



Sensory experiences in near death experiences and the Thomistic view of the soul

MICHAEL POTTS

Methodist College, Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA

Introduction

Since the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* in 1975,¹ there has been an explosion of literature concerning so-called 'near death experiences' (NDEs). In Moody's classic description of the NDE, which he admits is a composite from several cases, a patient 'hears himself pronounced dead by the doctor', and after hearing a loud buzzing noise, feels a sensation of moving through a dark tunnel. The patient may see his or her physical body as if it were from a distance and observe attempts at resuscitation. Even though the patient experiences a sense of separation from the physical body, the patient notices that he or she has a body of some kind, though different than the physical body. The experiencer may then see dead friends and relatives, as well as a 'being of light'. Eventually the experiencer approaches a barrier. Although the experiencer wants to remain in the 'afterlife world', due to positive experiences of 'love, joy, and peace', he or she finds that it is necessary to return to the body, often with a changed sense of life and death.² Kenneth Ring simplified this rather complicated scenario by identifying a 'core' NDE, consisting of five stages: peace, bodily separation, entering the darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light.³

This description, and NDEs in general, raise a number of philosophically interesting questions, the most obvious of which is "Are NDEs objective experiences of a disembodied self or a transcendent world or are they the products of the physiochemical changes which occur in the dying brain?" On this issue, those involved in NDE research are divided into two major camps: the 'subjectivists' and the 'objectivists'. 'Subjectivists' believe that NDEs are products of physiochemical processes in the brain which occur near death, and are not experiences of any reality outside the context. 'Objectivists' believe that an NDE represents a literal departure of the soul from the body and that the disembodied soul has certain experiences, either of this world or some world which transcends our own. NDEs also raise questions concerning the relation between mind and body, the epistemology of religious experience, and the relationship between NDEs and mystical experience. Yet

despite this, philosophers, for the most part, have tended to shy away from a philosophical discussion of NDEs, leaving such discussion to the physicians and social scientists. This is probably due not only to the difficulty in getting a handle on just what these experiences are, but also to positions espoused by major near death researchers, which to many philosophers come across as bizarre and without rational or experiential foundation. An example is Kenneth Ring's position that NDE experiencers may be higher forms of human beings. Ring goes on to link both NDEs and UFO phenomena to a new step in human evolution.⁴ Such problematic claims, however, do not remove the philosophically interesting issues arising from NDEs.

One of the more intriguing claims of those who have had NDEs are claims involving sensory experience during the course of the NDE. Most claims of sensory experience involve visual and auditory experiences, often quite vivid. At this point it is important to note Michael Sabom's useful distinction between 'autosopic' and 'transcendental' NDEs. In the 'autosopic', or 'self-visualizing' NDE, the person experiences the 'self' as separated from the body, a 'self' which looks down upon the physical body from above.⁵ In Sabom's other category of NDE, the 'transcendental', there is a reported "passage of 'consciousness' into a foreign region or dimension quite apart from the 'earthly' surroundings of [the experiencer's] physical body."⁶ The important point is that *both* autosopic and transcendental NDEs involve claims of some kind of objective sense experience. Those who have NDEs usually claim that such experience occurs in a disembodied soul. Whether a philosopher is open to such an interpretation depends to a great extent upon one's metaphysics, especially regarding the mind-body problem, and to some extent upon one's epistemological framework. A philosopher working in the Platonic or Cartesian tradition, for example, would at least be open to the notion that sensory experience could occur in a disembodied soul. A philosopher who holds one of the physicalist positions on the relation between mind and body, such as reductive or eliminative materialism or perhaps functionalism, would not be open to the notion that a disembodied soul or mind could exist at all, so that the question of disembodied sensory experience does not even arise.

There is another position on the relationship between soul and body which raises some intriguing possibilities for philosophical exploration in the light of NDEs – the position of St Thomas Aquinas. Could Aquinas' account of the soul-body relation be open to an objectivist interpretation of NDEs? Could Aquinas have accepted the claims that the disembodied soul has certain experiences, including sensory experiences, and could he have accepted the types of experience claimed for a soul in the NDE? Or could he accept some claims of experiences made by those who have NDEs and reject others?

The issue upon which I will focus in this paper is whether a Thomistic view of the soul leaves room for sensory experience taking place in a disembodied soul, especially in the setting of a NDE. The first section will summarize St. Thomas Aquinas' view of the soul and its relationship to the body. It will focus on the powers (and lack of powers) found in a disembodied soul, with particular emphasis on whether a disembodied soul can have sense experience. The second section will summarize the characteristic kinds of experiences that the 'disembodied souls' of NDEers have. The final section will discuss whether Aquinas' position leaves conceptual room for a disembodied soul having the kinds of sensory experiences claimed for them in NDEs.

