

Review of: "The Near-Death Experience and the Question of Immortality: A Philosophical Approach"

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Peer review about the manuscript entitled:

The Near-Death Experience and the Question of Immortality:

A Philosophical Approach

The essay "The Near-Death Experience and the Question of Immortality: A Philosophical Approach" addresses the phenomenon of the "near-death experience (NDE)" from a partially philosophical perspective and consequently focuses little on the medical, neurobiochemical, psychological, or psychiatric aspects. The author begins with a critique of mystical positions, which often use metaphorical, quasi-poetic, pseudo-scientific, and pseudo-philosophical language to make assertions that at best sound mystical but are basically merely generalised speculations based on experiences (e.g., "Williams attempts to blind us with esoteric jargon that sounds erudite but seems entirely devoid of evidential value"). These experiences are presented as evidence for a consciousness that detaches itself from its physical anchoring, and this assumption would justify the existence of an afterlife. The author's justified criticism is that there is no epistemological reflection and criticism and that a naïve realism is followed: the experiences are attributed exactly to an external reality as a correspondence. However, it would also have been interesting if the author had gone into the current attempts at explanation, for example, the modelling of the NDE as an "experience of ego dissolution," as is the case with psychedelic drugs and NMDA antagonists. It would also have been interesting if the author had not only dealt with the terms "consciousness" or "ego," but also with the meaning of the term "soul" from a philosophical perspective.

The author justifiably criticises the assumptions of "transcendentalism", as they uncritically conclude from individual experiences to metaphysical assumptions that sound very anthropomorphic. The philosophical part begins in the manner of analytical philosophy with an examination of the language of the "transcendentalists", an analysis that sounds promising but is unfortunately much shortened; nevertheless, an important statement is made: "Anyone can invent an esoteric language in order to make nonsense appear erudite". This perspective is combined with an epistemological view of the matter using the term "justified true belief", as the author wants to prove that the mystical statements do not represent true belief. The author concludes in a balanced way: "So far, we have established that OBEs, whether part of an NDE or not, are not simply imaginary or make-believe: they do occur. What has not been established, however, is any evidence that the ego genuinely exits the physical body at such time. Anecdotal evidence in such cases is nowhere near sufficient to constitute a claim to true knowledge".

I believe that the argumentation has to be less formal-logical and more in the line of philosophy of science: with the uncritical conclusions of NDEs on a consciousness separating from the body as a guarantee for an afterlife, the question of plausibility on the basis of the accumulation of evidence and on the minimum consensus on the basis of partial objectification of these experiences is perhaps more important. It is also appropriate from the point of view of the philosophy of science that different models and hypotheses are contrasted and that the more acceptable hypothesis should be supported according to empirical criteria.

In the third part of the essay, the author addresses the question of whether or not eternal life is valuable and worth striving for. Here, the author opposes the positions of Bernard Williams and Timothy Chappell. I would have appreciated it if the author had explained the transition from the section about language and epistemology to the question of immortality. If the argument is made from a moral philosophical perspective, then it would also have been important to include the strictly philosophical arguments of Fred Feldman, Martha Nussbaum, Alan Paskow, Dorothy Grover, or Thomas Nagl. Personally, I find that the quasi-arithmetical arguments about the desire for unlimited life can hardly be attributed to the rationalist argument of "subjectively valuable projects not yet fulfilled," since it is a utilitarian, affectless argument. I am missing a more anthropological reasoning, i.e., based on fundamental characteristics of being human, including the ability to transcend and, above all, the yearning to continue life, as it seems to be modestly valuable to most as fragile and vulnerable embodied beings on earth. Many non-English-writing philosophers should be mentioned here, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Gabriel Marcel, Paul-Ludwig Landsberg, Elias Canetti, Jean-Pierre Wills, and Ralf Marten, among many others. Nevertheless, the distinction between "timeless" and "everlasting," as well as between "immortality" and "eternal life," is very fruitful.

Overall, this is an insightful examination of the philosophical scope of the debate on the nature of NDEs; a sequel about the anthropological significance of these phenomena would be of interest.