

Do Near-Death Experiences Provide a Rational Basis for Belief in Life after Death?

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Abstract In this paper I suggest that near-death experiences (NDEs) provide a rational basis for belief in life after death. My argument is a simple one and is modeled on the argument from religious experience for the existence of God. But unlike the proponents of the argument from religious experience, I stop short of claiming that NDEs prove the existence of life after death. Like the argument from religious experience, however, my argument turns on whether or not there is good reason to believe that NDEs are authentic or veridical. I argue that there is good reason to believe that NDEs are veridical and that therefore it is reasonable to believe in the existence of what they seem to be experiences of, namely, a continued state of consciousness after the death of the body. I will then offer some comments on the philosophical import of NDEs, as well as reflections on the current state of contemporary philosophy in light of the neglect of this phenomenon.

Keywords Near-death experiences · Life after death, belief in · Argument from religious experience · Materialism · Physicalism · Naturalism · Contemporary philosophy

I

The question of whether there is life after death is a perennial philosophical one. A positive answer to this question might allay one of the more pressing of human

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concerns—the fear of death. This is not to say that everyone fears death. Woody Allen, for example, explains, ‘It’s not that I’m afraid of death. It’s just that I don’t want to be there when it happens.’ But whatever attitude one takes towards death, the issue of life after death remains an intriguing mystery. For none of those who have been there when death happens have returned to settle this question. Or have they?

In the last 30 years or so, there have been an increasing number of reports of people who have been clinically dead for a time and then revived and who have had, during this period of clinical death, what has come to be known as a ‘near-death experience’ (NDE). In addition to all the best-sellers with the word ‘light’ in their titles, there have been numerous magazine articles, television specials, a movie (*Flatliners*) and a slew of Web sites on the near-death experience. It is an experience that apparently has been around since ancient times. Plato describes the NDE of Er in the *Republic* and the information provided in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* derives, in part, from such experiences. Other notable accounts can be found in Bede’s *A History of the English Church and People*, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Carl Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*.

Contemporary interest in the phenomenon, however, is due primarily to the publication in 1975 of the book *Life After Life* by Dr. Raymond Moody (1975). Moody, a physician with a PhD in philosophy, fascinated by the account of another medical doctor, George Ritchie (1978), who experienced being dead in an army hospital in 1943 for almost ten minutes before being revived, interviewed 150 people in similar situations and described the now classic features of the NDE. Since then there have been thousands of documented cases of NDEs from many cultures across the globe, and a 1982 Gallup poll estimates that millions of people have had a near-death experience (Gallup 1982). Presumably, the dramatic rise in reports of this phenomenon is due to advances in medical technology that increase the likelihood of reviving those pronounced clinically dead, not the popularity of Moody’s book.

In addition to the attention the NDE has received in popular culture, the subject has been widely investigated by serious academic psychologists and medical researchers, and it even has a scholarly journal devoted to it.¹ The NDE has also received some attention by scholars of religion, since, the belief in life after death and descriptions of experiences of death and dying are common in the world’s religions.² Despite the fact that one of the luminaries (forgive the pun) of 20th-century philosophy, A. J. Ayer, reported his own NDE in 1988, little attention has been paid to this phenomenon by contemporary philosophers.³ This is odd in one sense but understandable in another. It is odd since the NDE, if genuine, would seem

¹ Studies by psychologists include Ring (1980); Greyson and Flynn (1984); Blackmore (1993); among others. Medical studies include Sabom (1982); Morse (1993); among many others in medical journals, including the recent prospective study (most previous studies relied on retrospective accounts of NDEs) by van Lommel et al. (2001). *The Journal of Near-Death Studies* has been in existence since 1980. A good collection of scholarly treatments of the phenomenon, along with some first-hand reports of NDEs, can be found in Bailey and Yates (1996).

² Zaleski (1987) is the most notable example.

³ A search for ‘near-death experience’ in the *Philosopher’s Index* yields six entries for the last 30 years. Notable philosophical treatments include Cherry (1986); Almeder (1992); Becker (1993); Griffin (1997); and Walls (2002). For a recent discussion of Ayer’s account of his near-death experience, see Rosenthal (2004).

to have enormous implications for the question of whether there is a rational basis for belief in life after death. After all, on the question of life after death, the attitude of philosophers ought to conform to what John Hick calls ‘the principle of openness to all data (Hick 1976)’. One should think the NDE would also have implications for other issues in the philosophy of religion, as well as such metaphysical issues as the mind/body problem, the nature of personal identity, and the ethical issues surrounding treatment of the terminally ill. To some extent, reflecting upon the NDE takes us back to the roots of philosophy itself, which, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, is described by Socrates as ‘practicing for death.’