I

Aquinas' position on the relationship between the soul and body in human beings offers a unique metaphysical perspective, neither strictly 'physicalist' nor strictly 'dualist'. His view is consistent with the view of human beings widely held by Christian theologians in the Middle Ages, that human beings are 'metaphysical amphibians', 'midway between apes and angels'. Aquinas' mature view on human nature is certainly not Platonic or Cartesian. He clearly affirms the unity of the human being as a soul-body unit, with both soul *and* body required for full personal identity.⁷ Aquinas' views on the powers of a soul separated from the body must be understood in this light. For Aquinas, "the human soul is the form of the body" (*anima humana corporis forma*),⁸ and he even quotes favorably Aristotle's statement that "it is unnecessary to ask whether the soul and body are one, just as it is unnecessary to ask whether the wax and its impression are one."⁹ But Aquinas' position was not a version of physicalism or reductive materialism. He believed that the soul had what might be called a 'quasi-independent' ontological status; that is, the rational soul, as opposed to the vegetative soul of plants or the sensitive soul of non-human animals, continues to exist after the death of the body, albeit with sharply diminished powers. This may seem to conflict with Aquinas' emphasis on the body-soul unity of the human person; however, he believes that the human soul's ability to understand universal concepts cannot be explained by dependence on a bodily organ, since the action of physical organs are oriented to particular things. In addition, he believes that human beings have a natural desire to exist forever. Since Aquinas holds that natural desire cannot be frustrated (a position which fits into his strongly teleological view of nature), the human soul must be immortal.¹⁰ Since a soul can exist independently of the body, the question arises concerning its properties and powers while separate from the body.

Aquinas altered his position on the powers of the separated soul throughout his career, as Anton Pegis has convincingly shown.¹¹ Aquinas moved over time from a position close to Platonism, in which he had a high view of the powers of the separated soul, to a more Aristotelian position, according to which the separated soul has very limited cognitive powers – and these limitations are primarily due to the lack of a body, especially the lack of sense organs. The former position is represented in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1259–1264); the later position is represented in Aquinas’ mature works, the *Summa Theologica* (1266–1273) and the *Disputed Questions on the Soul* (February–April 1269).¹² It is his more mature position upon which I wish to focus, since its unique combination of dualistic and non-dualistic elements make it an interesting model under which to consider NDEs.

In order to understand Aquinas’ views on the powers of the separated soul, we must understand his theory of knowledge.¹³ Aquinas, following Aristotle, believes that human knowledge begins with sensory experience. He accepts the Aristotelian understanding of material objects as form-matter composites, with the form being the carrier of the intelligible content of the object’s nature. He is a direct realist since he believes that we have direct, albeit limited, knowledge of the natures of things in themselves. An angel has direct, intuitive, purely intellectual knowledge of the natures of material objects, as does God. However, unlike some Platonistically oriented thinkers, Aquinas does not believe that human knowledge is intuitive. This is related to his insistence on the unity of the human person; a human person is a body-soul composite and knows as a body-soul composite. In their natural state, human beings must have sensory experience in order to gain knowledge. The human being first observes the phantasm, or sensory image, which is in itself a particular entity, but it contains universal intelligible content which is abstracted by the ‘active intellect’. Such abstraction involves a kind of unity with the object known, but an immaterial unity, e.g., if I see a cat and recognize it as a cat, I become one with it in an intentional sense. The sensory image itself is *not* what is known, but *that by which* the thing itself is known.¹⁴ Still, the sensory image is not optional – for human cognition, ‘phantasms’ are an absolute requirement: “In the present state of life in which the soul is united to a passible body, it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually without turning to the phantasms.”¹⁵ Without sensory data of some kind, the human being can neither acquire new knowledge of reality nor use “knowledge already acquired,”¹⁶ since the latter requires the use of imagination, and imagination, as the name suggests, involves the formation, manipulation, and recall of sensory images, all of which ultimately arise from prior sense experience.

