

The NDE as Evidence for Life after Death: A Dialog

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From time to time I ask my students how they feel about life after death. A solid majority say they believe in it, in keeping with most Americans (82% in a recent Gallup poll). I then ask them to imagine how they would feel if I could prove it didn't exist. "But you couldn't," some insist. "I know," I say, "but I want you to imagine I could and *did*. In other words, you actually feel compelled by logic and evidence to stop believing in it. How would you feel then?"

Quite a few say they would live life differently, that it's the reward or punishment of an afterlife that keeps them from being complete animals. But others admit they would live the same way, "but without much joy," they add. "I mean, if God doesn't love us enough to keep us in existence beyond one measly life, He doesn't love us enough. Would *you* let your child be snuffed out forever if you could stop it?" Good question! At this point in the conversation, someone — we'll call him an existentialist (he's almost always a male) — usually says life is all the *more* meaningful and happy because death snuffs us out forever. "If life just keeps going on forever and ever, then it's not that special. It's *because* it's so fragile and brief that it's so precious." "But wouldn't you rather live on after death if given a choice?" someone usually challenges. "Not really," is often the reply. "You mean you really don't care whether you're immortal or not?" This challenge is usually met with a complacent shrug of the shoulders.

Completely aside from what we might want or prefer, where does the evidence *actually point*? Does it point to extinction, or does it point to life after death? In this paper I will focus exclusively on the near-death experience (NDE) and see in which direction it takes us.

First a clarification. If the NDE is a real experience and not some sort of hallucination, life after death is strongly indicated. Here's why. First, if you can get out of your body and still move about and see and be aware of yourself as the person you are, then you're not your body. And if you're not your body, then the body's death

doesn't mean *you* have to die. This line of reasoning seems clear enough. But what if the NDE is a hallucination? In that case the experience isn't any more real than a dream, and the NDE completely fails as evidence of an afterlife. So the question comes down to this: What are the reasons for thinking the NDE is an experience of real things, and what are the countervailing reasons for thinking it's just a vivid dream, a hallucination? In which direction does an openminded, evenhanded analysis take us?

I think the evidence is strong for reality and against hallucination. I am going to let Theophilus (Theo) Adams tell you why. Theo, a professor of philosophy where I work, will be debating his prize student, whom we'll call Reggie. Reggie is the skeptic that Theo once was, and Theo would like to guide the young man in a different direction. While driving back from a philosophy conference they witness a frightening automobile accident. We pick up their conversation shortly after.

REGGIE: I wonder if the driver had a near-death experience.

THEO: You know, these days near-death researchers speak of the "fear-death" experience. Once in a while a person who *thinks* he's going to die has a near-death experience.

REGGIE: Really? Is it the same experience?

THEO: Apparently. The same sense of being out of the body, going down the tunnel toward a light, meeting dead relatives, coming into the presence of a Being of Light, reviewing your life—the same. Very suggestive.

REGGIE: Why do you say that, Dr. Adams?

THEO: *Theo stares pensively ahead for a few seconds with an almost pained look on his face.* Then: Reggie, let's conduct an experiment, just you and me. Let's imagine we live in a world with no scriptures and no religious traditions. Let me refine this a little. Let's imagine all the world's scriptures exist, but they're regarded by everyone just as you regard them—as mythology. They molder in libraries and museums, studied only by specialists. In other words, they tell us about times past, not about reality as it is. They tell us only about what certain people *took* to be reality a long time ago—just as we regard Greek mythology today. And let's imagine that all living religion was wiped off the face of the earth by a long-standing regime ruling the entire

world with murderous brutality. No living person has ever practiced a religion, for the last traces of public religion were stamped out two-hundred years ago. But now that regime has been overthrown, and all peoples--billions of them--are free for the first time to think new and daring thoughts. And as people always have once free, they begin to listen to their depths, and they begin tiptoeing back into the world of spirit and religion. Here is my question: Three-hundred years later, three-hundred years after the overthrow of this repressive regime, what would appear in the world's *new* scriptures? Where would ten generations of free people allowed to start over from scratch find hints of transcendence, hints of a divine order of things? What would they write down in their scriptures?

REGGIE: Probably some nut-case's visions and dreams. The funkier the better.

