

Letters to the Editor

On "Evolution and the Relationship Between Brain and Mind States"

To the Editor:

This letter is written to comment on the article, "Evolution and the Relationship Between Brain and Mind States," by Juan S. Gómez-Jeria and Carlos Madrid-Aliste in the Summer 1996 issue of the Journal. The entire Board of IANDS of Utah have signed this letter, since the article is so contrary to our findings.

Concerning Objectivity and the Scientific Method

The authors doth protest too much, we think. We find it interesting that individuals with a particular agenda so often attempt to disguise their agenda with pronouncements of "scientific objectivity." This is certainly true in the subject article, in which the authors stated: "The need for keeping scientific objectivity in near-death studies is stressed by its particular nature. In fact, if a near-death researcher falls into parochial attitudes, he or she will be exposed to two dangers: interacting with NDErs in a way leading to the so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecy' . . . , or becoming lost in an unreal but self-consistent verbal world" (p. 264). One of the definitions of *science* given in *Webster's II New College Dictionary* (1995) is: "The observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena. . . . Methodological activity, discipline or study." Under this definition, it would seem that any theory built upon a series of observations of a phenomenon that chooses to ignore a large class of data methodically collected during the observations would not be scientific. It certainly would not be objective if it claimed to be a general model of the phenomenon.

Monism Versus Dualism

The authors created the outlines of a rudimentary model that they argued could be used by researchers to study the near-death experience (NDE). They defined a brain state space Γ by means of a neurobiological model, and a consciousness state space Θ by means of a psychological model. They suggested that, although difficult, a possible relationship between Γ and Θ may, with further research, be determined. They wrote little about the practical difficulty of determining the neural activity during an NDE, or of determining the psychological state of the individual during the NDE, never mind the problems of finding a relationship between the two.

The principal problem with their model, though, is that, as they acknowledged, "we consider NDEs as a consciousness (purely psychological description)/brain (purely neurobiological description) state" (p. 265). In so doing, they completely rejected the possible dualistic nature of living beings, that is, the possible existence of a soul, spirit, or some other-dimensional existence.

Their argument, long and convoluted, for rejecting dualism was, briefly stated, that since science only knows of physical properties—and psychological properties that are related to the physical—any attempt to introduce a nonphysical mind lying in another plane would be nonscientific. They summed this up by writing: "we must conclude that when physical structures disappear, 'nonphysical minds' or 'nonphysical brain properties' also disappear" (p. 260).

The Evidence for Dualism

The primary NDE evidence against this point of view comes from the numerous out-of-body experiences in which an individual saw things that could not have been seen from the physical body, either because of position or because of the physical state of the body, and those things the individual claimed to have seen were later verified. These cases are, by now, so numerous that to deny them is to ignore a major aspect of the near-death experience. We shall not attempt to list the numerous cases available in the literature, but rather shall enumerate four cases with which we are intimately familiar.

The Shoe on the Ledge

Perhaps the most famous is that of Maria's shoe on the ledge, reported by Kimberly Clark Sharp (1995). In that experience, Maria had a massive heart attack for which she was being treated at the Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. She suffered a cardiac arrest in the hospital and was resuscitated, as witnessed by Sharp. During the arrest she had an NDE. After the NDE, and upon returning to consciousness, Maria was agitated and asked for Sharp to visit her. She explained to Sharp how she had left her body and what she had seen the medical people doing from her position up near the ceiling. Her statements coincided with what Sharp had seen. Maria described how she, in her out-of-body state, had left the hospital. Then, to prove her point, she insisted that she had seen a worn, blue tennis shoe on a ledge of the hospital three stories up, not visible from the ground. With much difficulty, Sharp searched for the shoe and found it.

Sharp attended one of our IANDS of Utah meetings and described her feelings about this particular incident. She said that the shoe could only be seen from a west-side window by pressing against the pane. The shoe, as she retracted it, resembled Maria's description in detail.

A Traveling Experience

In his account of his extensive NDE during World War II, George Ritchie (Ritchie with Sherrill, 1978) described having been in a military hospital in Camp Barkley, Texas, as the result of an illness with an extremely high temperature of 106.5°. In his resulting NDE, Ritchie traveled in an out-of-body state with a spirit guide across a portion of the United States. At one point he found himself in a bar in a community near a military base, but far from Camp Barkley. He had never been there before.

Some weeks after his NDE, when his medical emergency was over, Ritchie was traveling in a car with three other young men as they entered Vicksburg, Mississippi. When they drove through a particular neighborhood, Ritchie recognized the area and told his companions where he wanted them to go. One of them said: "I thought you had never been in Mississippi before." It was the same location in which he had been during his NDE.