Sense experience is dependent upon having working sense organs,¹⁷ which for Aquinas includes not only the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, but also, to put it in contemporary terms, a working brain and nervous system. Aquinas recognizes that the quality of sense input depends on a healthy brain and healthy sense organs: “a good disposition of the brain is necessary for the good condition of the internal sentient powers, namely the imagination, the memory, and the cogitative power.”¹⁸ If the sense organs are totally destroyed, including those responsible for the sense of touch, or if the brain and nervous system, to continue the use of contemporary language, is totally destroyed, the human being cannot have sense experience of any kind, including memory.¹⁹ Since, from a natural point of view (that is, apart from the direct action of God or other supernatural beings upon the soul) new knowledge is dependent upon new sensory images, an individual incapable of sense experience is incapable of gaining new knowledge.

This clearly relates to the issue of the kind of experiences and knowledge which could be had by a disembodied soul. One thing is clear: for Aquinas, whether knowledge be natural or supernaturally imparted, it is impossible for a separated soul to have sense experience of any kind, including imagination and sensory memory. Although the sensory powers ‘remain in the soul as their principle’, ‘when the body is corrupted the sensory powers cease to exist’.²⁰ Without the body, without sense organs and a functioning brain, there can be no sense experience. Angels, for example, which are pure spirits, do not have sense experience – they have an intellectual understanding of material objects in their full individuality, including both their matter and form, but this is purely intuitive knowledge which does not involve sensation at all.²¹ For Aquinas, this is not a lack, but a perfection, since he believes that, absolutely speaking, intellectual knowledge without the necessity of phantasms is a higher form of knowledge than knowledge derived from sensation. Nevertheless, such pure intellectual knowledge is not in accordance with the nature of the human soul.²²

Since the separated soul lacks sense experience, it cannot gain any new knowledge, at least in its natural state. It does have knowledge, but this is limited to intellectual knowledge of the things it knew while in an embodied state.²³ One must be careful, however, to avoid any notion that the separated soul has sensory memory, that is, memory which involves the recall of sense images. This cannot occur, since Aquinas believes that the power of imagination, the forming of images, requires a body as a necessary condition for its actuation. The only memory which functions in a separated soul is purely intellectual in nature.²⁴

Knowledge of the essences of material things is deficient in the separated soul; “it is confused and general.”²⁵ Scientific knowledge, based partly

on sensation, is also truncated. Knowledge of individual things is deficient; unlike angels, who can gain a thorough intellectual knowledge of individuals by means of infused 'species' (an inexact, though more contemporary wording might be 'infused concepts'), separated human souls can "attain a knowledge only of those singulars to which it itself bears some special relationship."²⁶ But any new knowledge, including knowledge of events on earth, is not possible for the separated soul:

Now the souls of the dead are in a state of separation from the living both by Divine order and by their mode of being whilst they are joined to the world of incorporeal spiritual substances; and hence they are ignorant of what goes on among us.²⁷

The dead do 'care' for the living, but "the affairs of the living can be made known to them not in themselves, but through the souls who come to them from this life, or by angels and demons, or by the revelation of the Holy Ghost."²⁸

Even if God, an angel, a demon, or another soul infuses 'intellectual species' into a disembodied soul, such knowledge does not include sense experience. It is still a purely intellectual knowledge. Aquinas believes that God infuses intelligible species into the souls of the blessed, so that they have a high degree of knowledge of reality ("equal to the angels in knowing"),²⁹ even of the lives of people on earth (thus, the efficacy of prayers to the saints), but even this does not include sensory knowledge. Such a claim is in tension with Aquinas' position that the resurrection of the body is needed for complete human cognition.

Emotions (what Aquinas calls "passions") are also absent in the separated soul, since Aquinas believes, as William James argued later on, that a necessary condition for emotional expression is a bodily change.³⁰ For this reason, love for others is diminished, for though Aquinas believes that there is a love of will which is purely spiritual (as opposed to love of sense), still, even that love is dependent on knowledge, and since human knowledge depends on sense experience, which is lost in the separated soul, the separated soul is deficient in its capacity to love. That is remedied in the souls of the blessed – but then again one wonders how consistent Aquinas' language is with the rest of his thought on the unity of the human person.

There are two aspects of knowledge which will increase in the separated soul. First, the separated soul will have direct, unmediated, intuitive knowledge of one's own self. Such self-knowledge is limited in this life by the body. Aquinas sounds almost Cartesian when he discusses the self-knowledge of the separated soul. It can also understand other separated souls better than while embodied – to the point that Aquinas calls it "perfect knowledge."

Knowledge of angels, however, even in the separated soul, is “imperfect and defective.”³¹ Such knowledge is increased even more by the action of God in the blessed.