THEO: You might be right! But I'm more optimistic. Assuming technology hasn't been destroyed during the revolution, large numbers of people who used to die before resuscitation technology was developed will be brought back from the edge of death, just as they are now. And many of them will have near-death experiences. What they report will provide a more convincing and inspiring glimpse into the nature of the Big Picture than the visions of your nut-case. No comparison. The NDE will be a major contributor to any future scripture.

REGGIE: That would be pretty cool, I guess. But personally — as you know -- I don't necessarily take NDEs at face value. They might be hallucinations.

THEO: Even if they are -- and I don't think they are -- they would be a huge improvement over much of what passes for scripture today. NDErs who've had a full-blown experience -- especially if they merged with that intimately knowing, loving Light -- tell us the main purpose of life is to grow in love, while a secondary one is to grow in knowledge and wisdom. They come out of their experience deeply changed, eager to accept the challenge, exhilarated by the second chance they've been given. And there's nothing clubby about NDErs. They don't talk like they're better than others, or more saved, or favored by God. They're just heralds of hope for a world that's lost its way, the modern equivalent of angels. They strike me not as proud but humble -- like the saints of past ages whose close brush with God made them permanently humble. Reggie, when my faith crumbled many years ago, it was this literature, more than anything else,

that showed me a way out of my despair. You cannot imagine my excitement when I caught the first whiff of it.

REGGIE: I'm happy for you, I really am, but I still don't see why you take these visions at face value. They might be inspiring, and I'm sure they are, but they might not be real. And if they're not, I'd rather not have anything to do with them, no matter how good they make me feel.

THEO: Nor would I. But if they *are* real, if there is even a fair chance they are, wouldn't you think it worth your while to look into them?

REGGIE: Well, sure, but--

THEO: Then why don't you?

REGGIE: I read about them in your class last year.

THEO: But not since?

REGGIE: No. *The car is quiet for a few moments as Theo drives along, patiently waiting for Reggie to speak.* I guess I think they probably are hallucinations. Or maybe I'm just not that interested in looking into the question. And that's my fault.

THEO: *With a big smile.* Nah, you're just twenty-three. No fault in that! But, if you'll permit me, I'll tell you why I don't think they're hallucinations. Are you game?

REGGIE: Sure.

THEO: You know the first reason already. NDEs are strangely similar. Why should an old black man from Baptist Alabama have roughly the same experience as a gay atheist from San Francisco or a Mormon housewife from Idaho? If they were hallucinating, wouldn't their hallucinations be radically different? People's hallucinations are based on their memories and expectations. But these three characters don't have similar memories and expectations. They come out of pretty different worlds. So how do you account for the similarity of their experience? The only way to do it is to assume they've entered into a real world, a world equally surprising to all three. Does that make sense?

REGGIE: Yeah, but there's another explanation.

THEO: The one I taught you in class?

REGGIE: No one would accuse you of being one-sided, I grant you. But maybe you did too good a job. You said that maybe at the moment of death the brain screams

out a protest against its own imminent extinction. It contains material deep in the left temporal lobe that can explode into expression if provoked. And looking into death is the provoker. And since we're all part of the same human family, our brains are all coded the same basic way, regardless of background and experience. It's a species thing. That would explain the similarities of the NDE. We're all programmed to hallucinate the same basic thing because we're all members of the same species.

Pause.

THEO: Let me complete your argument, Reggie. Neurologists have probed the right temporal lobe of the brain and artificially stimulated some of the features of the NDE, especially the sense of being out of the body. And Navy pilots in training sometimes report being out of their bodies when they pass out during high G training. But none of these people has ever experienced anything like the intimately loving Being of Light, the most amazing part of the NDE. My suspicion is that, in the cases I've just mentioned, the self, or soul, or psyche -- call it what you will -- is artificially "loosened" from its usual place in the body and given a very brief and shallow introduction to the world we enter at death. Nevertheless, you give a good argument, indeed the best that a materialist can give. Hopefully you're not going to talk about drugs.

REGGIE: No, no, that's lame. We all know there's plenty of NDErs who aren't in hospitals or on drugs of any kind. I won't bother you with that s---!

THEO: Well, let me give you a little more to chew on. Actually a lot more. Do you know that NDErs don't have rapid-eye movement when they're having their vivid experiences? As you know, REM is always found when we dream. Look at anyone sleeping, and if her eyes are fluttering, you can be sure she's dreaming. And if they're not, you can be sure she's not dreaming. Every psychologist knows that. What does that tell you?

