

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 Cebes's objection in Plato's *Phaedo* (1993/360 B.C.). Cebes granted that the soul might leave the body at death but argued that, even then, it might wind down and eventually cease to exist. Cebes 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.

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