

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

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The essay divides into 2 sections. The first is a survey of the voluminous literature on NDEs, or rather of the mostly popular books with "Light" in their titles. These are narratives whose authors are indeed "naive realists." They have dramatic stories to tell, along with stories from previous collections. There are some examples of far more sophisticated NDE writings, which the author of this essay does not discuss. I would recommend particularly Carol Zalesky's *Otherworld Journeys*, a historical study with a fine analysis of accounts from both present and past. Christopher Moreman's *Beyond the Threshold* is also a very sophisticated treatment of the issues around "consciousness" and its continuation after death. But even the "naive" narratives to me deserve a more sensitive and insightful treatment. If there is such a thing as a "raw" NDE - one unaccompanied by elaborated beliefs about the cosmos, the afterlife, etc. - I have heard several from college students who told them in a class on "Death and Dying." Listening, we all accepted that the students were telling the truth, and that there was something unusual and intrinsically mysterious about these experiences. To speak of "out of body" implies that "consciousness" is not intrinsically located within the body; it does not help to assume from the start that it must be.

The majority of the published NDE books do include lots of material about the soul, its destinations, and destiny. As far as I can tell, almost all of this can be found in the writings of Theosophy, a movement that flourished in the late 19th to early 20th century. Theosophy pictured the universe as a cosmic school, where souls learned after or in between incarnations. Theosophy flourished long before the current NDE literature and was one of several occult or esoteric belief systems that postulated a transcendent non-material reality, where death was graduation, not ending. These explicitly rejected the traditional God of western religion and often tried to present themselves as "scientific." They used a variety of imagery based on electricity. They offered an alternative to a naive materialist view and also to a version of theism where God rules, judges, rewards, and punishes. Much of the NDE literature of the 1970s claimed a version of "life after life" very similar to this, and probably borrowed from it.

One feature of current NDE literature, not found in earlier writings and not discussed in this essay, is the experiencer's encounter with beloved dead persons. Not only is there a heavenly landscape, but a welcoming committee. Their message is: "We're glad to see you, but it's not your time. Go back!" While it may be questioned how "Jesus" could be identified, these familiar dead are definitely the same persons they were in life. No one ever questions "How did you know it was your mother you met?" The interesting cases are those where the NDE experiencer did not know at the time that the welcomer had died (in the same car accident, for instance). If we are serious about the phenomenology of these

experiences, meetings with the dead ought to be included. These experiences make it seem natural to ask “Where are the dead?” and “What are they dying?”

That leads into another concern that makes these newer accounts different from anything in the western religious past. There is no necessity to think that the “otherworld” of NDEs is a permanent destination, as Heaven clearly is in Abrahamic religions. That Heaven is preeminently the realm of God. But suppose that the NDE realm of Light is more like the Tibetan Buddhist Bardo, an in-between existence that perhaps prepares the newly dead for something beyond itself? This has been the case in several novels, where the immediate afterdeath realm is a place where the newly dead can work through their emotional issues and ties to the living before moving on. Where to? This is left open. But this way of taking the contemporary NDE writings seriously but not literally places them within the wider context of today's spiritualities. I find this more productive than the rather stale debates between ideological materialists vs. transcendentalists such as the Bailey and Yates volume exemplified.