On the other hand, it is not surprising that NDEs are ignored by the contemporary philosophical community. It is, first of all, because of its popular appeal, a somewhat unseemly topic. It is too sensational, too low-brow and ‘media-ized,’ if you will, for the likes of academic philosophy. Along with the phenomenon of UFOs, some might think this issue appeals to the mushy-brained, or to those whom William James had called the ‘tender-minded.’ Of course, to use the category of tender-minded implies a belief in minds, and this, I am afraid, is the rub. For a full-blown belief in minds is anathema to the materialistic or physicalistic assumptions of much of contemporary philosophy, and it seems to me that it is precisely the prevailing naturalistic materialism that precludes serious philosophical consideration of the NDE. For if materialism is true, the NDE provides us with nothing philosophically interesting since it is simply a bizarre hallucination caused by a brain in decline. The hallucinatory experiences of dying brains do not provide evidence for any belief; much less can they serve as a basis for belief in something like life after death.

Yet even naturalistic materialists, if they are to be true to their empiricist heritage, must pay tribute to the experiential basis of beliefs. They must take seriously the phenomenology of experience and its impact on the formation and justification of beliefs. And this is why A.J. Ayer, for all the resistance he must have felt due to his prior naturalistic beliefs, had to acknowledge the force of his own NDE when he admitted that it ‘weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon, will be the end of me’ adding ‘though I continue to hope that it will be (Ayer 1990)’.

Ayer departed this world less than a year after this experience and one cannot know if he got his wish. But I would venture to say that it is reasonable to believe that he did not. In this paper, I suggest that NDEs provide a rational basis for belief in life after death. My argument will be a simple one and is modeled on the argument from religious experience for the existence of God. But unlike the proponents of this argument, I will stop short of claiming that NDEs prove the *existence* of life after death; rather, I will make the more modest claim that they render rational the belief in life after death.⁴ Like the argument from religious experience, this one will turn on whether there is good reason to believe that NDEs are authentic or veridical. I will argue that there is good reason to believe that NDEs are veridical and that therefore

⁴ In this my argument is similar to the attempt of Alston (1991) to establish the rationality of belief in God on the basis of religious experience, but makes use of the strategy employed by Swinburne (1979) and Yandell (1994), among others, to prove the existence of God on the basis of religious experience. Walls makes use of Alston and the ‘Reformed epistemology’ of Alvin Plantinga to argue that NDEs ‘provide support for the Christian doctrine of heaven’. (Walls, *Heaven*, 140.) I stop far short of this claim.

it is reasonable to believe in the existence of what they seem to be experiences of, namely, a continued state of consciousness after the death of the body.⁵ I will then offer some comments on the philosophical import of the NDE, as well as reflections on the current state of contemporary philosophy in light of its neglect of this phenomenon.

II

What, then, is the near-death experience? It is an experience reported by some people who have been ‘clinically’ dead, that is, in a state that is absent of any vital functions for some period of time, and then revived. By now the classical features of the NDE are well known. Based largely on Moody’s work, the ten most common traits of the NDE are:

1. A sense or recognition that one is dead.
2. Feelings of painlessness and peace.
3. The experience of floating or traveling out of the body.
4. The experience of darkness and movement through a tunnel.
5. The experience of people of light, deceased relatives, or spiritual guides.
6. The experience of a being of light radiating love and understanding (at times accompanied by beautiful visions of lush meadows, gardens or landscapes, heavenly music, cities or cathedrals of light, libraries of knowledge, etc.).
7. A review of one’s life.
8. A sense that there is a border beyond which one could not return, accompanied by the reluctance to return, but with an understanding that one must for some purpose.
9. A return to the body, followed by an initial feeling of discomfort and disappointment.
10. A positive transformation of one’s personality, values and beliefs, and moral character. (One experiences oneself as less self-centered, has greater respect for others and life in general, is more loving and compassionate, and more concerned with ‘higher’ things such as truth, beauty, and goodness.)

While this list is overwhelmingly positive, other studies report a small percentage of persons having more negative experiences such as utter darkness, a spinning void, hellish visions, or fear of punishment (Atwater 1994).

The most pressing philosophical question to ask when faced with the phenomenon of NDEs is whether they provide a rational basis for belief in life after death. For people having a NDE do seem to experience occurrences typically

⁵ Of course, one could object that the line of thinking employed in this paper is faulty since an experience can never be used to support the belief in anything outside the experience itself, that is, that all arguments from experience to a mind-independent reality are question-begging. But my principal aim in this paper is to show that there is no good reason why contemporary philosophers, most of whom accept the reasonableness of belief in the external world of material objects on the basis of experiences of what seems like an external world of material objects, should not also accept the reasonableness of belief in life after death on the basis of experiences of what seems like life after death. I do not think my argument needs to meet the burden of proving the existence of a mind-independent world.

