



Fall 2017

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Semenov, Anastasia N., "The Possibility of an Afterlife as Examined Through Near-Death Experiences" (2017). *Student Publications*. 578.

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Abstract

Approximately five percent of the world's population has dealt with a near-death experience, which is the unusual phenomenon after temporarily dying or coming close to death, where people feel like they have left their body and see an afterlife. Millions of accounts from people around the world who have experienced this occurrence tell of seeing an afterlife, which should allow for the possibility of a life after death. Although peoples' experiences in another realm differ, they all have similar features such as travelling in a fast tunnel and encountering loving light beings. These experiences are so intense that they form a huge impact on their experiencer, thus people often change their actions and way of thinking after such an encounter with this other realm. Because many people alter their lives to such an extent following this experience, society should become more open and aware of the possibility that there could be a life after death. Although scientists have attempted to explain this phenomenon, there are still many unanswered questions.

Keywords

near-death experiences, afterlife, death

Disciplines

Philosophy of Mind | Philosophy of Science

Comments

Written for FYS 150: Death and the Meaning of Life.

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Research Paper Draft #1
The Possibility of an Afterlife as Examined Through Near-Death Experiences

Approximately five percent of the world's population has dealt with a near-death experience, which is the unusual phenomenon after temporarily dying or coming close to death, where people feel like they have left their body and see an afterlife. Millions of accounts from people around the world who have experienced this occurrence tell of seeing an afterlife, which should allow for the possibility of a life after death. Although peoples' experiences in another realm differ, they all have similar features such as travelling in a fast tunnel and encountering loving light beings. These experiences are so intense that they form a huge impact on their experiencer, thus people often change their actions and way of thinking after such an encounter with this other realm. Because many people alter their lives to such an extent following this experience, society should become more open and aware of the possibility that there could be a life after death. Although scientists have attempted to explain this phenomenon, there are still many unanswered questions.

A near-death experience is an unusual occurrence that happens to those who have had a brush with death. It can either happen to those who were close to dying or who actually did die but were later revived. As P. M. H. Atwater explains in her book, *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences: The Ultimate Guide to What Happens When We Die*, experiencers usually have no pulse or breathing for about 5-15 minutes, but there have been cases where it has been much longer. This is so incredible because there have been instances where the individual has been dead for an hour, yet they are still conscious enough to have these experiences. The age of those who experience this can range from newborns and toddlers to the elderly. Every person's near-death experience (NDE) differs from what they encounter to how it makes them feel (whether it is pleasant or frightening), however there are many characteristics that are common in this phenomenon. People usually have feelings of peace and love, travel through a tunnel, have an

out-of-body experience, and encounter a bright light. During their brush with death, many people claim to be rescued by something supernatural, such as angels. After these experiences, people tend to no longer fear death because they have a higher understanding of how the universe operates and what is waiting for them on the other side. It is very common for people to come back to their body with the awareness of the existence of another realm. In other words, they now know that there is more to life than the physical world. This can make people feel better as they enjoy the idea that there is life after our body dies, however it makes some feel worse because it is such new, abstract knowledge.

Carl Allen Pierson from West Virginia had a more typical kind of NDE when he was a child. He was outside during a storm with a metal container over his head when suddenly he got struck by lightning. He then was able to leave his body and watch his physical body lay on the grass with the now black metal container by his side while the storm continued. He learned that he had died and when he tried to argue back that he was not in fact dead, he was unable to speak with his mouth. Instead, the communication was telepathic. He then saw a welcoming, comforting light followed by blackness. Later, he was in the hospital when he again had an out-of-body experience (Atwater). The fact that so many people have had similar experiences should make society question their views of what happens after people die. Some might believe absolutely nothing happens, while others might think we immediately appear in Heaven or Hell. However, experiences like Pierson's show that there may be more to death than people think.