In 1995 our IANDS of Utah group sponsored a two-day meeting with Ritchie as the speaker. He described this and other events from his NDE in detail.

An NDE from Multiple Perspectives

One of the members of IANDS of Utah told of her experience in our August 1994 meeting; it is described in one of our newsletters (Gibson and Gibson, 1994). Susan Burt had a heart attack during the Caesarian delivery of twins. The medical personnel were unable to get a blood pressure reading for 10 to 15 minutes. During this time, Burt left her body and met a guide, her deceased aunt. She observed the doctors and nurses attempting to revive her, and she saw, helping them, other spirit persons.

In the meeting in which Burt explained what had happened to her, she also had other individuals describe the effects of the NDE from their perspectives. These persons included Cory Burt, her husband; Dianne Burton, her sister; Preston Richards, the anesthesiologist; and Betty Ishoy, one of the nurses. Their stories were fascinating, particularly that of the anesthesiologist, who confirmed Burt's view of what the medical personnel were doing during her NDE. He commented that there was no physical way she could have seen what she later described in detail. Not only was she unconscious, but he had taped her eyes shut to protect them during the emergency. In a later visit to the anesthesiologist's house, Burt was able to identify from a family photo album one of the his deceased ancestors as the spirit helper she had seen helping him.

A Blessing Seen During an NDE

The president of our local IANDS chapter is Bill English. In July, 1991, English and his brother Bob were riding their all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) in the sand dunes near Saint Anthony, Idaho. English's machine threw him and he landed on his head, breaking his back at about the nipple level. After removal by helicopter to a local hospital, and later being transported to the University of Utah Medical Center in Salt Lake City, his medical emergency deepened. His brother was told that English probably would not live, and if he did live he would be paralyzed and need help for the rest of his life. English was comatose for more than four weeks. During that time he had two out-of-body experiences. The first one occurred on the

afternoon of the day following the accident. English was able to determine the specific time because of the nature of his NDE.

One of his cousins, Tom Christensen, who is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, offered to give English a blessing. Although English was neither a member of that church nor particularly religious, and although he was not conscious to make a decision in the matter, his brother Bob agreed. Christensen arranged for the blessing to be performed on English's unconscious physical body.

In the meantime English had no knowledge of what was happening until suddenly he found himself above his body looking at his cousin and others giving him a blessing. Some of the others he recognized as spirit beings. Immediately after his accident, when he had been conscious, English could feel nothing in his body, but now he felt what he described as many "healing hands" on him. After the blessing, he again lapsed into unconsciousness. A second out-of-body event occurred in which he met his deceased father and was assured that everything would be okay. He returned with a feeling of peace.

During his recovery English was able to compare, with his cousin, the details of the events during the blessing; soon after the event his cousin wrote an account of what he saw and said. Both English and his cousin have described these events to our IANDS of Utah chapter; his experience is also recorded in the book *Echoes From Eternity* (Gibson, 1993). Today, although paralyzed from the chest down, English is a very independent and upbeat individual who is an example to us all. He is currently training for a three-wheeled hand-operated bicycle race.

Conclusion

These four experiences are by no means exhaustive of what can be found in the literature. They should be sufficient, however, to demonstrate that at least in some NDEs, and probably in most of them, the dualistic nature of human beings plays a major role in the experience. Many individuals having NDEs describe their out-of-body body as being a form of energy. Some have described it as having shape. One individual, John Stirling, put it this way as he traveled through space during his NDE: "I looked at my hand, and I saw the shape of a hand, but it had an aura around it. It wasn't the same

hand as an earthly hand. There was an energy field that defined it" (Gibson, 1992, p. 183).

In summary, we think that the evidence from NDEs is overwhelmingly in favor of living beings being constituted of both a physical body and a spiritual or otherworldly body. During extreme trauma, or when the individual approaches death, the spiritual body or essence, which continues to exhibit all the independent consciousness traits and ego of the living physical body, leaves the physical body and continues to exist. Indeed, the NDE accounts would suggest that this spiritual body has enhanced freedom of movement, increased awareness of the surroundings, superb ability to communicate, and immensely improved knowledge, which often is removed from the memory upon return.

Any model of NDEs that does not include these observed phenomena is not scientific, and it surely is not objective. It appears, unfortunately, that the authors of the subject article have become, to use their words, "lost in an unreal but self-consistent verbal world." The authors made the point that "However pleasant any pattern of thinking may be, it must be rejected as soon as an observation appears for which there is no place in it" (p. 252). Since we have demonstrated observations for which there is no place in their model, by their own criteria, their model must be rejected.