associated with traditional philosophical and religious beliefs of life after death, including the separation of soul and body, some form of a final life judgment, and intimations of heaven and hell. Should we accept these experiences as providing a rational basis for some or all of the aforementioned beliefs? An affirmative answer would begin by noting that there is, *prima facie*, nothing irrational about basing beliefs on experiences. Indeed, for the most part, our experiences do provide a rational basis for our beliefs. And most of us would find relatively unproblematic what Richard Swinburne calls the ‘principle of credulity.’⁶ Roughly, this basic principle of rationality states, if someone has an experience of what seems to be *x*, then that person has a rational basis for belief that *x*, unless there is good reason to believe otherwise. Thus, my experience of what seems to be computer screen in front of me serves as a rational basis for my belief that ‘there is a computer screen in front of me’ unless I have reason to believe otherwise. Reasons for believing otherwise—defeaters of this belief—might include a disposition on my part to dream while awake, or the habit of ingesting hallucinogens prior to writing, or otherwise some systematic propensity to see computer screens when, in fact, there are none. Clearly, if I am dreaming or hallucinating, my experience is not veridical (it is not really what it seems to be) and cannot serve as a rational basis for my belief. The question then becomes ‘are NDEs veridical experiences?’

Reasons to believe that NDEs are veridical include the same reasons that one would have for believing my experience of a computer screen is veridical. First, the experience occurs in optimal conditions for the experience in question. For example, I am looking at the computer with enough light and I am wearing my glasses. Second, the experience is repeatable so that others in the same position would experience the same thing. Third, there is widespread agreement among those in the same position who have experienced the same thing. And fourth, there is a sense of phenomenological certainty to the experience. Reminiscent of G. E. Moore’s defense of common sense (‘Here is one hand, and here is another...’), if I cannot be certain of this experience of typing at the computer, then I cannot be certain of anything. This may not be an exhaustive list—for example, we can also add the pragmatic desideratum that such experiences result in morally better lives—but it is sufficient for what most of us would regard as veridical experiences.

All of these features apply to the NDE.⁷ First, the proximity of subjects to actual death provides ideal, if not privileged conditions for the experience of death. Second, the NDE has been repeated by many in the same situation, namely, clinical death. Third, the reports of these experiences are uncanny in their unanimity and

⁶ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p. 254. While there have been notable criticisms of the principle of credulity when applied to religious experiences, it is not clear that these criticisms also apply to the NDE, which is, in itself, not necessarily a religious experience. But see Rowe (1982). See also Gale (1991). But also see William Alston’s defense of the analogy between religious experience and sensory experience in (1994). A useful discussion of this issue, with a defense of the analogy between religious experience and sensory experience, may be found in Wainwright (1973) and *Mysticism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), chapter 3.

⁷ Since my intent here is to make a philosophical point, and since the scientific literature on the NDE is vast, I will not cite specific studies but instead report the general features of the NDE that appear in the literature. A good summary of this literature may be found in Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 156–158.

invariance. And fourth, NDEs share the same phenomenological sense of certainty that accompanies our most basic experiential encounters.

Why, then, would anyone not accept such experiences as veridical? The principal reason is that if NDEs are veridical, they would lend support to beliefs that conflict with our dominant naturalistic, materialistic worldview. Many would argue that it is more rational to believe that the NDE is not veridical than to give up materialism. Hence other explanations for the experience, explanations that provide reasons to believe the experience is not veridical, are suggested, which, if plausible, constitute defeaters for the experiential basis for belief in an after-life. I will summarize some of these explanations below.⁸

The main alternative explanation is that NDEs are dreams or hallucinations caused by some physiological condition affecting the brain. Anesthesia or certain medications (e.g., morphine or ketamine), oxygen deprivation to the brain, or the release of endorphins when the body is dying, limbic lobe syndrome, and sensory deprivation all, in their own ways, cause experiences with traits similar to the NDE, and have been proposed as explanations for the NDE. Carl Sagan proposed that the NDE could be explained in terms of memories of the birth experience that occur when the brain is dying (Sagan 1979). Some suggest that NDEs are illusions produced by the brain as an evolutionary device to adapt to conditions of stress undergone while dying and to avoid the unpleasant prospect of death, while others propose that NDEs are the subjective interpretations or constructions of the mind based on prior cultural or religious conditioning and beliefs.

There are, however, counter-arguments to each of these explanations.⁹ First, NDEs are more orderly and vivid than dreams and hallucinations in general and (a) many subjects are not on medication or anesthesia, (b) many subjects have had high levels of oxygen in their blood, (c) subjects are more alert than those experiencing natural opiates, in fact, a kind of heightened alertness is often reported, and (d) subjects of NDEs do not experience the anxiety, confusion, and distorted sense of reality that typically accompany limbic lobe syndrome and sensory deprivation. In sum, for every biological explanation, researchers can point to cases where subjects were either free of such conditions or had experiences quite different than what such conditions produce. Besides, the clarity and lucidity of the NDE are exactly the opposite of what we would expect under conditions of severe energy loss to the brain, if the brain itself were the cause of these experiences.