Though Pierson's example had characteristics that are quite common for NDEs, some people have more atypical encounters that are unexplainable, prompting many questions about the experiencer's death and revival. One woman had been in a bad car accident and was no longer conscious. She then had an out-of-body experience where she was able to witness the

scene around her which was filled with emergency vehicles. Her husband worked in ambulances and she was somehow able to see her husband in one of them (which was accurate). She described floating in a blue ball towards her husband. However, once her husband realized it was her that had been in the accident, he was overcome with emotion. After seeing him so upset with grief, she decided to return back to her body to console him (Atwater). There is no way to explain how an unconscious woman could know that her husband was on the scene. Not only that, but it is inconceivable that she was able to *consciously* make the decision for her soul to reenter her body in order to not upset her husband.

As Atwater states, these two examples both fall into one of four types of NDEs, all of which are fascinating in their own way and the fact that there have been enough claims of these experiences to categorize them should persuade people to be open about their existence. The first type, which is what these two examples fall into, are called “Initial Experience”. As Atwater states, this contains “loving nothingness, the living dark, a friendly voice, a brief out-of-body experience, or a manifestation of some type”. Because it is the mildest of the four, it is usually experienced by children or people who do not need a big change in their life that would result from a dramatic NDE. Although it certainly can change lives, it is probably the least likely to as it is the least intense type of NDE.

The second type is an “Unpleasant and/or Hell-Like Experience”. Fortunately, these are not very common. Those who do have this type of NDE encounter a threatening void, a dark frightening tunnel, scenes from the experiencer’s past that they regret, and life reviews. The experiencer usually holds a lot of negativity such as guilt and anger, and may have also expected prior to their death that they would be punished in the afterlife. One man named Scott says he nearly died from a car accident. While he was in a coma, he encountered the Devil, who was

angry and shouting at him. He looked like a being of rotting flesh. Scott was terrified but kept his faith in God, and finally got taken away from the Devil by angels. Once he woke up from his coma, he says his relationship with God became stronger because he never wanted to encounter the Devil again. This experience was so intense and traumatizing that he has changed his ways by being kinder to others, which is not something he prioritized prior to this meeting with the Devil (Atwater).

The third type is a “Pleasant and/or Heaven-Like” Experience, which is likely how most believers of the afterlife expect theirs to be. People claim they reunite with deceased friends/family/pets, and meet welcoming religious figures or beings of bright light. What people may not expect, however, is it is actually uncommon for experiencers to encounter specific religious figures (like Jesus). Instead, they are more likely to be greeted by a deceased loved one or genderless bright holy beings, which the experiencers describe as possibly angels. Children seem to be more likely to see these beings with wings, like how angels are usually portrayed.

The fourth categorization of NDEs and certainly the most remarkable are “Transcendent Experiences”, which leave people with such abstract knowledge about the world that it should lead society to question our confidence about how the universe works. Experiencers claim to go to other realms that are nearly indescribable where they gain knowledge about how the universe works. This is mostly experienced by those who are capable of understanding something beyond themselves and/or can use this information to better their life.

Ray Kinman is a man who has had two transcendent experiences in his lifetime and has left him with a new and different understanding of life. The first experience happened before puberty, which was not as detailed and extreme as his next experience in his teenage years. When he was ten years old, he collapsed on his head and as he lay there seemingly unconscious,

he started feeling like he was going through a funnel. He was greeted by Love and Light and then came to golden gates, where his deceased dog came to him. His next NDE happened when he was sixteen after an accidental overdose. Once again, he went through a funnel and then was greeted by beings of Love and Light. He learned that there was no past and present – everything in this realm was simply the “now”. He then became all-powerful and all-knowing, thus becoming a part of God. Despite these being such abstract concepts that sound difficult to understand, Kinman understood it clearly – it made complete sense to him, thus prompting the question of how could he possibly comprehend such an idea while unconscious.

Another example of this type of experience that is so hard to wrap one’s head around is from Mellen-Thomas Benedict. Benedict was diagnosed with cancer and as he claims, one morning he woke up knowing that he would die that day, which ended up coming true. After he had died, he was shown all of history, from the beginning of the universe to thousands of years into the future. Atwater writes, “He saw all wars from their beginnings, race as personality clusters, species operating like cells in a greater whole”. Once he was revived, his doctor said that his cancer had somehow completely vanished. After this incident, he no longer fears death and his perspective on the world has changed. He now understands that there is nothing to fear in the future of the world for all problems will eventually be solved.