There are three situations discussed by Aquinas which are particularly relevant to the contemporary discussion of NDEs, particularly concerning claims of sensory experience during an NDE. The first situation is described in article 19, objection 18 of the *Disputed Questions on the Soul*:

... it is related of the dead who are brought back to life, as we read in many histories of the saints, that they said they saw certain imaginable objects, for example, houses, camps, rivers, and things of this kind. Therefore, when souls exist apart from their bodies, they use imagination, which belongs to the sentient part of the soul.³²

Aquinas’ answer is enlightening on the position he might take toward contemporary accounts of NDEs:

The soul does not understand in the same manner when it exists apart from the body as it does when it exists in the body. . . . Therefore, concerning those things which the separated soul apprehends in the manner proper to it without phantasms, this knowledge remains in the soul after it returns to its former state. Having been joined to the body again, the soul now understands in a manner befitting it, that is, by turning to phantasms. And for this reason *things grasped intelligibly are narrated imaginatively* (emphasis mine, M.P.).³³

Such experiences, then, may give the illusion of being sensory experiences since they are remembered in that way, but on Aquinas’ account the actual experiences need not involve sensation or imagery of any kind.

A related situation Aquinas describes is one in which the soul seems to be temporarily ‘loosened’ from the body, as in cases of ‘rapture’. Aquinas’ example is St. Paul’s story of being taken up into the Seventh Heaven in II Corinthians.³⁴ Such experiences may be due to the direct action of God, through the action of a demon, or due to the weakness of the body.³⁵ One must also be careful to distinguish the experience of “rapture” from an “imaginary vision or fanciful apparition.”³⁶ Aquinas realizes that many individuals who report such mystical experiences use sensory imagery to describe them. But he argues that, although the actual experience was intellectualistic, when one remembers the experience (after the soul and body are again fully integrated), it will be recalled in terms of sensory experience, in line with the natural state of human cognition.³⁷ Again, in this situation, the human mind ‘translates’ the original, purely intellectual, experience, into sense imagery.

A third situation is that of infused knowledge through angels which occurs while a person is undoubtedly alive; Aquinas believes that this sometimes occurs in sleep or other sleep-like conditions:³⁸

It is undoubtedly true, however, that bodily movements and the activity of the senses prevent the soul from receiving infused knowledge from separate substances. It is for this reason that certain things are revealed to persons during sleep, and to those who have [momentarily] lost their senses.³⁹

This opens the door to infused knowledge from separate substances during ‘sleep-like’ conditions near death; cardiac arrest would be a paradigm case, since it would result in a loss of sensory activity and of bodily movement. Such a situation might open the door, on Thomistic grounds, for angelic communications during a patient’s cardiac arrest.

But returning to the separated soul, Aquinas is open to the idea of communication between angels or demons and the separated soul, as well as non-bodily communication from one separated soul to another.⁴⁰ But this communication is at a purely intellectual level, and never includes sense imagery, though, as just discussed, the experience might be ‘remembered’ in a sensory way.

II

The term “near death experience” has been notoriously difficult to define, and is often used in a vague sense in the literature on the topic. The difficulty is that experiences which are associated with NDEs, such as the feeling of being out of the body, a ‘life review’, or seeing dead relatives occur in some individuals who are *not* near death at all. People who have fallen from great heights have had experiences similar to NDEs, as well as individuals who have taken ketamine and other drugs. Some individuals who are perfectly healthy have claimed to have ‘out of body experiences’ (OBEs). I wish to limit my discussion to those individuals who were actually ‘near death’ when their experience occurred – the kind of restriction Michael Sabom used in his study of NDEs, in which he defined “physically near death” as being “in any bodily state resulting from an extreme physiological catastrophe, accidental or otherwise, that would reasonably be expected to result in irreversible biological death in the majority of instances and would demand urgent medical attention, if available.”⁴¹ A similar restriction is found in Kenneth Ring’s study of NDEs.⁴²

I will limit my account of NDEs to the studies of Ring and Sabom, which, although undertaken in the early 1980s, remain the best large scale statistical

studies of large groups of people who had NDEs. Because I am concerned with claims of sensory experience occurring in a disembodied soul, I will focus on Ring's second stage of his "core experience," "body separation and leaving the body behind," experienced by 37 percent of Ring's subjects.⁴³ Since the remaining stages also involve experiences claimed to occur while in the "disembodied state," they will also be included in the discussion. I will discuss the kinds of experiences NDEers report – whether visual, auditory, or other kinds of experience, perhaps sensory, which transcend the five known senses.