As for Sagan's birth-memory explanation, we can note that infants are not able to organize sensory experience in an orderly way so a memory of an infant's experience would be very different from an adult's experience. Also, it is not likely that infants would experience the birth canal as a tunnel, nor is it likely that the attending physician or the light of hospital room would be experienced as pleasant memories during an episode we commonly refer to as 'birth trauma.'

The idea that the dying brain produces pleasant illusions is undermined by the fact that some NDEs include unpleasant experiences and difficult self-appraisals.

⁸ A review of the literature out of which these explanations arise can be found in Bailey and Yates, *The Near-Death Experience*, 12–18. See also Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 164–175.

⁹ Many of these counter-arguments are mentioned in Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 175–177, and Becker, *Paranormal Experience and Survival of Death*, 92–119.

And it is not at all clear what the adaptive value may be of the life review or out-of-the-body journeys. Indeed, such experiences may have a negative value for survival by expending limited brain energy on elaborate visions and pointless self-reflection.

Finally, it is implausible that prior beliefs and expectations somehow cause NDEs since subjects who have no religious beliefs sometimes have religious NDEs, and many NDEs differ from what subjects previously believed about death, dying, and the after-life. Indeed, the unexpected features of many NDEs may be one of the more compelling reasons to accept them as veridical (some of the things reported would have been very difficult to dream up).

One comprehensive objection to the whole materialist attempt to explain away the NDE by locating it in certain brain states may also be forwarded. And that is, even if we can pinpoint the specific location in the brain where some mental event or phenomenal experience is processed, this is not by itself reason to deny the veracity of the experience. Presumably all of our mental experiences are processed in some location of the brain, but this should not give us reason to deny the veracity of all of our experiences.¹⁰ The fact that your experience of reading this right now is being processed in some part of your brain does not give you a reason to deny the veracity of your experience of reading this essay. Simply discovering which brain process is associated with a mental event is not equivalent to establishing that the event is not a veridical experience. Much more would need to be established about the cause of the event. We would need to know that this brain event caused that mental event even in the absence of those conditions that would make the mental event a veridical experience. But, even then, the fact that we could, say, artificially stimulate the brain to cause a non-veridical experience does nothing to undermine the fact that, in ordinary conditions, the experience would be caused by the normal means of a veridical perception. Just because we could, in special conditions, cause people to experience the smell of lilacs by certain well-placed electrodes in the brain, this does not mean people, in normal conditions, do not really smell lilacs when walking in the garden. So, even if we could reproduce aspects of the NDE by manipulating the brain in certain ways, this does not mean those who are in the state of clinical death are not actually experiencing life after death. Of course, all of this is moot anyway, if, in fact, there is no recorded brain activity going on in subjects reporting NDEs, that is, if they are ‘flatliners,’ as is the case in numerous accounts.

III

If we are to supplement the principle of credulity by another principle of rationality, the principle of ‘inference to the best explanation,’ then the cumulative evidence suggests that NDEs are not reducible to some other phenomenon since no alternative explanation can account for all of its traits. As one prominent medical researcher writes, ‘No one physiological or psychological model by itself explains all the

¹⁰ Alston makes a similar point with regard to mystical experiences, as does William James for religious experience in general. See Alston, *Perceiving God*, 232 and James (1985). James regards this kind of reductionism, or what he calls ‘medical materialism,’ to be a ‘too simple-minded system of thought.’

common features of NDE (Greyson 2003)'. We can then maintain, assuming that 'comprehensiveness' is one criterion for a best explanation,¹¹ that positing NDEs as veridical explains more than any alternative explanation. Especially problematic for alternative explanations are cases where subjects encounter persons not previously known to be deceased only to have it verified by others later; and those cases of paranormal occurrences such as out-body-experiences (OBEs) that involve the ability of the subject to describe correctly certain events that took place while the subject was clinically dead. One of the more striking examples is of a woman who, during her OBE, spotted a red shoe on the ledge outside the window of the hospital room where she was revived from clinical death, which was later verified by the custodial staff.¹² Another oft-cited case is the NDE of Pam Reynolds who provided a detailed account of the surgery to remove her large basilar artery aneurysm, including some remarks made about her tiny veins, during a period in which her body temperature was at 60°, she was without cardiac or respiratory functions, she had flat brain waves, and the blood had been drained from her head.¹³ Some have suggested that the existence of extra-sensory perception (ESP) could explain these occurrences, but this is no more likely given our current science than OBEs. Until the science of NDEs proffers more compelling naturalistic explanations, there is no need to alter the judgment that NDEs are veridical.

