To the Editor:

The clash of the titans transpiring in the Summer 2000 Issue of the Journal (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000) begs for an impartial response. In the spirit of both essays, I want to say up front that in addition to being a researcher, I am a committed evangelical Christian. And beyond having
read Michael Sabom's most recent book, *Light & Death* (Sabom, 1998), I had an enjoyable conversation with him a while back about my own upcoming book. In addition, I have read and greatly enjoyed Kenneth Ring's work.

With that said, I feel like the person who said of the Middle East conflict, "Why can't the Jews and Arabs just sit down at the bargaining table like good Christians and work out their differences?" Unfortunately, like so many discussions involving God, the differences in perspective between Ring and Sabom regarding the near-death experience (NDE) are manifold. Furthermore, they have gone well beyond a scientific examination of the phenomenon to what the phenomenon means.

Therein lies the rub. Throughout the history of modern science, the hard sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and to a lesser extent biology, have sought to steer clear of discussing the meaning behind phenomena. The reason is clear: Not only is it irrelevant to an analysis of the effect, but there is no way to quantify meaning. For example, it is not necessary for a physicist to find and explain the meaning behind Dannion Brinkley's experience with a lightning bolt in order to discuss the phenomenon of lightning and its effect on human tissue.

This approach was foundational to the success of modern science. Beginning with Galileo, we found a way to pose "scientific questions" so that the researcher could avoid any exploration of a thing's meaning. In so doing, scientists were able to answer the question: "How does one discuss something for which there is no language?" By objectively quantifying phenomena, that is, by measuring them, scientists created a standardized language that made it possible to discuss findings. To this end, scientists created innumerable scales and units, such as degrees and volts, to measure effects under investigation.

As scientists attempting to discern the nature of the NDE, we are duty-bound to find a way to measure what we find. But in the case of NDEs, the particulars make it difficult. Fortunately, science is more than just a mechanical making of measurements; it is also a way of knowing. And to further that knowing, scientists and philosophers of science developed specific philosophies to guide their approach. By the time science had fully established itself as a superior way of ascertaining a fact, positivism, empiricism, materialism, reductionism, and determinism had formed its framework. Having a rule book kept arguments to a minimum. If there were sharp disagreements (and there certainly were), scientists could always boil them down to a matter of measurement.
Furthermore, in an attempt to augment and facilitate this approach, scientists, following Isaac Newton, began to develop scientific theories. To be scientific, a theory had to do three separate things. First, it had to explain the phenomenon; that is, break it down into its constituent parts. Second, it had to describe the activity; that is, detail the mechanism behind the phenomenon and how it was integrated into its milieu. And third and most importantly, a theory must predict; that is, it must accurately predict the future state of the thing under investigation.

These were the tests to establish a successful scientific theory. Generally, scientists were somewhat flexible on the first two criteria, because those factors are subject to constant refinement. But they were unyielding when it came to the third. If a theory could not predict, it was clear that the proponent did not have the goods. All scientific postulation was rigorously subjected to direct measurement, and if the numbers did not work out, the theory was tossed onto the trash heap of history.

But after Charles Darwin, things were never the same. Regardless of what one believes about Darwin, his writings forever confused the nature of scientific theories. We still talk of Darwin's theory of evolution today, and yet we know it predicts nothing beyond the tautology that things change. Many, like the noted philosopher of science Karl Popper (1972), maintained that Darwin's concept of evolution is not a theory at all, but a paradigm unto itself. Yet the question of who is right about Darwin is immaterial here. What is germane is that it was at that point in history that the rhetorical-argument-as-theory gradually began to supplant the process theory as a tool of scientists.

This trend was intensified with the coming of Sigmund Freud and his followers, and the advent of the so-called "soft sciences," those sciences where factual information can have a qualitative as well as a quantitative aspect. The principle reason for this is that the soft sciences study human habits. Yet problematically, individual humans are like subatomic particles in a quantum matrix. They generally follow certain "laws" of human nature in the aggregate, but they seem subject to a kind of Uncertainty Principle for People when on their own.

As a result, psychological "theories" dealing with and purporting to explain individual human behavior have proliferated. Some of our best psychological "theories" work a significant percentage of the time. But the days of Newtonian-like mathematical precision across the board in science are long past. Today, it is more relevant to speak in terms of researchers' points of view when it comes to their study of phenomena,
particularly human phenomena. Because psychologists' beliefs are now synonymous with their theories, some might say that today we have almost as many different psychological schools of thought as we have psychologists. This highlights a significant roadblock to scientific study of the mind. In fact, for this very reason, some researchers in the hard sciences maintain that human nature cannot actually be "scientifically" studied at all.