It is interesting that most NDE experiencers surveyed did not report having the experiences in Ring's "core experience." The most common experience of the subjects in both Ring's and Sabom's studies of those who had NDEs is a feeling of 'peace' or 'contentment'. Nevertheless, a significant minority of NDEers did report some experience of separation from the physical body. Both the studies of Ring and Sabom reveal that most of the NDEers who report bodily separation deny having any kind of body at all,⁴⁴ contra Moody's claim that NDEers claim to have some kind of "body."⁴⁵

However, in Ring's study the majority of his subjects did not have one of the stereotypical experiences associated with Moody's classic description of the NDE, a visual experience of the body from above. Most subjects who reported body separation "reported a sense of being completely detached from their bodies."⁴⁶ One of Ring's subjects said:

Can you imagine floating, suspended in midair, touching nothing, yet you're aware of things, but there's nothing there to be aware of. You've got no sense of feel or touch, but you've got *thought*. The mind's working, but there's no body. No vision. No vision, but the mind is working, and capable of thought.⁴⁷

Another subject also reported no some of bodily feeling at all, saying, "There was nothing there."⁴⁸ If there was a sense of being in a 'place', it was a sense of being 'somewhere else', without any concomitant visual experience of the immediate environment. One of Ring's subjects stated, in a way that would have pleased Descartes, "Well, it was like [pause] like I didn't have a body! I was [pause] but it was *me*. Not a body, but *me*."⁴⁹ A minority of Ring's subjects believed that they had some kind of "body" which moved in "some nonphysical dimension."⁵⁰ Sabom's subjects also described a sense of "separation from the physical body," sometimes referring to a separation of "the essential part of themselves"⁵¹ from the body; the body itself is conceived as "an empty shell."⁵² 93 percent of his subjects "perceived their 'separated self' to be an invisible, nonmaterial entity."⁵³ 7 percent of Sabom's

subjects reported having a body similar to their physical body, but “‘visible’ only to themselves.”⁵⁴

A number of subjects in both studies reported sensory experiences in their “disembodied” state, primarily visual and auditory. Sixteen of Ring’s subjects reported “visually clear out-of-body experiences . . . it is typical at this stage in the experience to find himself in the room looking down on his physical body.”⁵⁵ The majority of this subset of subjects said they viewed their body “from the outside . . . often from an elevated corner of the room or from the ceiling.”⁵⁶ A woman who had rapid loss of blood pressure at the birth of her second child said, “I was up in the left-hand corner of the room, looking down on what was going on.”⁵⁷ A young man near death from a high fever experienced leaving his body “and viewing it from the other side of the room.” He goes on to say:

I can remember seeing myself lying there with a sheet and a hypothermic blanket on me. My eyes were closed, my face was cold-looking. . . . It was like I was perched right up on a little level over near the other side of the room. . . . I would be at the foot of the bed, but kind of more up onto the wall, closer to the ceiling, almost in the corner of the room.

Some subjects also reported “acute hearing and sharp but detached mental processes.”⁵⁸ They stated that they had both clear hearing and vision: “I could see very clearly . . . ,” “I heard the voice,” “My ears were very sensitive [note the reference to “ears,” M.P.] . . . vision also . . . ,” My hearing was clear. . . . My sight – everything was clear.”⁵⁹

In Sabom’s study, those who experience what ‘autoscopical’ NDEs reported seeing their physical body from above, which almost all subjects identified as “ceiling height.”⁶⁰ Some of the subject’s descriptions of their experiences are remarkably detailed, as in the case of a 52 year old night watchman who reported an NDE he experienced after a heart attack. After he collapsed, he noticed the black and white tile of the floor, the ‘half-fetal’ position of his body, saw his body being carried away on a dolly, and accurately described his resuscitation, including CPR, defibrillation, intubation, the cardiac monitor, and an injection of drugs directly into his heart.⁶¹

Subjects reporting ‘transcendental’ NDEs often said they experienced a bright light. A 54 year old auto mechanic suffering from shock described the light as “total and complete . . . you didn’t look at the light, you were *in* the light.”⁶² They also described experiences of “‘nonterrestrial’ scenes of clouds, skies, stars, or mist” among some subjects.⁶³ There were visions of dead relatives; one woman saw her sister; another saw her deceased husband coming toward her.⁶⁴ Others reported either a “nonvisual ‘presence’ or a visualized ‘spirit’,” with a subset reporting “communication” with this “presence,” either verbally (most common) or nonverbal (gestures or telepathy).⁶⁵