Finally, following William James' treatment of religious experience, we could also employ pragmatic criteria in support of the authenticity of NDEs, based on the pragmatist's suggestion that truth is determined by what is beneficial for us to believe, by what makes our lives better. The positive transformative effects of the NDE, the 'good consequential fruits for life'¹⁴ that result, weigh in favor of their authenticity against alternative explanations, especially since such positive transformative effects do not generally occur in cases of hallucinations caused by cerebral hypoxia or the kinds of drugs typically administered to the dying.

If NDEs are veridical, does that mean they provide a rational basis for belief in life after death? I offer a simple argument for an affirmative answer to this question based on the principle of credulity.¹⁵

- (1) Persons who have near-death experiences have experiences of what appears to be life after death.

¹¹ Gilbert Harman suggests such criteria as simplicity, plausibility and comprehensiveness should guide inference to the best explanation. Others suggest 'beauty' or 'loveliness' as well. See Harman (1965).

¹² This report is cited in Ring and Lawrence (1993). Some might argue that the purported verification of this instance of veridical perception is simply a report, long after the fact, by just one person whose credibility is unclear. A naturalist, then, would not be unreasonable to follow Hume's lead here and, given the general standing of testimony to the paranormal, believe that the testimony in question is false rather than call naturalism into question. But this response is simply an easy way to reject even well-documented cases of phenomena that might call into question one's philosophical position. There is no good reason to doubt the credibility of the person who corroborated the veridical perception in question. And, in any case, this is not the only case of corroborated veridical perceptions occurring during apparent out-of-body experiences. Other examples are described in Sabom (1982 and 1998) as well as Ring and Lawrence (1993).

¹³ This case is cited in Sabom (1998).

¹⁴ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 21.

¹⁵ This argument is a simple version of a similar argument for the existence of God on the basis of religious experience put forward by Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 272–275.

- (2) If persons have experiences of what appears to be life after death, then in the absence of a compelling reason to believe otherwise (i.e., the experience is not veridical), then those persons have a rational basis for the belief in life after death.
- (3) There is no compelling reason to believe that near-death experiences are not veridical.
- (4) Therefore, near-death experiences provide a rational basis for the belief in life after death.

Simply put, we may conclude that NDEs lend rational support to the belief in life after death since that is what they seem to be experiences of and no better explanation defeats the experiential evidence.

One may object at this point that, even if the NDE is veridical, the experiential evidence does not conclusively prove the existence of life after death. After all, subjects are not definitively (irreversibly) dead and new scientific discoveries may provide better explanations. We can grant that the experiences are ‘near’ death experiences and not full-blown ‘death’ experiences if by ‘death’ we mean ‘irreversibly’ dead. But this begs the question since it already assumes that death is a state from which no one comes back and that is precisely what is at issue.¹⁶ Besides, it is difficult to see what would distinguish the dead from the living if not the absence of all vital signs, including brain activity (flat EEGs).¹⁷ But let us say we grant the distinction between ‘near-death’ and ‘death.’ Then the issue turns on whether NDEs are sufficiently analogous to death experiences to base belief about the after-life on them.¹⁸ Given the obvious external similarities to the death experience, there is reason to believe the internal or phenomenological dimension would also be sufficiently analogous.

One might claim, however, that it is nonetheless question-begging to assume that the nature of near-death experiences is a reliable indicator of the nature of experiences of death. For example, there is no justification for assuming that the nature of experiences of near-collisions is a reliable indicator of the nature of experiences of collisions.¹⁹ But this objection is misplaced since it assumes the ‘near’ in ‘near-death’ means something like ‘almost’ dead. But this isn’t quite right. Near-collisions and collisions are clearly not analogous examples to death and near-

¹⁶ But, one might object, perhaps the reviving of the subject is itself the cause of the NDE. That is, a naturalist might maintain that NDEs occur at the time of revival of the brain and are caused by the restarting of neural processes. NDEs would then be more properly characterized as ‘returning from near-death experiences.’ (This point was made by an anonymous reader of this essay.) The major problem with this explanation of the NDE is that it fails to do justice to the phenomenological features of the NDE itself, particularly the sequential stages of the experience. Subjects of NDEs experience seeing their bodies from a point above the body early on in the experience, not at the time of revival. They also experience the more ‘transcendent’ dimensions of the experience after these initial out of body episodes, corresponding to the longer period of time spent in clinical death and, consequently, the lessening of biological activity in the brain. If the NDE were the result of reactivating neural activity, one would not expect this sequence within the reported phenomenology of the experience. Besides, subjects often do report being jarringly returned to an experience of their bodies at the *terminus* of the NDE, not at its onset. This is not what one would expect if the NDE *begins* with the revival of neural activity. It makes more sense to propose that the revival of neural activity occurs at the end of the NDE, when the person re-experiences being alive in the body.

¹⁷ This point is made by Becker, *Paranormal Experience and Survival of Death*, 94.

¹⁸ This issue is the crux of the discussion in Cherry (1986).

