multiple different elements. Their out-of-body component does not touch on their transcendent aspects. A spatial, temporal out-of-body experience, even if definitively verified, would not prove a timeless afterdeath world beyond physical space.

Therefore, I believe that Augustine was mistaken when he claimed that a positive result in veridical perception experiments would prove life after death. The problem is similar to that of Ceber's objection in Plato's Phaedo (1993/360 B.C.). Ceber granted that the soul might leave the body at death but argued that, even then, it might wind down and eventually cease to exist. Ceber had a series of incarnations in mind rather than out-of-body experiences. Nevertheless, a parallel difficulty exists in the present case. That is, it would not follow from "something leaves the body" when someone is near death that that "something" would persist after the annihilation of the body. But even the notion that "something leaves the body" is highly dubious.

For the sake of argument, suppose that the experiment were to succeed. That is, suppose that someone were to return from a near-death experience and correctly describe the sign. Even then, it would not follow that "something left that person's body." Simply because we have veridical perceptions of things distant from our bodies does not mean that "something leaves the body."

We can feel distant objects through a stick, as blind people know, or, we can feel a kite through its string, even when the kite is at a considerable height. Moreover, in such cases, the sensations we experience seem to be outside of our bodies. Anyone can experience this odd phenomenon by a simple experiment. Just grip the end of a six- to twelve-inch, straight stick with the fingertips of one hand.
Next, put the other, blunt end on a hard, flat surface, such as a tabletop. Close your eyes, introspect, and move the stick around on the surface. Then ask yourself where you feel the sensation of the surface. Most reply that they feel the sensation on the surface. Therefore, at that point their conscious sensations seem to exist several inches outside their bodies. Nevertheless, that does not prove that “something left the body.”

Augustine accurately quoted a passage from my works that made it seem I believed in an afterlife. So, I thank him for giving me another opportunity to correct the record. The passage he quoted was a well-meaning editor’s reformulation of my original words, which were admittedly pretty abstruse. The gist of my original words was that near-death experiences probably engendered the very notion of life after death. Therefore, in a purely vacuous sense, what people with near-death experiences see is what has always been known as the afterlife world. Of course, this is only a conjecture. Still, I think it is interesting that near-death experiences may have contributed to the origins of the religious idea of life beyond death. But I neither believe nor disbelieve in an afterlife, and never have. I continue to maintain that life after death is not yet a scientific question.

Could rational studies be devised that would connect directly with transcendental aspects of near-death experiences? If so, that would circumvent the transcendent fallacy implicit in veridical perception experiments. In a forthcoming book, I describe a new method of rational investigation that addresses the transcendent dimension of near-death experiences.

References


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To the Editor:

Keith Augustine (2007) repeatedly invoked the epistemological standard that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. However, he ignored William James's "white crow" standard: "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show no that crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white" (James, 1897, p. 5). As applied to the nature of near-death experiences (NDEs), this standard would suggest that one example of a veridical NDE not explainable by any means other than discarnate consciousness would be sufficient to prove its existence. My reading of the literature has not convinced me that we yet have that one irrefutable instance, but I remain hopeful that we shall.

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To the Editor:

I thoroughly enjoyed the latest issue of the Journal that featured an article by Keith Augustine with subsequent comments by near-death researchers. I have some additional comments as a near-death experiencer, a clinician, and former researcher in the field of near-death studies.

When I interviewed near-death experiencers back in the early days of the research in the late 1980s, I sometimes heard experiencers tell me about a collection of three books called *A Course in Miracles* (1975). They would say things like, “These books have come from the same place we've been,” or, “This Course understands what we were shown and couldn’t bring back.”

Like other near-death experiencers, I would not look at any book that attempted to explain where I had been. I did not want anything to “muddy the waters” of my memory of the most profound moments of this lifetime. I resisted looking at *A Course in Miracles* until years later, when I found these books literally landing in my lap in a profound, though not paranormal, way. And I agree that the Course does come from where I had been and it does spell out what I learned in my life review but could not articulate back then. But now I can, because of the Course, and have co-authored a book (*Whitfield, Whitfield, Jyoti, and Park*, 2006) and have another one in process that are products of the psychology of *A Course in Miracles* and of my life review in my near-death experience 32 years ago.

In a nutshell, what I learned in my experience, specifically my life review, and what the Course teaches, is that the life review “is a final healing in which we separate out our holy thoughts from our insane thoughts, choosing to retain only the former” (Perry, 2007, p. 363). As the Course says:

> You who believed that God’s Last Judgment would condemn the world to hell along with you, accept this holy truth: God’s Judgment is the gift of the Correction He bestowed on all your errors, freeing you from them, and all effects they ever seemed to have. (*A Course in Miracles*, 1975, *Workbook Part II*.10.3.1, cited in Perry, 2007, p. 363)

Of course, coming back here into this body with this mind, it was not that easy. I knew deep in my “soul” all that knowledge of “holy” thoughts and their differentiation from “insane” thoughts needed years and some good psychotherapy to percolate before I could start to awaken from the dream I was living in this life time.
I do not believe that any one group, scientific or otherwise, will ever come to definite conclusions about near-death experiences. But to clinicians who accept and use them to help their clients grow, and to NDErs like me whose path totally changed after the experience, this knowledge is the true fruit of the NDE. And it is the bottom line of what we have learned. A Course in Miracles validates over and over that we are dreaming our lives; that this whole physical plane is a dream; and that what you believe will happen, will happen – until we wake up and realize that heaven and hell are right here, right now. It is all what we choose to project.

To illustrate the above point, in 1988 I was a guest on the “Larry King Live” television show as an expert on the near-death experience (NDE). Without telling me, they brought in a neurologist from the University of Maryland who was a specialist in death and dying. He negated my experience and my research and, no matter how I tried to explain the aftereffects of an NDE and how promising they are for personal growth, he continued to be negative. During the last commercial, when our microphones were off, I leaned over and said to him, “When you die, you will see for yourself that these things do happen.” He answered, in a sad voice, “No, nothing good ever happens to me!”

So, what he believes will happen, will happen. And, for all the authors of all the articles evaluating the “scientific validity” of the NDE, I ask only one thing: Do not throw the baby out with the bath water! Believe that it changes people for the better, because it does.

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