Like Benedict, people who have transcendent experiences come back to life understanding everything about the universe. They say that everything now makes sense. It is difficult to explain how they can suddenly have these abstract thoughts that make complete sense to them all while being unconscious and even clinically dead.

Children also are able to have these occurrences and since they have no way of knowing the concept of a near-death experience, it is even more startling and astounding when a child

comes back from death or near-death telling of what they saw during that time. Children usually have initial experiences since it is the mildest and therefore least difficult to comprehend. Like adults, children are shown previews such as how their death would negatively affect their loved ones and their purpose in life. After children's experiences, they are often more in tune with the spiritual realm (such as ghosts and angels) and are more matter-of-fact about the world since their NDE gave them a better understanding of how the universe works and what is in store for their future. In other words, they have accessed their higher faculties and are much more aware of the world around them. Some adults are able to do this through meditation and even drugs, however nothing comes close to the effects NDEs have on one's knowledge of the world. It is also common for them to come back to the physical world knowing information they could not have possibly known before but was later verified as true. One example comes from Tonecia Maxine, who says she was drowning at the beach and had an out-of-body experience. She was far from shore and underwater, yet she could see her grandmother running to her and her brother cutting his foot on something. Then, she suddenly saw that she was now in a beautiful meadow with shades of colors she had never seen before. They were much more beautiful than they were on Earth. When she eventually got to the hospital, she asked her brother how his foot was and he was in disbelief that she somehow knew he had cut it while she was far in the ocean and underwater at the time he injured himself (Atwater).

People who have attempted suicide also claim to have had an NDE, but their effects on people tend to be life-changing in either a positive or negative way. It is most common for people who have tried to commit suicide to come back to life with a sense of purpose and self-worth, however it is unlikely for them to have experiences where they gain knowledge about the universe. One man, for example, overdosed on drugs and claimed to enter a peaceful, loving

realm where he felt forgiven for his action of attempted suicide. Ever since this experience, he has shared with others the importance of life and the idea that everyone has a purpose, therefore suicide is never the solution. His NDE clearly had such a big impact on him to the point that he changed his life around and tried to help others do the same. It would be hard to try to invalidate his NDE because it is certainly not easy for someone with depression to suddenly think positively about life. *Something* must have happened in order to cause this change and it makes sense that his experience in the afterlife is what sparked it. Although this is a good example of the constructive effects of this phenomenon, for some suicidal people it can actually make things worse. People explain that it has contributed to their depression because it made them feel crazy for having something so unexplainable and seemingly impossible happen to them. They also might get frustrated that they have had such an eye-opening experience, yet they have no idea how to apply it to their life and they are left feeling lost. Others feel like they were not worthy enough to go to Heaven which is why they got sent back to Earth. Although this is surprisingly uncommon, there have been cases for people to awake and be so overwhelmed with how wonderful the other side was that they become tempted and even act to commit suicide again.

There is no way to explain how millions of rational people have had these experiences and significantly changed their lives because of it. The only explanation is the reality behind NDEs. In a 1994 research study, 60% of experiencers say they had a significant change and 19% said their changes were so dramatic that they feel like they are a different person now. One man named Joseph McMoneagle was suddenly able to see people and places that he was nowhere near and had never been to after dying and being revived. According to Atwater, *Reader's Digest* even called him a "psychic spy" and has been so accurate and trusted that the US military and CIA use him to help spy on Russia and locate hostages. Clearly, it seems impossible to be able to

do such a thing, but if his skills have been proven to the military and CIA who have high standards, he must be legitimate.