¹⁹ This concern was raised by an anonymous reader of this essay.

death. 'Near-death' is not like a 'near-collision' since 'near-death' refers to the state of being 'temporarily dead'. A near-collision is not a temporary collision; it is *almost* a collision but is, in fact, no collision at all. Near-death experiences are, on the contrary, experiences of death, or at least 'clinical death'; they are just not *permanent* experiences of death.²⁰ Better yet, they are temporary experiences of the early stages of death. A more analogous example might be that of near-paralysis (temporary paralysis) and paralysis. The experience of temporary paralysis, I would submit, is sufficiently like permanent paralysis to draw conclusions about permanent paralysis on the basis of it. Similarly, experiences of the early stages of paralysis are sufficiently like full-blown paralysis to know something about what full-blown paralysis is like on the basis of the experience of these early stages.

In regard to the second objection that all the scientific evidence is not yet in, one may respond that it is unlikely that it ever will, that is, it is unlikely we can ever have conclusive evidence in this area. Yet we don't need conclusive evidence for a rational belief since most of the beliefs we consider to be rational do not have conclusive evidence. Consider, for example, the belief in other minds, or even the belief in the existence of the external world. If OBEs could be experimentally verified, then perhaps something approaching conclusive evidence would be forthcoming, at least regarding the veridicality of the earliest stages of the NDE. How we would get empirical evidence of the more advanced stages of the experience, however, escapes me.

IV

Even if we can agree that NDEs provide rational support for belief in life after death, there are still a number of things left unresolved. First, it may be said that it is unclear whether NDEs lend support to belief in what might be called 'maximal' life after death (eternal life or immortality) or merely belief in a 'minimal' life after death (existence of consciousness for some period of time after death). Since the experiences themselves last a matter of minutes, the phenomenological or experiential evidence suggests minimal life after death.²¹ On the other hand, subjects of NDEs commonly experience a loss of time (atemporality) akin to traditional philosophical notions of eternity. If eternal life is to be understood in terms of atemporal existence rather than infinite temporal duration, then the NDE does offer some support for the maximal view. Of course, this also raises the issue of personal identity after death. We are temporal beings whose identity or selfhood is tied up with memories of our past and anticipation of our future. If immortality

²⁰ One might object that the subjects are not *really* dead since 'death' means something like the point at which vital functions cease for the last time. Subjects of NDEs might be in a state of 'clinical death,' a state wherein vital functions cease, but not 'death' since vital functions are later restored. In that case, 'near-death' is more like being 'almost dead' rather than being 'temporarily dead.' But even if we grant, contrary to standard medical practice, that 'clinically dead' does not mean 'dead,' then it is still reasonable to believe that, if consciousness persists during clinical death, it would also persist at 'real' death. For, what is the substantive difference between clinical death and real death if the feature that distinguishes real death from clinical death is simply that real death is irreversible? There is none. The difference seems to be nothing more than the difference between a temporary and a permanent state.

²¹ This is the conclusion reached by Habermas and Morehouse (1992).

amounts to atemporal existence, it is reasonable to ask if personal identity is retained after death. Just who/what survives death? How long does consciousness of the self last after death? Does this question even make sense in the context of atemporal existence?

Another issue to be considered is whether the NDE has evidential force for non-NDEers. Again, we might follow William James and his conclusions regarding mystical experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. For James, mystical experiences can be authoritative only for those who have them, and we perhaps should say the same for the NDE.²² Still, it is not irrational for us to believe what others believe on the evidence of their privileged first-hand experience. Of course you would want some external corroboration of their trust-worthiness in other matters. But what better human authority for a belief in life after death can we have than those who have been, or at least have come closest to being, dead?

Yet another consideration concerns the issue of whether believers with different worldviews have different epistemic obligations. That is, one may be willing to grant that for the person who already believes in the after-life, the NDE provides *prima facie* evidence for this belief, but that such experiences have no evidential force for the dyed-in-the-wool naturalist or materialist. For we always evaluate our experiences against the backdrop of our other prior beliefs. If the materialist were to take the NDE as *prima facie* evidence for belief in life after death, it would reap such havoc upon his or her other beliefs that we may not think it irrational for the materialist to withhold assent on this belief until a more congenial explanation comes along.

I admit that this way of sorting the marbles has its appeal: the spiritualist community of believers in the after-life is reassured that their beliefs are rationally based, and the materialist community of non-believers in the after-life enjoys the same reassurance. Of course, some might have a problem with the ‘ghetto-ization’ of rationality in this way. But perhaps a bigger problem is that the materialist would be risking a violation of the fundamental epistemic obligation to allow for some experience to serve as a defeater for a belief. If the materialist, in holding out for a forthcoming naturalistic explanation of an experience, is simply refusing to allow an experience to serve as a defeater for his beliefs, we would rightly question whether he is rationally justified in holding those non-defeatable beliefs. It would amount to denying the possible falsification of those beliefs, and thus, following Karl Popper, placing the naturalist on the wrong side of the science/pseudo-science divide, an ironic state of affairs given the issue in question (Popper 1959). Besides, even A.J. Ayer knew better than to refuse to acknowledge that the NDE may constitute a defeater for some of his hardened prior beliefs.