At one time, this was the finger "hard scientists" pointed at the soft sciences so that they could maintain their air of superiority as the true minions of science. But today that is no longer possible because hard scientists are as guilty as the soft scientists of muddying the waters of what science is, thanks largely to Albert Einstein. The fall-out from Einstein's three famous theories of reality led inexorably to the falsification of determinism, empiricism, materialism, reductionism, and positivism as infallible guideposts in the acquisition of scientific knowledge.

Moreover, thanks to Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, we now know that the ability to acquire any kind of factual knowledge about our reality is limited in principle; and we have been bouncing up against those limits for decades. The current conundrum with respect to scientific knowing always seems to bring forth a discussion of what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called a "paradigm shift." Today's paradigm shift within science is a direct result of the failure and/or limits of the above philosophies of science to permit the further acquisition of factual knowledge. This is a good thing for near-death researchers because it allows investigators to justify pushing the envelop, an act necessitated by the particulars of the case.

In the main, however, this paradigm shift has accelerated the aforementioned historical trend whereby rhetorical arguments continue to garner an ever larger share of scientific discourse. Today, almost everything in science is controversial. The further we get from direct measurement of phenomena, the more we resort to arguing. Yet arguing can be instructive; it is a time-tested, albeit annoying, method of arriving at reasonable conclusions.

At this point, therefore, it is instructive to ask: what are scientists really arguing about? The answer lies in the limits of the previous paradigm. Under the tenets of science outlined by the founding fathers of modern science, the animus for research rested on the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which said in essence that every effect must have a reason behind it.

According to Princeton philosopher of science Diogenes Allen (1989), the findings of astrophysicists and astronomers resulting from
Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity led scientists to begin asking PSR questions like “Why does the universe exist?” Such questions inevitably led directly to questions of meaning and purpose. Yet scientists managed to keep such questions bottled up until a single event forced them into the mainstream of scientific discourse.

In the fall of 1973, many of the world’s most renowned astronomers, astrophysicists, and mathematicians, including Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose, Robert Wagoner, Joseph Silk, and John Wheeler, gathered in Poland to mark Nicholaus Copernicus’ 500th birthday. There a presentation by Cambridge cosmologist Brandon Carter entitled “Large Number Coincidences and the Anthropic Principle in Cosmology” (Carter, 1974) brought questions of meaning squarely into the open for the first time. Today, his Anthropic Principle, which states in essence that the universe was specifically crafted to foster life on earth, remains controversial, not because its precepts are untrue, but because it forces a discussion of meaning upon scientists who have taken great pains to eschew anything metaphysical. Allowing such questions to be asked, however, proved a boon for near-death research because it is almost impossible for investigators in this field to avoid them.

Mathematical physicist Paul Davies (1999) put the problem like this: If scientists were to analyze a neon sign based strictly on the traditional philosophies of science, we would get a complete breakdown of the component parts, as well as an explanation regarding their function and overall operation. No such materialist/reductionist analysis, however, is germane to the point of a neon sign, which is to transmit information, a decidedly nonmaterial thing. The point of the sign is not to give the parts something to do; it is to foster meaning. As such, no analysis of the sign can be complete unless it addresses the meaning precipitated by the sign’s information content.

And this brings us directly to the argument between Ring and Sabom. Even if we could measure an NDE as we measure lightning bolts, the analysis would still not be complete because this experience suggests a profound meaning beyond the mechanistic details of the event. Characteristically, the most significant series of events in our lifetime poses limitations upon scientific investigators that may be unparalleled in the annals of science. It is impossible to draw a line as to where it begins and where it ends, almost as if the measurement problem of quantum mechanics has a new iteration in the interface between biology, medicine, physiology, and psychology.

In my view, however, we do not need to verify thousands of separate instances of NDEs to show that they what they purport to be: in Melvin
Morse's words, "the best objective evidence of what it is like to die" (1996, p. 309). If researchers can show scientifically that in even one instance people leave their bodies as the body dies and proceed to another realm where they meet beings with capabilities and knowledge far beyond our own, then the phenomenon is established.

From that point on, like the neon sign, its meaning far exceeds any discussion, no matter how deep, of the parts. Unfortunately, the process of deriving and attaching meanings to the NDE is inherently fraught with argument. The nature of meaning is our oldest and perhaps most difficult argument. Yet if scientists are going to weigh in on this discussion they need hard facts. We have to save the speculation for others. For obvious reasons, however, we are stymied as investigators when it comes to gathering otherworldly facts on the NDE. And even when we finally do get to see a few of the pieces in what could conceivably be an infinitely large jigsaw puzzle, we are confronted with Winston Churchill's riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma all over again.

