

### **Augustine Responds**

To the Editor:

Having presented a comprehensive three-part critique of survivalist interpretations of near-death experiences (NDEs) and defended it against multiple commentators, I am generally inclined to allow readers of this Journal to reflect upon the entire exchange and take from it what they will without offering further comment. However, I feel compelled to point out a number of fallacies that Neal Grossman commits when, ironically, accusing me of fallacious reasoning. Although Grossman prefaces his letter with the disclaimer that it “will not be a response to anything [I] wrote,” he explicitly implicates me along with “other debunkers” in customarily employing fallacious reasoning, and in any case there is no point in him bringing up errors “that Augustine and his fellow materialist ideologues frequently commit” if he does not mean to imply that my critique contains them.

Right from the start, Grossman stereotypes those skeptical of survivalist interpretations of NDEs as ideologues plagued by “unwavering certainty” in a materialist faith. But his comments reveal his own “unwavering certainty” that NDEs and other phenomena represent a smoking-gun falsification of materialism. One wonders if *any* evidence could ever persuade Grossman of the truth of strict materialism or a related view, such as David Chalmers’s property dualism, in which mental states are nonphysical *properties* of the physical brain and thus irreducible to brain states, but existentially dependent upon the properly functioning brain in which they inhere (Chalmers, 1996).

Indeed, one wonders if Grossman thinks that it is possible for anyone to hold a materialist or similar position *rationally on the basis of the empirical evidence*. His comments strongly insinuate that anyone who does not accept the reality of mind-brain separation – a class including the vast majority of cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind, I might add – is simply burying his or her head in the sand. And yet, contrary to what Grossman would have us believe, the evidence for survival of bodily death does not even approach that of an established scientific fact like plate tectonics or global warming. Consequently, Grossman seems to possess the very ideological traits which he attributes so disparagingly to those he disagrees with.

Since Grossman does not engage any of the specific arguments or evidence that I offered, it seems that he does not take issue with *how* I arrived at my conclusions, but with *what* conclusions I arrived at. If Grossman thinks that the *data* favoring survival are compelling, why does he not simply cite them, as Michael Sabom does in his excellent preceding letter? In lieu of letting the data speak for themselves, Grossman opts to attack *ideas* that he happens to find disagreeable. But his personal proclivities, like my own or those of anyone else, are irrelevant. His comments seem to betray an ideological commitment to a robust dualism, as he does not intend to respond to anything that I actually wrote, but simply to his stereotype of “the fallacious reasoning that [I] and other debunkers customarily employ” lest *serious* researchers be “taken in” by my sophistry. It is as if he feels compelled to offer a defense of the faith to protect “naïve” researchers from straying from the flock. Having already persuaded Raymond Moody (2007), Allan Kellehear (2007), and Mark Fox (2007) that I have some valuable insights to contribute, I am a dangerous heretic indeed.

Just what *evidence*, in principle, could falsify Grossman’s dualistic commitments? Since he characterizes my brief reference to an

argument against personal survival from the concomitant variation of mental states and brain states as a nonsensical fallacy decisively refuted by William James over a century ago, evidently no scientific findings could ever shake Grossman's dualistic faith. In fact, James's response to the strong neurophysiological evidence against personal survival is just one of about a dozen such responses, some of which overlap, and some of which are mutually exclusive (Braude, 1993; Broad, 1925; Hart, 1959; Hasker, 1983; Hasker, 1999; James, 1989; Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, and Greyson, 2006; McTaggart, 1906; Murphy, 1945; Popper and Eccles, 1984; Stokes, 1993; Swinburne, 1997). It seems that Grossman commits yet another fallacy in presuming that producing an answer to a problem is equivalent to producing an *adequate* answer.

I cannot develop the various lines of evidence supporting the neurophysiological argument here, but in essence it maintains that the mind-brain correlations that we actually find, such as the dramatic effects of brain damage on mental functioning, are *extremely unlikely* to obtain if the mind can exist independently of the brain. Bertrand Russell succinctly captured its force: "The argument is only one of probability, but it is as strong as those upon which most scientific conclusions are based" (Russell, 1957, p. 51). Similarly, Paul Edwards noted that "We have just as strong evidence for concluding that certain brain states bring about certain conscious states as we have for any number of causal relations between purely physical phenomena which are not questioned" (Edwards, 1992, p. 294). One would hope that the fact that prominent parapsychologists like C. D. Broad, Gardner Murphy, Douglas Stokes, and John Beloff have conceded the strength of this evidence would have given Grossman some pause in being so dismissive of its implications (Beloff, 1997; Broad, 1925; Murphy, 1945; Stokes, 1993).