There are a number of additional philosophical issues that could be fruitfully examined in light of NDEs, including the ethics of death and dying and the impact of NDEs on faith and religious belief. I would like to conclude with some reflections on two other philosophical issues: the relationship between experience and its interpretation and the mind/body problem.

The issue of the relationship between experience and its cognitive interpretation is the one I have found to be most troubling for my credulity in regard to the

²² This is the view of Potts (2002).

authenticity of NDEs. I say this because, while there are great similarities in reports of NDEs, some reports are so idiosyncratic, and frankly, so bizarre that I have enormous difficulty taking them seriously. And if I have a hard time believing them to be veridical, it is a short step to believing the whole phenomenon is silly. For example, A.J. Ayer reports that, in his own NDE, 'I was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space.'²³ Now Ayer, the author of that great English manifesto for logical positivism, *Language, Truth and Logic*, believes this experience to be veridical, but I must admit it strains my credulity to do so. It simply does not accord with my beliefs about what the after-life should be like. Ministers of space? Similarly, some of the things one reads in the more popular best sellers also strike me as unrealistic and attributable more to the interpretive activity of the subject's mind than anything real. For example, I find it hard to believe Betty Eadie's report that, on the other side, there are spirit beings whose job it is to weave new spiritual clothing for the newly departed on 'large ancient-looking looms (Eadie 1992).' Such things just seem too 'earthly' to fit my notion of the life to come. And what are we to make of the one woman who was greeted not only by her departed relatives, as is typical, but also by Elvis Presley? Again, I am inclined to attribute such encounters to a lively imagination than to anything else. On the other hand, maybe this will finally put to rest the question of whether Elvis is actually dead.

Fortunately, such reports are not common and can be regarded as 'outliers' among the many cases of NDEs. Perhaps in this area one should expect some very fanciful accounts that deviate from the norm and are not to be taken as seriously as those with features corroborated by many others. In any case, I find it easier to chalk up such things to the subjective or interpretive overlay of what may be a more invariant, and perhaps more authentic 'core' NDE. As is the case in the phenomenological analysis of religious experience, or ordinary perceptual experience for that matter, I do not pretend that it is an easy task to distinguish between the interpretation and the core experience. Perhaps degrees of variance from the typical core elements could serve as a way of determining what is 'given' in the experience and what is the contribution of the mind of the subject (Smart 1965). Caroline Franks Davies suggests something similar with regard to all religious experiences (Davies 1989). Following Davies, we might propose that the evidential force of NDEs varies inversely with the specificity of the claims it is required to support. The general claim that there is consciousness after death seems to be well supported when taking into account all NDEs. The claim that there is weaving of spiritual clothing is not.

On the other hand, the very fact that there is a great deal of subjectivity or 'interpretive overlay' in the early stages of the NDE is not to be unexpected. Many religious traditions speak of the initial phase of the dying experience to be one that is largely 'mind-dependent' to use H.H. Price's term (1953). This initial phrase is significantly colored by the thoughts, memories, and desires of the dying person's mind. The Tibetan Buddhists speak of this phase as the Bardo, the Islamic mystics

²³ Ayer, 'What I Saw When I Was Dead'.

(Sufis) refer to it as the world of Barzakh, the Hindus refer to it as the ‘Kama Loka.’ Since this initial stage of death is so very subjective, these traditions suggest the need for the purification of one’s mind and heart while one is alive so that one’s subjectivity does not hinder the soul from advancing further in its journey to its ultimate end, howsoever that is conceived.

Besides, who are we to judge what is authentic and what is inauthentic in the NDE? After all, we are in no position to determine *a priori* what the after-life must and must not be like. We were in no position to do so in the case of the present life. Who, besides Hegel maybe, would have thought *a priori* that things would be like *this*? So perhaps, to paraphrase Hamlet’s famous remark to Horatio, ‘there is more in earth and in heaven than is dreamed of in our philosophies.’ And this may include ‘ministers of space,’ ‘large ancient-looking looms,’ and, to be sure, Elvis Presley as usher (for some, at least) to the pearly gates. Maybe there is a reason it is called ‘Graceland.’