Therefore, interpretation is the order of the day. The qualitative assessment demands that researchers bring all that they are and all that they know to bear upon the analysis. Consequently, the conflicting views of reality offered by Ring and Sabom are a product of not only who and what they are, but what they believe. These are very difficult arguments to win or lose because beliefs are arrived at emotionally and therefore do not generally succumb to reason. Fortunately, in this case, it is not necessary to prove either wrong; it is entirely possible that Ring and Sabom are both correct.

Personally, I sympathize with Sabom regarding the direction of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). I was aghast when I read an article in IANDS' newsletter, Vital Signs, by a woman who was trying to use her out-of-body experience to justify her homosexuality as a blessing from God (Breaux, 1998). Such miscues demonstrate an inappropriate political agenda on the part of the editorial staff, and this kind of thing is increasingly becoming the norm. Moreover, for many, near-death studies appear more literary genre than scientific pursuit. As such, it is sometimes difficult to tell where hard science ends and New Age trendiness begins.

On the other hand, if God is perfect, ultimate truths cannot be dichotomous, since duplicity would be an imperfection. True facts are incontrovertible statements. Why should Christians fear truth, even if it is somewhat uncomfortable? By definition, we only seek The Way, The Truth, and The Light; yet we are notorious for bickering endlessly
amongst ourselves over every little thing. Christendom has 243 different denominations, and it is almost impossible to find a single belief they all have in common. One man's heresy is another man's dogma. This is precisely why the early church was forced to embrace creeds to solidify the mainstream of Christian thought.

As such, when Sabom referred to the notion that NDEs could be a deceptive move by the devil in a larger spiritual context, he was absolutely right: they could be. But at this point it is simply an unproven allegation with no basis in fact. Biblically, questions of evil and specifically the problem of evil are wide-ranging and remain generally unresolved. And if we invoke Occam's Razor (the Law of Parsimony), which states in essence that it is illogical in solving dilemmas to allude to factors beyond the bare minimum required to solve the problem, we can say that the NDE is explainable without allusion to the devil.

But here again is another rub. If the NDE is truly a close encounter with God or somebody like Him, we are witnessing, in my opinion, the greatest series of events since those in Palestine 2000 years ago. And with both atheists and infidels now claiming to have near-death experiences, it would seem that God's reach extends beyond the walls of Christendom.

If we merely take the best that both Ring and Sabom have to offer, we are far better off than we started. Together, their work offers clear, demonstrable, scientific evidence that the NDE is a phenomenon that ranges well beyond the bounds of brain chemistry. Sabom's Atlanta work and Ring's work with the congenitally blind were both groundbreaking to the point of causing earthquakes in science. The big question they leave us with, however, is this: Should they, in their role as research scientists, be telling us just what the NDE means?

In the old paradigm, the answer was clearly "no," but the new paradigm is a different story. Being centered on all four of Aristotle's causes, rather than just agency, the new scientific paradigm recognizes the existence of meaning and purpose. A belief exists that the emerging paradigm will eventually be distilled into a holistic way of gathering facts that encompasses all three of mankind's methods of knowing: scientific knowing based on systematic replication, philosophic knowing based on reason and logic, and theological knowing based on Søren Kierkegaard's sense of inward subjectivity. All three have their limitations, but together they form a powerful way of knowing a fact.

And if we look at the stages of an NDE in light of these three, some basic truths become evident. First, it is apparent that we do in fact have a soul. Second, there is life after death and we will be held accountable for
our conduct here on earth. Third, that phenomena (beings) exist beyond this realm of time and space that play an active role in our endeavors. And fourth, whether the NDE is from God (as I believe) or from Satan, we are enmeshed in a spiritual battle wherein we are implored to foster Godliness at every turn during our stay here on the planet. These are extrapolated truths from information uncovered during wide-ranging near-death studies. As such they offer a basis for common ground that all can live with to our mutual benefit.

All of this brings us full circle. Arguments will continue about the nature and scope of the NDE, as well they should. For people who seek oneness with God, they offer a profound glimpse at the meaning and purpose behind our existence. And if we can use Jesus’ words to frame the context within which these arguments will transpire, I would choose these: “You shall know them by their fruits.” This is a cosmic law: The fruits we manifest are indeed an indication of the reality to which we accede. So the question is, “What kinds of fruits do near-death experiencers produce?” Answering this question will give us some indication as to whether the phenomenon is a good thing or a bad thing.

This leads me to one final question: If the Jews and Arabs do sit down at the table and work out their differences like good Christians, can we all agree that in the final analysis we are all talking about the very same God? I do not know, but I am dying to find out.

References


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