Instead, Grossman claims that the neuroscientific data "will always be neutral with respect to the hypotheses" that the brain produces consciousness, or merely "transmits" it. But is he talking about one of those mere logical possibilities which he later derides, such as the possibility that we are all living in the Matrix, or is he talking about what he characterizes as a real scientific possibility? Ironically, he writes of young-Earth creationism that "no one reading this seriously believes that evolutionary theory is on less solid ground simply because this logical possibility cannot be refuted." I might add that no one reading this *should* seriously believe that the dependence of

consciousness on the brain *for its existence* is on less solid ground simply because the mere logical possibility of “transmission” cannot be refuted – *if* it cannot be refuted.

On that note, how does Grossman know that, in principle, no evidence could ever favor the productive hypothesis over the transmissive one? In fact, we already have such evidence: the generation of two centers of consciousness after severing the corpus callosum connecting the two cerebral hemispheres. William Hasker, in developing his own idiosyncratic defense of dualistic survival, writes of such evidence:

Even more telling are the split-brain data. Eccles admits that in split-brain cases “there is remarkable evidence in favour of a limited self-consciousness of the right hemisphere” (*Evolution of the Brain: Creation of the Self* [London: Routledge, 1989], p. 210). This is especially significant coming from Eccles, who is essentially a Cartesian dualist: it is hardly intelligible that a Cartesian consciousness should be divided by an operation on the brain, so Eccles’s admission has to reflect strong empirical pressure from the experimental data. (Hasker, 1999, p. 193n42)

Of course, no matter what neurophysiological evidence is forthcoming, Grossman can always use the escape clause that the brain filters some *pure* “already existing consciousness into the particular form that is us.” But that comment inadvertently concedes the argument, for when we talk about survival after death, we are not talking about the persistence of some abstract Aristotelian active intellect or universal cosmic mind, but *personal* survival, the “human *personality* and its survival of bodily death.” Given the extent of *known* correlations between mind and brain, any immaterial mental thing that might be temporarily intertwined with an organic brain is going to be radically *diminished*, not enhanced, once the “filter” of the brain is destroyed – so much so that any “unfiltered” mind that comes out on “the other side,” stripped of all its “memories, feelings, behavioral dispositions, and other personality traits” (Stokes, 1993, p. 76), would not be the person we knew in life. And as Stokes explicitly noted, all of the various sources of so-called survival evidence, including out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and NDEs, actually *conflict with* the transmissive hypothesis, as they suggest that whatever survives death *retains* such individualistic traits (Stokes, 1993).

In his first paragraph, Grossman engages in an informal fallacy known as “poisoning the well,” conveying that readers can simply

ignore any arguments or evidence I offered because I am pushing some agenda. But however readers judge whether I have some agenda to push, such judgments are irrelevant to whether my arguments succeed, whether my data are accurate, and whether my conclusions are reasonable extrapolations from the data. To maintain otherwise is like contending that because Grossman is in the middle class, his students can safely dismiss any arguments he makes that the richest 1 percent of Americans should pay higher taxes than they currently do. This poisons the well by suggesting that his argumentation is motivated by promoting his own personal benefit. The implication here is that readers of this Journal can safely ignore my arguments and evidence, bypassing the need to refute any of the arguments or evidence I offer. This sort of tactic is designed to close dialogue before it can even get off the ground. Since Augustine is an ideological “debunker,” survivalists need not take anything he has to say seriously.

Next Grossman claims that I fallaciously argued that the existence of hallucinatory NDEs constituted sufficient evidence to refute the proposition “Some NDEs involve veridical [paranormal] perception.” It is puzzling that Grossman thinks that I argued such, given that the first of my three articles (Augustine, 2007a) focused solely on claims of veridical paranormal perception in NDEs. If I had thought that the existence of NDEs containing false perceptions of the physical world were sufficient to refute such claims, I would not have bothered to address them independently of my presentation of NDEs with hallucinatory features (Augustine, 2007c). What I did argue was that “NDEs with overt hallucinatory features do give us some *grounds* to suspect that NDEs that are not so *explicitly* hallucinatory are hallucinations as well” (Augustine, 2007d, p. 60), and I supported that by analogy to the hypothetical discovery of discrepant alien abduction experiences.

In fact, apart from the evidence for the dependence of consciousness on the brain, it is the *combination* of merely ambiguous evidence for paranormal perception during NDEs and clear instances of NDEs with hallucinatory features that provides the strongest grounds for understanding NDEs as hallucinations. And readers can rest assured that I addressed what near-death researchers themselves have proposed as the best anecdotal cases of paranormal perception in NDEs by noting that my first article (Augustine, 2007a) considered three out of four of the examples of veridical NDEs highlighted in the

“Key Facts about Near-Death Experiences” brochure available on the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) website ([www.iands.org](http://www.iands.org)).