A wounded soldier saw his dead comrades who “communicated without talking with our words.”⁶⁶ Three people reported the presence of “God” or “Jesus.”⁶⁷ Others were more vague concerning the identity of the being, identifying it as either God or an angel.⁶⁸

Similarly, in Ring’s study, after the experience of “entering the darkness,” those who experienced a “transcendental NDE” sometimes experienced seeing “a brilliant golden light,” which “almost never hurts the eyes.”⁶⁹ Those who “entered the light” reported entering a beautiful world with vivid colors and often buildings which do not correspond to buildings on earth.⁷⁰ A patient who suffered a cardiac arrest described a beautiful path with “flowers and birds.”⁷¹ A patient in respiratory failure experienced “a large, empty field [which] had high golden grass that was very soft, so bright.”⁷² A woman who suffered a cerebral hemorrhage reported hearing music.⁷³ A minority of Ring’s subjects reported a “life review.” A few reported seeing dead relatives, who are “usually seen *and* recognized,”⁷⁴ though very few reported “visions of religious figures.”⁷⁵ The woman mentioned above who suffered a cerebral hemorrhage reported seeing two dead aunts; a woman in cardiac failure saw her mother and father, as well as strangers. She said that her parents looked the same as she remembered them. In line with what some of Sabom’s subjects said, she stated that people were communicating without speaking.⁷⁶

III

Given the description of Aquinas’ views of the powers of the separated soul, and given the reported experiences of those who have had NDEs, how would a Thomistic account of the soul deal with all the sensory imagery described in NDEs? First, let us consider the autoscopic NDEs, which include experiences of looking down upon the physical body and viewing the resuscitation.

Aquinas’ position does not leave any room for the idea that the NDEers’ souls have separated from their bodies and that the souls then have visual and auditory experiences. This is simply not an option for someone who accepts Aquinas’ position to the letter. There are, however, a number of alternative positions open to the Thomist. First, the Thomist might accept a purely physicalist explanation for NDEs – that is, NDEs are dream-like images produced by physiological changes in the brain which occur near death. Since any imagery, for Aquinas, depends on at least a functioning brain, this would be the most obvious position for him to hold. Also, since Aquinas believes that such sleep-like states facilitate spiritual communication, it is possible that a spiritual entity could communicate information about the body, resuscitation, etc., to the dying patient, which is later remembered as

sense imagery. A closely related position is that the body might have sensory powers (perhaps located in a particular part of the brain) which become disinhibited near death (or possibly due to the use of certain drugs, such as ketamine or LSD). Aquinas limits the senses to the traditional five, as well as the so-called “common sense” which unifies the experiences of the five senses into a whole; he did not believe in any other level of sense experience. However, it would not be too much of a stretch for Aquinas to be open to the possibility of other kinds of sensory experience, perhaps involving the brain and using mechanisms as yet unknown to science. This would probably not be Aquinas’ preferred route – visions of Occam’s Razor would dance in his head – but it at least theoretically fits into his epistemological framework.

Another option is to take the data from autoscopic NDEs as a challenge to Aquinas’ view of the separated soul. Suppose that, as Sabom’s research suggests, those patients who have had autoscopic NDEs describe the details of their resuscitation in such great detail that the only reasonable option is to suppose that they had a sensory experience of their own resuscitation. Suppose, further, that no physiological mechanism for how such an ‘above the body’ experience could take place seems reasonable, and that the only reasonable alternative is to hold that some aspect of the patient’s personality exists outside his or her body. The Thomist can deal with this in three ways. First, the Thomist could return to the notion that the NDE is similar to a sleep-like condition in which the individual is more open to spiritual communication. Such communication could include images of a person’s resuscitation which may indeed be accurate, but it need not involve the separation of the soul from the body. While this would fit most easily into Thomistic metaphysics, one wonders if it is the best explanation of a person having accurate sensory recall of his or her resuscitation; all else being equal, the best explanation would seem to involve some actual disembodied sensory experience. But the Thomist would probably reply that working from the Thomistic metaphysical research programme, all else is *not* equal, and some explanation other than sense experience by a disembodied soul must be found.

Second, the Thomist might theorize that there is some kind of “subtle body” which separates from the original body during the NDE. This body might be thought of as being composed of some kind of energy, though such descriptions tend to be so vague one could be talking about anything. But such an interpretation could at least fit into the Thomistic view that one must have a body to have sense experience. Of course one would have to postulate some kind of sensory apparatus in the new body. Again, one wonders about the multiplication of bodies without cause.