One final point: the authors seemed obsessed with protecting their version of science. Countering William Serdahely's call (1990) for a paradigm shift to account for NDEs, they wrote: "Science does not need a paradigm shift to deal with NDE data" (p. 266). We ask: what is wrong with a paradigm shift if the data make obsolete the previous paradigm? What was the change in science from Newtonian mechanics to Einstein's theory of relativity if not a massive paradigm shift?

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Reply to Martin Tanner and Colleagues

To the Editor:

In reply to the Letter to the Editor from Martin Tanner and his colleagues, I must stress the following points. First, it is amusing that the authors appeal to *Webster's II New College Dictionary* (1995) to talk about science. I am certain that the people best entitled to talk about science, its structure, philosophy, and methodologies, are the ones working on it. I invite Tanner and his colleagues to inspect some of our publications (Gómez-Jeria, Ojeda-Vergara, and Donoso-Espinoza, 1996; Morales-Lagos and Gómez-Jeria, 1991) to appreciate that scientific research is something very serious.

Second, we were not disguising any "particular agenda" such as monism with pronouncements of scientific objectivity. Our rejection of dualism was based not on the state space concept, which is only a formalism, but on evolutionary arguments derived from various scientific disciplines (Gómez-Jeria and Madrid-Aliste, 1996). If Tanner and his colleagues believe in the existence of a soul or "essence," I invite them to state in the Journal their ideas about when and how this supposed soul appeared in the evolution of humankind: did it appear in *Homo habilis*, or maybe in *Australopithecus afarensis*, or

perhaps only in *Homo sapiens sapiens*? Unless they are followers of some obscurantist line of thinking, like creationists, or invoke the well-known argument “. . . then a miracle occurs,” I am sure they will have to work hard to answer this question.

Third, it would be easy for us to dismiss near-death experiences (NDEs) or out-of-body experiences (OBEs) as reports of silly and/or sick people. We did not do that. We chose to accept the evidence as representing something that science must and will explain. Actually, the scientific modeling of the NDE has already been accomplished (Gómez-Jeria and Saavedra-Aguilar, 1994; Saavedra-Aguilar and Gómez-Jeria, 1989), and it is only a matter of time before better and more complete models are proposed. We are actually working on a model to explain the OBE without invoking souls or “essences.” But please do not make a potpourri of the experience itself, its report, and its interpretation!

Fourth, there is nothing wrong with a paradigm shift if there are data making the previous paradigm obsolete. The problem here is that there are no such data. For example, the fact that unconscious people are able to perceive the external world was tentatively explained some time ago (Gómez-Jeria and Saavedra-Aguilar, 1994), as was the contamination of the experience by cultural influences (Gómez-Jeria, 1993). Alluding to the Newton/Einstein paradigm shift to support their claims only shows the weakness of their arguments.

Fifth, I invite Tanner and his colleagues to analyze and discuss deeply some questions like the following:

(a) How do people recognize spirit beings? For example, do they have wings or carry labels? By analyzing the reports of alleged “spiritual beings” it seems to me that they are like the terrifying extraterrestrials always visiting our poor Earth: of all sizes, shapes, colors, and so on.

(b) How can it be asserted that this alleged “spiritual body” has an immensely improved knowledge, which often is removed from the memory upon “return”? We normally expect that, by definition, something removed from the memory cannot be remembered!

(c) Some people claim that the out-of-body body is a form of energy; what kind of energy could that be? electromagnetic? nuclear? gravitational? or something so subtle and special that it cannot be measured or studied?

(d) How does this alleged out-of-body body interact with the physical body? It would be helpful if Tanner and his colleagues could propose a model based, for example, on the suggestions of John Eccles

(1994). This might foster a serious discussion, despite the fact that Eccles' work is an amusing but scientifically poor defense of dualism.

(e) This alleged out-of-body body continues to exhibit all the independent consciousness traits and ego of the living physical body. Let us consider vision as an example. The first step in vision is the arrival on the retina of energy of certain wavelengths and intensities; the retina does not receive a photograph of the external world! After a complicated process that science is beginning to elucidate, a representation of the external world is created. Does the out-of-body body have a retina? If not, how can it see?

I shall not comment further on pseudoscience, NDEs, and OBEs at this time, because we are preparing a longer work on this topic. In conclusion, Tanner and his colleagues failed to present anything vaguely similar to a model to sustain dualism. Their proposition crashes against all the available scientific data coming from several disciplines and their ideas cannot even be tested experimentally. Therefore, all their efforts remain in the realm of wishes and beliefs.

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