I will largely ignore Grossman’s implication that I conflate strong scientific evidence with mathematical or logical proof, as that straw man is nowhere to be found in my critique. It is nonetheless notable that he points out that “The demand for ‘proof’ in matters empirical is logically impossible” in this sense of “proof” – as if this comment was not, in his words, “a totally trivial point that everyone grants from the outset.”

His statement that the evidence for the independence of mind from body is “very strong and very compelling” is more of a statement of opinion than of fact. He certainly cannot appeal to any sort of scientific consensus that there is “very strong and very compelling” evidence for the independence of consciousness from the brain, as he could if he were talking about natural selection or a heliocentric model of the solar system. And however strong Grossman takes the evidence for mind-brain independence to be, it pales in comparison to the neurophysiological evidence that having a properly functioning brain is a necessary condition for having a human mind. That, not some “fundamaterialist” ideology, is why almost all contemporary neuroscientists hold that “consciousness is inseparable from the functioning of individual brains” (Beyerstein, 1991, p. 44). His appeal to a preponderance of the evidence also overstates his case, since if anything a preponderance of the *total available evidence* strongly points to the dependence of consciousness on the brain, and at best it is an open question whether a preponderance of the so-called *survival evidence alone* really is best explained on the survival hypothesis. Moreover, the *amount* and *quality* of the data supporting the dependence of consciousness on the brain is far greater than that supporting the survival hypothesis.

In another straw man fallacy, Grossman implies that I equivocate between the *logical* possibility of a proposition and its “empirical possibility,” which Grossman characterizes as having empirical evidence that the proposition is true. “Science is concerned with real possibilities only,” we are told, begging the question that my critique does not concern any “real” possibilities. If I had not already disavowed any taste for the superpsi hypothesis, Grossman could be forgiven for illustratively mentioning it. Falsifiable psi hypotheses appealing to living persons’ *limited* paranormal powers in lieu of

survival might not qualify as “real possibilities” either, given no compelling evidence that such powers exist, let alone play a role in OBEs and NDEs. But I explicitly disavowed appealing to *any* paranormal processes (Augustine, 2007b), since explaining a known phenomenon like NDEs in terms of an unknown contrivance is no explanation at all. It is also telling that I disavowed exotic possibilities like bilocation precisely because they do not amount to “real possibilities” in Grossman’s sense (Augustine, 2007d), and yet Grossman surmises that there are “merely imagined” possibilities in my critique without acknowledging those to be found in some of the responses of the commentators.

Based on my imagined confusion, I supposedly delude myself into thinking that I hold a rational point of view. But ignoring Grossman’s condescension, from Pam Reynolds’s actual description of her NDE to a comprehensive survey of the features of extant nonWestern NDE reports, my critique avoided discussion of “a possibility that is merely imagined, and for which there is no empirical evidence whatsoever” *whenever there was relevant empirical evidence available*. What more could Grossman hope for? Some discussions were necessarily speculative given the paucity of the relevant evidence, but my critique was certainly no more speculative than other, more survival-friendly papers that have been published in this Journal. And despite Grossman’s hasty and demonstrably false generalization that skeptics never attempt “to deduce observational consequences” of the theories they propose, I went out of my way to point out how several of my suggestions could be empirically tested or falsified through future research to preempt such unwarranted criticism.

But this is no matter to Grossman, who apparently finds no value in my skeptical critique at all. In his mind, anything I might say can be automatically disqualified from consideration, as anything I say *must* be “proposed for the sole purpose of ignoring data that [contradict my] *a priori* worldview” so long as I do not come around to *his* purportedly *a posteriori* worldview. It does not even matter that Grossman offers no evidence for such a bald and sweeping assertion. Given this, I have no expectation that anything I might say here will cause him to budge an inch. But I do hope that by taking the time to respond, I will persuade others not to follow his lead. Such ideological tribalism does not serve anyone’s interests, and it is a senseless obstacle to determining the truth of the matter concerning NDEs. If we take Grossman’s accusations seriously, those who endorse the reality of the

paranormal or survival are simply following the evidence where it leads, whereas it is impossible to reject the paranormal or survival without being an ideologue. And yet in the face of ambiguous evidence, who but an ideologue would make such a claim?

If the truth is on his side, Grossman has nothing to fear from skeptical critiques such as mine. Indeed, if he is right, by presenting a strong but fair critical appraisal of survivalist interpretations of NDEs, I have done survivalists an enormous favor, providing them with a means to tighten up their arguments in favor of such an interpretation. How much stronger would a case for a survivalist interpretation be if it took critiques like mine seriously and responded to them, rather than blithely dismissing them? In the end, as it has been with every scientific advancement in human history, it will be the data that will decide which of us is correct – or more likely, which aspects of both of our respective positions are prescient and which are false.

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