Dr. Michael B. Sabom, author of *Light & Death: One Doctor's Fascinating Account of Near-Death Experiences*, never used to believe NDEs were possible especially as a man of science, however hearing peoples' experiences first hand converted him to a believer. One man, as he describes, told him that he had an out-of-body experience during his surgery in which he was unconscious. Dr. Sabom explains, "When I asked him to tell me exactly what he saw, he described the resuscitation with such detail and accuracy that I could have later used the tape to teach physicians". He knew that one doctor was not wearing shoe covers during surgery as well as the color scrubs a nurse was wearing, all while completely unconscious. Dr. Sabom states that reading a book containing the stories from experiencers is one thing, but after actually watching someone tell their story and see their emotion, it is hard to remain a skeptic. As a doctor who used to try to find scientific explanations for everything, he has realized some things just do not have a scientific explanation.

Bing Engmann explains the science behind this phenomenon in his book, *Near-Death Experiences: Heavenly Insight or Human Illusion*, though it still leaves some questions unanswered. He states that the so-called out-of-body experiences are simply an effect from the anesthesia, and the feeling of going through a tunnel as well as seeing family members are caused by the brain shutting down. However, if this is the case, it is hard to explain why there are so many doctors who believe in the spirituality behind NDEs as well as why brain-dead people miraculously come back to life with such experiences. It is impossible for there to be any brain activity in someone who is brain-dead, yet people who have recovered from this claim to have been conscious and had thoughts, emotions, and visions. Therefore, it leads to the philosophical

question of whether there is a separation between the brain and the mind (or as some call it, the “soul”) (Berkson). As science has shown, our thoughts come from the brain, however it is then unexplainable why those who should be incapable of having any thoughts still do. As author of #1 *New York Times* bestseller, *Proof of Heaven*, Eben Alexander, M.D. writes that when he was a neurosurgeon prior to his 7-day coma, he had no explanation for NDEs, however he “did know that they were brain-based. All of consciousness is. If you don’t have a working brain, you can’t be conscious”. Then, though, his own brain went unconscious. Like millions of other people that he used to brush off, he too experienced the rare phenomena of near-death experiences. Since his brain was completely not functioning, he “was encountering the reality of a world of consciousness that existed *completely free of the limitations of [his] physical brain*”. After this experience, he has gained more information about the body. More specifically, that simply because the brain and body are dead, it does not mean one’s consciousness is also. Coming from a man who earned his M.D. at Duke University Medical School and had over a decade of training at Harvard, this is revolutionary. Science emphasizes that once someone dies, their brain starts shutting down, releases chemicals, but then becomes completely dead. Dr. Alexander, on the other hand, rejects this as he learned this is not the case through his own experience that he attempted (but ultimately found was impossible) to medically analyze.

Skeptics argue that the consistency of people’s experiences can be explained by everyone’s biology being very similar and NDEs can just be categorized as hallucinations, however it does not explain how people come back to life knowing information about their surroundings that would otherwise be impossible to know. Like Tonecia Maxine and the man Dr. Sabom describes, one woman died after having a cardiac arrest and when she was resuscitated, she spoke of floating out of her body onto another floor of the hospital. She described a shoe that

was on the floor in great detail and begged her caretaker to see if it was actually there, showing even the experiencer was slightly skeptical about this being true. Sure enough, the nurse found the shoe and brought it to the woman, appearing exactly as she had described (Berkson). Some might say that she had a memory of this shoe in her subconscious from when she might have passed by it before, however she had never even gone to that floor. Another woman was clinically dead and later revived by doctors. She claims she had an out-of-body experience where she saw the surgery being done. She described the specific instruments the surgeons used, which were not commonly-known instruments, therefore it is very unlikely she could just make this up. Though there may be scientific explanations for some aspects of NDEs, some are still very much a mystery.

The unusual accounts of near-death experiences are so inconceivable due to their otherworldly nature that seems to go against science. Although skeptics can fall back on science to explain some of the characteristics, others are still impossible to comprehend. This should lead society to question what is thought to be known as fact about death, the brain, and consciousness. How can people have knowledge about their surroundings while they are clinically dead? Does life actually continue after what we call “death”? These philosophical questions are still unexplained by scientists, however near-death experiences may provide an answer.

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