

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

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It was a great pleasure reading this scholarly article, written in a vivid style with some moments to simply laugh – what an achievement in such a philosophy-laden discussion. The author meets the proponents of NDEs with interest and curiosity; he is treating them with great respect, even though he does not agree. I felt immediately stimulated to start discussing with the author about some terms, among them ‘consciousness’ and ‘ego’. I found it extremely helpful to read the bullet points below on some of the central assumptions of NDE authors and add my thoughts. This is not meant to ask the author to incorporate my reflections, rather to indicate to what extent his writings made me think about my own assumptions.

First, that consciousness itself is primary and the ‘ground of all being’. Goswami (1993: 1), for example, states: ‘All events are phenomena in consciousness. Beyond what we see as immanent reality [i.e., the here and now], there is a transcendent reality. This seems to ring a Cartesian bell (Cogito ergo sum) and leaves open the origin of any certitude of who the first person in ‘cogito’ is; something is already thinking before we know who it is. Lichtenberg has pointed to this problem in saying: It should rather read like ‘it is thinking’ much like we say ‘It is raining’.

Second, consciousness is non-locative; it is a universal property and does not ‘belong’ to the individual. It is not something we acquire at birth and relinquish at death. The idea of each person having an individual mind is an illusion. This contradicts all findings about a baby’s developmental steps in becoming an individual person, starting from a predominantly ‘bodily identity’ and gaining insights of the world out there and of itself in this world with aging.

Consciousness can, and sometimes does, function independently of the brain. ‘This is a key assumption, especially for understanding how the blind may be aware of something that seems like visual perception’ (Williams 2019; for an alternative view, see Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2016: 46–59). ‘If the mind is nonlocal ... the possibility of survival of bodily death is opened’. Here again we see that the argument does not start with a discussion of consciousness of oneself. The sentence ‘I know who I am’ includes two entities, the first ‘I’ that knows and the second ‘I’ who is the object of interest to the first. If we try to disentangle the two ‘I’s,’ we will enter an endless self-referential loop which cannot be solved. Therefore, phenomenology has suggested starting from a bodily self-awareness as the origin of self (see literature on the Embodied mind or reference to the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz).

but we have no difficulty in separating fact from fantasy, especially given that some of our dreams are so

bizarre. Here I wouldn't agree and would rather be more cautious. Of course, some dreams are so bizarre that they are hard to believe in the sense of: they reflect reality. But many dreams are much closer to real-world scenarios, and we sometimes are not sure whether we have remembered something that has occurred to us in reality or whether it was 'just a dream.'

A minor typo: *The literature is out there in reams*

And here are some examples of the problem I have with the term 'ego'. What does it refer to? *How is it possible to know that Jim's ego truly detached from his body?*

this explanation is far more plausible than the view that the ego literally left the body for a few moments.

This denial consists in Williams' understanding of personal identity as involving continuity of character. At the risk of oversimplifying the case, let us suppose that my own character disposes me to an interest in football, beer, and computer games. Williams would maintain that in the long-term – and perhaps long before I reached the age of 337 – all these interests would lose their fascination for me and, as a fixed character, I would be incapable of turning my attention to anything else – say, wine, women, and song. So I would become as bored as Elina Makropulos.

This reminds me of the Aristotelian difference between substance and accident: what is lasting, what is 'the true essence,' and what is a characteristic open to change. Would it be helpful for the reader to mention that Williams revives an old debate?