



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment Coversheet & Feedback Form

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Module code: CSPH7023	Student University Number:1704133	Educational support needs: Yes/No								
Module title: Philosophy of Religion										
Module tutor: Tristan Nash										
Assignment title: Do near-death experiences provide compelling evidence for the existence of an afterlife?										
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I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism. Name David DEHOORNE.....										
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Do near-death experiences provide compelling evidence for the existence of an afterlife?

Death is the true inspiring genius, or the muse of philosophy, wherefore Socrates has defined the latter as θανάτου μελέτη. Indeed, without death men would scarcely philosophise.¹

Arthur Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer, like Socrates, Cicero and Montaigne before him, proclaims that to philosophise is to learn how to die. Yet many of those who have had a near-death experience declare that it taught them how to live.

Death and the process of dying have always constituted a major source of concern for humanity. But the spread of information that took place during the last decades regarding the near-death experience (NDE) phenomenon has considerably increased the attention directed towards this topic and its potential metaphysical implications.

Not only do NDEs and their corresponding narratives deeply challenge the way we look at our everyday life, they equally defy the scientific framework on which we rely for making sense of everything that goes beyond our usual experience of the world.

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol. 3, trans. by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909), p. 249.

In the first part of this essay, I shall try to delineate the nature and characteristics of NDEs. The second part will be dedicated to the examination of the scientific data collected over the last decades, as well as to the critical assessment of the main theoretical models that have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. Finally, I shall evaluate, in the light of these elements, the strength of the evidence that NDEs offer in favour of the existence of an afterlife.

NDEs present essentially two types of evidence: testimony and scientific data. Since the former is rightfully held to be one of the weakest forms of evidence and given that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, greater attention shall be devoted to the latter.

Even though the first mention of the term 'near-death experience' occurred in 1972 in John C. Lilly's spiritual autobiography,² it really caught the attention of a broader public three years later through the publication of Raymond Moody's seminal work *Life After Life*.³

The various circumstances during which NDEs happen and the diversity of aspects they exhibit make them difficult to classify and open to a wide variety of interpretations. Furthermore, the lack of a standard definition of NDE renders scientific investigation even more problematic. The core issue lies in the fact that many NDEs do not literally happen during life-threatening situations.⁴ The term may therefore appear quite misleading.

² John C. Lilly, *The Center of the Cyclone, An Autobiography of Inner Space* (New York: The Julian Press, 1972), p. 147.

³ Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (New York: MMB, 1975).

⁴ J. E. Owens, E. W. Cook, I. Stevenson, 'Features of "near-death experience" in relation to whether or not patients were near death', *Lancet*, 336, (1990), pp. 1175-1177.

In addition to this lack of consensus around the definition of NDE, the highly controversial nature of the topic is also revealed by the absence of agreement regarding the existence of a regular pattern⁵ that could be used as a demarcation criterion.

Consequently, those who do recognise certain regularities in the NDEs generally start their research by delineating a set of elements considered to be constitutive of a genuine experience. The sixteen questions of Greyson's NDE scale⁶ epitomises this methodology.

Typical accounts of NDEs exhibit an intertwining of mundane and transcendental elements. These stories generally take the form of a travel narrative. The minds of the experiencers leave their bodies and travel upwards, passing through a dark tunnel. At the end of this passage appears a bright light that transmits a deep sense of peace, love and comfort. They also describe a profound feeling of unity or oneness with the whole universe. They are shown a life-review during which they empathically re-experience their lives and the way their actions affected others. They meet and interact with departed relatives and deceased loved ones. Finally, the experiencers return to their bodily life, either willingly or reluctantly.⁷

NDEs have considerable effects on the life of the experiencers. For a minority of people, negative effects have been identified such as the impossibility of functioning as before, communication problems, depression and difficulties in relationships, including divorces.⁸ But for the vast majority of experiencers, the consequences of their NDE are doubtlessly positive. These effects include the loss of the fear of death, a new appreciation of the purpose of life which in turn promotes a more optimistic attitude. They become more sensitive, tolerant, and compassionate.

⁵ Birk Engmann, *Near-Death Experiences, Heavenly Insight or Human Illusion?* (Cham, CH: Springer, 2014), p. 106.

⁶ Bruce Grayson, 'The Near-Death Experience Scale', *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, 171, (June 1983), pp. 369-375, p. 372.

⁷ Raymond Moody, 'Near-Death Experiences, An Essay in Medicine & Philosophy', in *The Science of Near-Death Experiences*, ed. by John C. Hagan (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), pp. 11-17, p. 13.

⁸ N. E. Bush, 'Is ten years a life review?', *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 10, (1991), pp. 5-9.

In addition, they feel less concerned by the material dimension of existence and become more attracted towards spirituality.⁹

The studies conducted on NDEs reveal no connection to specific medical conditions. It also appears that they occur independently of the age or gender of the experiencer. Furthermore, even though there is no agreement on whether prior belief or religious convictions play a determining role on the content of NDEs, it nonetheless seems that they have no impact on their occurrence.