Alternatively, autoscopic NDEs could be thought of as a genuine anomaly which challenges the Thomistic view of the soul, and which would support

an alternative explanatory framework, such as a Platonic-Cartesian model of the human person, which allows for visual, auditory, and other sensory experience in a disembodied soul. The Thomist can then either put the anomaly aside and continue in his or her research programme (to use Lakatos' terminology), accept one of the alternative models to the disembodied soul explanation for autoscopic NDEs, or the Thomist might modify his or her position on the soul in order to allow for some kind of sensory experience in a disembodied soul. There would remain the task of working out in detail the implications for the Thomistic model of the soul. How much would it have to be changed? Is there a need to abandon it completely for a more Platonistic model? Or can some kind of *via media* be found?

Transcendental NDEs are easier for the Thomist to handle. The Thomist could return again to the position that the NDE is a state similar to sleep, in which bodily movements and perception of the body is diminished, and the individual is open to communication from spiritual beings. Alternatively, the Thomist can assume that the soul was separated temporarily from the body in a state of 'rapture'; the remembered experience will be in the form of sense imagery because that is how humans gain knowledge. The experience itself was intellectual and did not include sensory experience. There is not even a need for supernatural explanations to explain most transcendental NDEs. A life review may arise from the fact that a disembodied soul knows itself better than while embodied, and its faults and virtues may stand out more. Visions of dead relatives relate to the disembodied soul having the best knowledge of the things and people most dear to it. This could even explain visions of God or Christ among Christians, visions of Hindu gods among Hindus, and a more amorphous "benign spirit" among secular Americans – people will tend to remember the experience in terms of the world view with which they are most familiar. Aquinas is open to the idea of real communication between spiritual entities and the disembodied soul, as was discussed earlier. God may very well be communicating with the soul, but so also could an angel, another soul, or a demon – thus the importance of correctly interpreting such experiences – for Aquinas, the organ of interpretation would be Holy Tradition and Scripture. Be that as it may, such communication occurs at a non-sensory level, but it is quite natural, given the human mode of cognition, for the NDEer to remember the experience as a sensory one of seeing and talking to dead relatives, to God, hearing music, and so forth.

Thus a Thomistic position on NDEs is going to be more complicated than simply a Platonic objectivist approach or a physicalist reductionist approach. The Thomist allows for remembered sense imagery, and allows for the possibility of objectivist interpretations of NDEs, but does not allow for true sense experience occurring in the NDE, or even sensory memory during the expe-

rience itself – if that experience is interpreted as being one of a disembodied soul. The philosophical interpretation of the nature of NDEs, even regarding the question of whether NDEers “really saw” anything at all, to a great extent depends on the interpretative model with which one begins. The approach a Thomistic position takes to NDEs is no exception.

Acknowledgments

This is a revised version of a paper originally presented to the Seventy-first Annual Meeting of The Society for Philosophy of Religion in Charleston, South Carolina, in March 2000. I am indebted to Professor Frederick J. Crosson of the University of Notre Dame for his valuable comments, as well as to the other audience members for their questions, comments, and criticisms.

Notes

1. Raymon A. Moody, Jr., *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.
3. Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near Death Experience* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980).
4. Kenneth Ring, *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992).
5. Michael Sabom, *Recollections of Death: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 27.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
7. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (henceforth abbreviated as *S. Th.* I, q. 76 art. 1).
8. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 1, resp.; also *S. Th.* I, q. 76 art. 1.
9. *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 2, sed contra: “non oportet quaerere si anima et corpus sint unum, sicut neque de cera et figura.”
10. *Ibid.*, art. 14, resp. Also *S. Th.* I, q. 75, art. 2.
11. Anton C. Pegis, “The Separated Soul and its Nature in St. Thomas,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), pp. 131–158.
12. I am following the dates given by James A. Weisphal, *Friar Thomas D’Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983).
13. Aquinas’ theory of knowledge is explicated in qq. 79–84 of the *Summa Theologica* and also in the first two articles of *Quaestiones Disputationes de Veritate*.
14. *S. Th.* I, q. 85, art. 2.
15. *S. Th.* I, q. 84, art. 7: “impossibile est intellectum nostrum secundum praesentis vitae statum, quo passibili corpori conjungitur, aliquid intelligere in actu, nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata.”
16. *Ibid.* Also *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 15, resp.