Finally, I would like to reflect on the current state of contemporary philosophy in relation to the NDE. As I noted above, with the exception of a few individuals within academic philosophy writing on this issue, the NDE is largely ignored by mainstream philosophy. And this is despite the fact that the philosophy of mind has been at the center of the discipline for much of the last half-century. But surely, NDEs, if there is anything to them at all, would have enormous implications for the philosophy of mind since they lend credibility to the view that consciousness is not identical to, or caused by, or even in need of a working brain. As William Hasker writes, in one of the few treatments of NDEs to appear in a reputable philosophical venue, or any venue of philosophy, for that matter, ‘Even if these experiences do not constitute full proof of post-mortem survival, they put severe pressure on naturalistic views of the mind/brain.’²⁴ In other words, the phenomenon of NDEs seems to support some kind of mind-body dualism rather than materialism. One should think philosophers working on the mind-body problem would be interested in a phenomenon taken very seriously by the medical profession, which has significant implications for whether the mind is just the brain. But this is not the case. The current literature is strewn with discussion of ‘zombies’ and the like, but there is no interest in NDEs.

Flash back 100 years or so. The leading philosophers of the day, people like William James and Henry Sidgwick, and a bit later, C. D. Broad and H. H. Price, all took seriously what is known as ‘psychical phenomena’ and the enterprise of ‘psychical research.’ This is not to say they necessarily believed in the legitimacy of psychical phenomena, but they believed in the value of serious study of it since it had clear philosophical implications. These philosophers exercised a spirit of open-mindedness with regard to psychical phenomena, for as James might have put it, the non-materialistic conclusions to which they point were still a ‘live option’ for them. The NDE and the study of it are today’s equivalents to early twentieth century psychical phenomena and psychical research. But whereas James, Sidgwick, Broad, and Price all served as Presidents of the Society for Psychical Research, today we do not find many philosophers going anywhere near the International Association for Near-Death Studies.

²⁴ William Hasker, ‘Afterlife,’ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/afterlife/>>.

Why is this? Do we really know that much more about the relationship between minds and brains that is relevant to the mind-body problem than did C. D. Broad, say, or even James, for that matter? Do we really know enough to have settled the issue clearly in favor of materialism? The sufficiency of materialism has been challenged by philosophers like David Chalmers and others who persuasively argue that there are phenomenal facts over and above the physical facts, and NDEs give compelling reasons for thinking that the phenomenal facts do not even supervene on the physical facts.²⁵ Yet materialism continues to be well entrenched. It seems as if something more must be going on here to explain this philosophical commitment.

Clearly, since the 1930s, since the early work of A. J. Ayer, ironically enough, there was a major sea-change in academic philosophy. Naturalism and all it entailed became the unofficial official world-view of professional philosophers. Even as logical positivism morphed into analytical philosophy, naturalism continued to rule the roost. And although philosophers have long given up the Vienna Circle's goal of the 'unity of science,' we still act as if we are aiming to reduce all claims about reality to terms within physical science. It has been more than a half century since philosophers have been trying to reduce the mental or the spiritual to the physical, and we are no closer than when we began. But that does not lead us to drop materialism or seriously consider alternatives. By now it is the air we breathe. Materialism and its accompanying naturalism, we seem to believe, have simply got to be true.²⁶ If there are anomalies to work out, well, we just need a bit more time before we see how materialism can account for them. And so we strain and strain to make consciousness fit into our materialist worldview, positing ever more epicycles as we go.²⁷

We seem to be caught in the grip of a theory, or as Wittgenstein would say, 'A picture held us captive' (Wittgenstein 1958, §115). And the advice Wittgenstein gives in such situations: 'Don't think, but look!' (Wittgenstein 1958, §66). I have no illusions that this paper will lead many to take a serious look at NDEs and make a dent in the armor of naturalistic materialism. But surely there is a need to point out that, under the chain mail mesh, the emperor might not be wearing any clothes. Naturalistic materialism has surely become the religion of philosophy. It is the official dogma, accepted, I would venture to say, not so much for rational reasons as for sociological ones. But that is another, bigger story, of how philosophy in the twentieth century lost its soul, which is just *dying* to be told.²⁸

²⁵ See Chalmers (1995). See also Shear (1997). The grip of materialism is so tight that even philosophers who recognize an intractable 'explanatory gap' between conscious experience and its physical realization insist the problem is more likely with our understanding of nature than that there really is a gap in nature between the mental and physical. See, for example, Levine (2001).

²⁶ Matthew Bagger (1999) gives expression to this attitude when he writes that, within the contemporary worldview, 'We could have no good reason for asserting that an event, in principle, resists naturalistic explanation.' If this isn't an example of entrenched dogmatism, what is?

²⁷ Even Christian philosophers now want to be materialists, as if that is the only way to be taken seriously by the rest of the profession. Some prominent 'Christian materialists' include Lynne Rudder Baker, Kevin J. Corcoran, Nancy Murphy, and Peter van Inwagen.

²⁸ An earlier version of this paper was given at an Annual Meeting of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, and I am grateful for the comments of those present. I am also grateful for the comments of the external reviewers of this journal, and especially grateful for the helpful advice of my colleague, Anthony N. Perovich, Jr.

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