It has been estimated that about four percent of the western world population has experienced an NDE. This astonishing ratio amounts to more than thirty million people.¹⁰ International prospective studies have shown that the incidence of NDE among patients having been critically ill is about seventeen percent.¹¹ Similar ratios have been observed in Pim Van Lommel's four-year study on patients having survived cardiac arrest.¹²

Two types of explanatory models have been proposed to elucidate NDEs. The first tries to correlate the available data with a variety of scientific hypotheses. This approach endorses the physicalist account of consciousness that dominates within the scientific community. Accordingly, it is assumed that the content of NDEs must be entirely explainable within the boundaries of the naturalistic framework. Anything that infringes this worldview is simply discarded. These

⁹ R. Noyes, P. Fenwick, J. M. Holden, S. R. Christian, 'Aftereffects of pleasurable Western adult near-death experiences', in *The handbook of near-death experiences: Thirty years of investigation*, ed. by J. M. Holden, B. Greyson, D. James (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABCCLIO, 2009), pp. 41-62.

¹⁰ G. Gallup, W. Proctor, *Adventures in immortality: A look beyond the threshold of death* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

¹¹ N. L. Zingrone, C. S. Alvarado, 'Pleasurable Western adult near-death experiences: Features, circumstances, and incidence', in *The handbook of near-death experiences: Thirty years of investigation*, ed. by J. M. Holden, B. Greyson, D. James, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABCCLIO, 2009), pp. 17-40.

¹² P. Van Lommel, R. van Wees, V. Meyers, I. Elfferich, 'Near-death experiences in survivors of cardiac arrest: A prospective study in the Netherlands', *Lancet*, 358, (2001), pp. 2039-2045.

explanations appeal either to psychological theories or to hypotheses involving metabolic or neurochemical determinations.

The proponents of the second type of approach usually reject the physicalist account which they perceive as overly reductionist. They recognise the value of the subjective assessments made by the experiencers and grant them epistemological primacy. And, since they endorse the conclusion that the content of NDEs correspond to a reality that transcends our ordinary perceptions, they equally admit the metaphysical implications of these experiences.

The psychological explanations mostly associate NDEs with psychodynamical processes such as depersonalisation and dissociation. Both mechanisms function as adaptative strategies meant to cope with threatening situations. Whereas characteristic traits of depersonalisation such as a dreamlike quality and discomfort seem to contradict the higher level of alertness and the state of peace described for most NDEs, a correlation has been observed between dissociative tendencies and the propensity to go through an NDE.¹³ It has also been argued that NDEs result from subsequent reinterpretations and that expectations induced by personal inclinations, religious beliefs and cultural influences provide most of their content. NDEs of young children and the existence of core characteristics independent of the cultural situations of the experiencers have been evoked against this hypothesis. There is, however, no consensus regarding the validity of these two claims.

Many physiological and neurological hypotheses have also been proposed as plausible explanations for NDEs. It has been thought, for instance, that the OBEs (out-of-body experiences) could be understood as a phenomenon of *autoscopy* resulting from temporal lobe disfunction.

¹³ K. Ring, C. J. Rosing, 'The Omega project: An empirical study of the NDE-prone Personality', *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 8 (4), (1990), pp. 211-239.

Likewise, it has been speculated that the passage through a tunnel and the vision of a bright light could result from the narrowing of the visual field induced by hypotension and retinal ischemia.¹⁴

NDEs are also frequently equated with deliria or hallucinations. These states of consciousness can be induced either by exogenous substances such as medications or anaesthesia (narcosis), or by endogenous substances such as hormones (*e.g. adrenaline, vasopressin*) or neurotransmitters (*e.g. serotonin, dopamine*). Yet, NDEs frequently happen to people who are not under anaesthesia and take no medication. Furthermore, the empirical data does not seem to support the hypotheses that endogenous chemicals are capable of producing anything approaching the phenomenology of NDEs.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the dominant view among scientists is that NDEs are better explained in terms of metabolic impairment or brain malfunction. This position is supported by the correlation that has been observed between the severity of brain impairment during cardiac arrest and the likelihood of going through an NDE.^{16,17}

The difference of sensibility exhibited by certain regions of the brain has also been evoked as a possible explanation. According to the pathoclinic hypothesis, some areas of the brain are more likely than others to suffer from blood gases alterations such as hypoxia, anoxia or hypercarbia. This explanatory model could at least explain the auditory and visual features of NDEs.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kevin Nelson, 'Neuroscience Perspectives on Near-Death Experiences', in Hagan (2017), p. 118.

¹⁵ E. W. Kelly, B. Greyson, E. F. Kelly, 'Unusual experiences near death and related phenomena', in *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21st century*, ed. by E. F. Kelly, E. W. Kelly, A. Crabtree, A. Gauld, M. Grosso, B. Greyson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 367-421.