REGGIE: That's pretty interesting. But are hallucinations and dreams the same thing?

THEO: A hallucination is the most vivid kind of dream. If a dream is a four on the Richter Scale, a hallucination is an eight. Those eyelids should be singing! But they're not. And that tells me the NDE is not a hallucination. It's an experience of something real. Very real. Just like the NDErs say it is. A lot of NDErs have had hallucinations at

some previous time in their lives, by the way, and they all say they're definitely not hallucinating during their NDE. And they're the experts. We should be listening to them!

REGGIE: Yeah. But they could be mistaken.

THEO: Yes, but not likely, I'd say. Especially when you take into account the latest research on blind NDEs. This gets downright hard-core scientific. For a long time NDE researchers theorized that if NDEs really were out of their body with its blind eyes, then they would be able to see for the first time. A study of blind NDEs was done a few years ago, and the theory panned out. People blind from birth experienced vision for the first time during their NDEs. When you get a chance, Reggie, check out a book called *Mindsight* by Kenneth Ring, the NDE researcher at the University of Connecticut. The whole story is told there. If you can tell me how persons blind from birth can hallucinate a visual world during an NDE and report the same things we see, I'll take you and Christina [Reggie's girl friend] to the best restaurant in town.

REGGIE: You already did that when I got that fellowship! Anyway, you've got me over a barrel this time.

THEO: And then there's the best evidence of all. Are you ready for the climax?

REGGIE: Oh yes.

THEO: Many NDEs see things while "out of their body" that are actually going on. A man might "take a trip" to see his sister and later report what she was doing and wearing at the time -- a report later verified by the surprised sister who wondered how he knew. Or a child might later describe in detail, and with impressive accuracy, what happened when her body was being resuscitated while she, out of her body, watched from near the ceiling of her hospital room. Such anecdotes are routine in NDE literature. One study compared what NDEs saw when their bodies were being resuscitated to a control group of patients asked to describe what they *thought* happened during a typical resuscitation. None of the NDEs made mistakes, while almost all in the control group made major mistakes. If NDEs were hallucinations, how could all this true information come from it? There's no materialist explanation that makes much sense. Keep in mind that NDEs are comatose and usually clinically dead when they're having their experience.

REGGIE: That's a pretty good argument, I have to admit.

THEO: Of course there's the possibility that all this true information comes from some super-stimulated ESP ability. But materialists typically don't want to touch ESP. It's almost as mysterious as the NDE itself. And just as unsavory to them.

REGGIE: So what you're saying is that it's hard to explain away the NDE as a delusion, and therefore the great stuff that NDErs are always talking about deserves to be taken at face value.

THEO: That's pretty much what I'm saying.

REGGIE: Where is God in all this?

THEO: That's trickier. It depends on what you mean by God. No one has ever reported seeing a being who was omnipotent and omniscient sitting on a throne. No one has ever met some infinite substance with a name tag that said "God." Many have seen and even merged into the so-called Being of Light, and many have thought it was God. But just as many have called it an angel or some advanced soul, even something that we ourselves are destined someday to become. And that's not quite God! What's going on here is that different people are transferring their biases onto the formless Being of Light. What they actually see or merge with is simply a shapeless Light that is unmistakably personal and filled with a stupendous love and knowledge of them. They feel totally blissful in its presence and do not want ever to leave it. But when they do, as they must if they don't die, they feel that life is precious and that they are under some new mandate not to waste time any longer on trivial things. They've been singed by that wonderfully loving Light, and they bear its mark, like a fiery cross, for the rest of their lives. Oh how I envy them sometime! But God? You be the judge.

REGGIE: But you'll want to grant, I think, that any future scripture would have quite a bit to say about God. And if the NDE doesn't quite reach that high, where do we look?

THEO: Don't underestimate the NDE, Reggie. What it shows us is that there is something -- we can't agree on its nature -- much more evolved than we are. And that's good news! For isn't it reasonable to think that just as there are more evolved beings than we are, there are also more evolved beings than the Being of Light? But let's don't get hung up at the moment on what God might be. We're talking about sources of inspiration for a future religion. The NDE is only one of many.