17. *Quaestiones de Anima*, VIII, resp: “[the] sensory powers . . . cannot perform their proper operations without bodily organs” (“potentiis sensitivis . . . sine corporeis organis operationes proprias habere non possunt”).
18. *Quaestiones de Anima*, VIII, resp.: “Unde, quia ad bonam habitudinem potentiarum sensitivarum interiorum, puta ut imaginationis et memoriae et cogitativae virtutis, necessaria est bona dispositio cerebri.”
19. *Ibid.*, art. 15, resp.
20. *Ibid.*, art. 19, resp.: “Destructo igitur corpore, destruuntur potentiae sensitivae; sed remanent in anima sicut in principio.”
21. *Ibid.*, art. 20, resp.; *S. Th.* I, q. 55.
22. *S. Th.* I, q. 89, art. 3.
23. *Ibid.*, I, q. 89, art. 4.
24. *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 19, ad 16.
25. Mary Rousseau, “Elements of a Thomistic Philosophy of Death,” *The Thomist* 43 (October 1979): 586.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *S. Th.*, I, q. 89, art. 8: “Animae autem mortuorum secundum ordinationem divinam, et secundum modum essendi segregatae sunt a conversatione viventium, et conjunctae convesationi spiritualium substantiarum, quae sunt a corpore separatae, unde ea, quae apud nos aguntur, ignorant.”
28. *Ibid.*, q. 89, art. 8, ad 1: “Possunt etiam facta viventium non per seipsos cognoscere, sed vel per animas eorum, qui hinc ad eos accedunt, vel per angelos, seu daemones, vel etiam spiritu Dei revelante.”
29. *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 17, ad 2: “aequabitur angelis in cognoscendo.” See also *Ibid.*, art. 20, ad 11, where Aquinas suggests that glorified separated souls may even be “superior” to the angels in cognition.
30. *Ibid.*, art. 19, ad 11.
31. *S. Th.*, I, q. 89, art. 2.
32. *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 19, obj. 18: “de mortuis qui resuscitari leguntur, legitur in plerisque historiis sancotum quod quaedam imaginabilia se vidisse recitaverunt, puta domos, campos, flumina et huiusmodi. Ergo animae separatae imaginatione utuntur, quae est in parte sensitiva.”
33. *Ibid.*, art. 19, ad 18: “anima separata a corpore non eundem modum habet cognoscendi et cum est in corpore. Eorum igitur quae apprehendit anima separata secundum modum sibi proprium absque phantasmatis, remanet cognitio in ea postquam ad pristinum statum redit, corpori iterato conjuncta, secundum modum tunc sibi convenientem, scilicet cum conversione ad phantasmata. Et ideo quae intelligibiliter viderunt, imaginabiliter narrant.”
34. *S. Th.* II-II, q. 175, art. 1, sed contra.
35. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 175, art. 1.
36. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 175, art. 2, ad 2.
37. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 175, art. 4, ad 3.
38. I am indebted to Professor Frederick J. Crosson for pointing this out.
39. *Quaestiones de Anima*, art. 15: “Nec tamen dubium est quin per motus corporeos et occupationem sensuum anima impediatur a receptione influxus substantiarum separatarum; unde dormientibus et alienatis a sensibus quaedam revelationes fiunt quae non accidunt sensu utentibus.”
40. *Ibid.*, art. 17, resp.
41. Sabom, *Recollections of Death*, p. 9.

42. Ring, *Life at Death*, p. 27.
43. Ibid., p. 45.
44. Ibid., p. 45; Sabom, *Recollections of Death*, p. 21.
45. Moody, *Life After Life*, p. 22.
46. Ring, *Life at Death*, p. 45.
47. Ibid., p. 93.
48. Ibid., p. 97.
49. Ibid., p. 97.
50. Ibid., p. 46.
51. Sabom, *Recollections of Death*, p. 20.
52. Ibid., p. 21.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 46.
57. Ibid., p. 35.
58. Ibid., p. 46.
59. Ibid., pp. 92–93.
60. Sabom, *Recollections of Death*, p. 21.
61. Ibid., pp. 25–26.
62. Ibid., p. 44.
63. Ibid., p. 46.
64. Ibid., p. 45.
65. Ibid., p. 47.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Ring, *Life of Death*, p. 56.
70. Ibid., p. 60.
71. Ibid., p. 61.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid., p. 62.
74. Ibid., p. 67.
75. Ibid., p. 59.
76. Ibid., pp. 62–64.

Address for correspondence: Michael Potts, PhD, Associate Professor of Philosophy,
Methodist College, 5400 Ramsey Street, Fayetteville, NC 28311-1420, USA
Phone: (910) 630-7072; Fax: (910) 630-7679; E-mail: mpotts20@hotmail.com