¹⁶ P. R. Martens, 'Near-death experiences in out-of-hospital cardiac arrest survivors. Meaningful phenomena or just fantasy of death?', *Resuscitation*, 27 (2), (1994), pp. 171-175.

¹⁷ Van Lommel et al. (2001).

¹⁸ Engmann, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

In spite of their potential contribution in the aetiology of NDEs, these naturalistic approaches face a number of serious difficulties.

The first issue that is often pointed to, is that many of these hypotheses, especially those that imply the action of one or more substances, consist essentially in mere assumptions that are not supported by direct evidence.¹⁹ More generally, the aforementioned potential explanations seem at best capable of explaining some features of NDEs. Not only do they reveal themselves incapable of explaining the whole phenomenon,²⁰ they also fail to provide a theoretical model that encompasses the wide variety of conditions under which these experiences take place.

The second problem with the hypotheses involving a malfunctioning brain or a metabolic impairment is that they seem hard to reconcile with the fact that NDEs are typically described as vivid and lucid experiences. A similar difficulty emerges when one tries to understand how veridical and corroborated remembrances can occur under such conditions.²¹

In response to these objections, it has been argued that the impression of enhanced awareness could be produced during the return to consciousness. Furthermore, accurate descriptions of events may be explained by the gathering of information through normal perceptions which occur mostly unconsciously. It has also been shown that, contrary to what was thought to be the case, a high level of activity can be detected in brains during near-death states.²² Being superior to that of the normal states, this level of activity could explain the heightened consciousness described by a majority of experiencers.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²⁰ K. Ring, S. Cooper, *Mindsight: Near-death and out-of-body experiences in the blind* (Palo Alto, CA: William James Center for Consciousness Studies, 1999).

²¹ Pim van Lommel, 'Dutch Prospective Research on Near-Death Experiences during Cardiac Arrest', in Hagan (2017), pp. 39-47, p. 42.

²² Jimo Borjigin, UnCheol Lee, Tiecheng Liu, et al. 'Surge of neurophysiological coherence and connectivity in the dying brain', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110 (35), (2013), pp. 14432-14437.

Opposing this naturalistic interpretation of NDEs, the super-naturalist approach considers them irreducible to mere psychological or physiological determinations. According to this point of view, NDEs unveil a reality that transcends both our ordinary intuitions and the limits of our scientific knowledge. Jeffrey Long's nine lines of evidence²³ illustrates this position.

Long's list comprises of: high level of awareness, OBEs, blind people experiencing vision, NDEs during anaesthesia, life reviews, encounters with deceased loved ones, young children's NDEs, cross-cultural invariance and significant aftereffects.

Of course, numerous objections have been raised against these arguments. Young children's NDEs, for instance, might be explained by the way children's testimonies are often influenced by adults. And the work of Oliver Sacks on visual hallucinations is frequently used to refute the experiencing of vision in the blind. Finally, the alleged cross-cultural invariance is often denied on the basis of discrepancies that can be found in the accounts of NDEs .

In sum, there seems to be no argument or evidence in favour of the reality of NDEs that is not susceptible of being either refuted, or to the least, put into question.

It has nevertheless been argued against this thorough scepticism that the richness, depth and significance of NDEs cannot be explained away by cherry picking the data collected in different contexts and comparing them to the ones extracted from NDEs. One needs more than a mere resemblance between features to conclude that the same causes must be at work in totally different situations.

²³ Jeffrey Long, 'Near-Death Experiences Evidence for Their Reality', in Hagan (2017), pp. 63-77.

What the opposition between the naturalistic and the super-naturalistic position clearly shows is that the major problem lies in the difficulty of producing compelling evidence in favour of a particular hypothesis. The root of the problem is certainly to be found in the extreme complexity of the phenomenon and in the impossibility of reproducing it under laboratory conditions. The absence of substantial results²⁴ produced by the numerous attempts that have been made to prove the reality of OBEs during NDEs is symptomatic of the present situation.

The conclusion that can be drawn from all these considerations is that the evidence that has been gathered so far is not sufficiently compelling as to convince anyone who doubts the reality of an afterlife. On the other hand, those who deny the reality of NDEs reveal themselves equally incapable of offering a satisfactory answer to the major interrogations that have been raised by this phenomenon.

For those who have not personally experienced it, the persuasiveness of the evidence provided by NDEs in favour of an afterlife depends greatly on their world view and on their willingness to challenge it. Yet, for the vast majority of those who went through such an extraordinary experience, its reality leaves absolutely no doubt.²⁵

As a consequence of the steady advance of resuscitation techniques, NDEs are bound to become more frequent. One may therefore hope that upcoming research will offer new evidence for, or against, the afterlife hypothesis. But, in all likelihood, the prospect that science will provide a definite answer to the metaphysical question of the afterlife remains extremely doubtful.

²⁴ Janice Miner Holden, 'Apparently Non-Physical Veridical Perception in Near-Death Experiences' in Hagan (2017), pp. 79-88, p. 86.

²⁵ Long, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

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