REGGIE: It all sounds pretty plausible. But I'm still not convinced. I just can't believe we can have experiences outside our body. NDErs say they can see while out of their body. How? How can someone see without eyes? It just doesn't make sense. We must be overlooking something.

THEO: Ah, now I see your difficulty. I need to be clearer. When NDErs say they're out of their body, they mean they're out of their old damaged, sick *physical* body. If you ask them if they had a sense of being embodied *in something* while having their NDE, most will tell you yes. Unfortunately for us, they're more interested in other things than what kind of new body they're moving around in! We can only guess what its nature might be. But one thing I'm pretty sure of: it has eyes, good eyes. If it didn't, it couldn't see — I'm with you completely on that point. St. Paul spoke of a "spiritual body," and India's scriptures are full of descriptions of "ethereal" bodies—just another word for the same thing. And these bodies are much superior to ours, they tell us. These are the bodies, I suspect, we'll be moving around in when we die. Reggie, I promise you: If I have a near-death experience, I'll pay attention to what kind of body I have. And I'll report back to you. And if you have one, you report back to me. Is that a deal?

REGGIE: That's a deal, Dr. Adams.

Please don't get the idea that I think the foregoing conversation is conclusive. All it shows strictly speaking is that there is very good reason to think we are not our bodies and that our sense of self is in no way diminished or dimmed just because we are out of our body. Would we continue to exist if our body actually died? If so, how long? And what kind of experience would await us five minutes after death? An hour after death? A year? A hundred years? A million years? Ten trillion years? The NDE doesn't tell us.

But I'm betting we would continue to exist after our body dies. Why shouldn't we? Our experience free of the body is completely different from what it was just moments before. We don't suffer, we're not sick, and if we're blind we see. Obviously we're still connected to the body in some way or else we'd never get back to it when the NDE ended. But there is nothing about the experience to suggest we *are* that damaged or

sick body. Furthermore, most NDE veterans report a complete absence of fear of death. They are confident death is not the end and that a better world awaits them. One of my colleagues, a history professor who described himself as a “wishy-washy Methodist” and a skeptic on the question of life after death before his heart attack, had an undeveloped NDE involving nothing more than an out-of-body experience. When I asked him if he now believed in life after death based on it, he answered, “No, I don’t believe it. I *know* it.” As Theo said above, I don’t know why we shouldn’t take these people at their word. They are the experts, not we. Yes, they could be wrong, but why should they be? Many were not religious before their NDE. Some were agnostic or even atheistic. Some (especially children involved in accidents) had never given death a thought. So it’s hard to argue they are victims of wish-fulfillment. Moreover, NDErs who have had a developed experience (of the Light) are profoundly changed. Atheists are no longer atheistic. Drifters suddenly have a powerful sense of life’s purpose and meaning. Narrow-minded fundamentalists burst the manacles of their religious bigotry. Do hallucinations have that kind of power? Anyone who has had one knows they don’t. They are quickly recognized for what they are. They change nothing about one’s beliefs. They are never the one event *that changed everything*.

One other consideration argues against the hallucination hypothesis. NDErs often see spirits while out of their body. These spirits have one trait in common. They have died before. NDErs don’t report meeting their living grandparents; they meet their deceased ones who come to greet them. Anyone who knows how hallucinations work would be hard pressed to explain this aspect of the NDE. For hallucinations are as crazy as dreams. They are utterly unpredictable. If the spirits seen during an NDE were hallucinations, they would just as likely be living as dead grandparents. Hallucinations don’t keep track! The fact that those we call “the dead” come to greet us when we are on the brink of death argues forcefully for the reality of the spirits. NDErs themselves express no doubt on this matter, by the way.

I don’t want to pretend the NDE phenomenon proves life after death. But it surely makes it seem probable. How probable? Eighty percent? Ninety percent? Ninety-eight percent? Probable enough, I would say, to bank on. The NDE alone has taken away most of my fear of death. It’s a stick that’s hard to break.

But there are six other sticks: apparitions, mediumistic phenomena, poltergeist phenomena, apparent possession by earthbound spirits, reincarnation cases, and deathbed visions (not NDEs). Together with the NDE, they make up the Big Seven. When you bundle these seven sticks together, the case for spirit existence, and hence life after death, is almost unbreakable. But one stick at a time, please! In this paper we've looked at the strongest. The rest will have to wait for another day.

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