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Near Death Experiences and the Evidence—A Review Essay

By Gary R. Habermas

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It is probably an understatement to say that the phenomena of near-death experiences (NDEs) is riding a massive wave of popularity and has been for much of the last twenty years.¹ Best-selling books, firsthand articles, television documentaries and movies regularly describe the fascination we have with stories "from the other side." The typically-reported sensations are now common parlance: floating above one's dying body, travelling down a dark tunnel, sensing the presence of departed loved ones or spiritual beings, and experiencing a Being of light.

From a more critical perspective, one problem with this popularity is that friends and foes alike generally concentrate on the more sensational aspects of these reports with little or no interest in the more evidential claims that are being made. Thus, allies often bask in the mere descriptions of these extraordinary reports while antagonists think that they have debunked these wonders by responding, in kind, to the same popular sensations. On both sides serious attention is seldom given to accounts that claim corroborative evidence in favor of the NDEs.

One recent book is a welcome exception to this trend. Susan Blackmore's *Dying to Live: Near-Death Experiences*² is a serious attempt to investigate the best arguments both for and against these phenomena. A Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of the West of England, Blackmore is the author of numerous publications on this subject and one of the recognized experts in the field. Her background and the amount of her research lend credibility to her treatment.

This review article will examine Blackmore's arguments. In particular, she recognizes the importance of the evidential cases and thinks that they are potentially the most important ones. As we are in agreement on the centrality of this aspect,³ I will concentrate chiefly on some of these instances.

Blackmore's Case: NDEs as Natural Phenomena

Blackmore enumerates four types of arguments that are most frequently utilized in order to argue from NDEs to an "afterlife hypothesis." First, NDEs are

In his article, Gary R. Habermas agrees with naturalist Susan Blackmore, author of *Dying to Live: Near-Death Experiences*, that the chief question concerning the objectivity of near-death experiences is whether empirical, corroborative evidence is really available. However, it is argued that Blackmore's challenge for specific kinds of data can at least tentatively be met. Mr. Habermas teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University.

described similarly from culture to culture and even throughout history. Second, NDEs seem so realistic that the experiencer cannot deny their authenticity; after all, he/she was there. Third, no purely naturalistic hypothesis can account for the "paranormal" data reported by those who have experienced NDEs. Fourth, experiencers are frequently transformed afterwards, becoming more interested in life and less materialistic (pp. 4–5). In my assessment, I will spend the most time on Blackmore's treatment of the third argument.

Blackmore also lists two arguments *against* the "afterlife hypothesis" and in favor of what she terms "the dying brain hypothesis." First, the similarity of NDEs is explained because "everyone has a similar brain, hormones and nervous system and that is why they have similar experiences when those systems fail." Second, all of the NDE phenomena can occur other than in near-death contexts, meaning that they "can be explained in terms of hallucinations or normal imagery" (pp. 5–6).

Blackmore undoubtedly sides with the dying brain hypothesis. Unlike some researchers, she does not hide her naturalistic convictions. She proclaims: "I have been developing a theory of the NDE that tries to explain it completely in terms of processes in the dying brain" (p. 111; cf. pp. 134–135, 263). Similarly, she contends that nothing leaves the physical body, and there is no survival of death, all of which are "illusions" (pp. 114, 259).

Most of her book is directed against the four pro-afterlife arguments. The similarities between NDEs are explained by the brain cortex and what happens in the presence of oxygen deprivation (hypoxia), the natural production of endorphins and other events that are interpreted as threats to the brain.⁴

I agree that the similarities across culture and time are not strong arguments for the objectivity of NDEs. But I cannot go as far as does Blackmore, who argues that the dying brain hypothesis better explains the findings (p. 262). The data could point either way—to an afterlife or to our common chemistry. Therefore, such resemblances are equivocal.

Blackmore does not question the fact asserted in the next argument: NDEs *do seem* to be very real. But she explains that the difference between reality and the imagination is the chief problem here (p. 138). Admitting that her view is influenced by her own studies of Eastern (and especially Buddhist) ideas (pp. 162–163), Blackmore favors the notion that "the world of appearance is a constructed illusion" (p. 151), as in the Indian concept of *maya*. Therefore, since the world

¹For convenience, the modern upsurge in interest may be dated from the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* (Covington: Mockingbird Books, 1975).

²Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1993, xii + 291 pp., \$23.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-87975-870-8.

³In twenty years of research on the topic of NDEs, I have also attempted to concentrate on the most evidential cases since it is here that we receive the most insight on the issue of their objectivity. See Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), Chapters 5–6; cf. Gary R. Habermas, "Paradigm Shift: A Challenge to Naturalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (Oct.—Dec., 1989): 437–450.

⁴This argument is found in chapters 2–5, especially pp. 45, 81, 106, 112, 261.

(ourselves included) is only a mental construction (pp. 158–159, 232–233), *none* of our experiences is objectively real. Thus, the NDE seems real because it is the mind's "most stable model of reality at the time" (pp. 164, 173).

While I agree that the NDER's sense of "realness" is not in itself proof of another reality, I have two major differences with Blackmore. First, her Eastern model is totally unproven. This in itself is interesting because she rejects other models for their failures (pp. 141–150), yet declines to prove her own. In fact, she even admits that she has gone beyond what cognitive theory allows (p. 159). Without proof, the Eastern hypothesis cannot then serve as an adequate foundation. Here Blackmore abandons her own empirical method. Secondly, although this "realness" does not constitute proof, it still counts for something. Many NDERs report that it is the most vivid experience they have ever had. As Blackmore admits, this must be adequately explained (p. 93).

Blackmore also attempts to explain the transformations (often radical ones) that frequently occur to NDERs. There is no doubt about these changes, but a wrong conclusion is too often drawn from the data (pp. 244, 251). Blackmore's chief response is similar to the last one: in the NDE, the participant gains "the insight that the self was only a mental construction." This allows the NDER to realize that there "never was any solid self," and then there is no fear of dying and the person can live a full, uninhibited life (p. 263). In short: "It becomes obvious that 'I' never did exist and so there is no one to die. . . . To the extent that this happens, the person is changed. Here is the real loss of the fear of death. Here lies the true transformation of the NDE" (p. 259). Blackmore concludes that the dying brain hypothesis thus "accounts better" for these changes (p. 263)!

I agree, once again, that post-NDE transformations do not by themselves prove the objectivity of these experiences. But Blackmore's critique appears to be very wide of the mark and for more than one reason. Initially, typical NDERs are peacefully transformed precisely because they think they have experienced the afterlife. But Blackmore's thesis that neither the world nor the self are objective entities and that life after death is untrue would appear to have the exact *opposite* effect, causing NDERs to experience anxiety! Thus, her solution appears exceptionally *ad hoc* and reductionistic, as if the chief purpose is to explain away NDEs at all cost. Without exaggeration, my respect for the transformation aspect actually *increased* after wondering whether naturalism has any better explanations! This account simply does not satisfactorily explain the phenomena.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the last two points is by citing one of Blackmore's own standards. She explicitly affirms: "No explanation of the NDE is worthwhile unless it can explain why it feels the way it does" (p. 93). Yet her own account *does not* adequately account for either the "realness" or the transformation components of these experiences.⁵

⁵Another frustrating element is that along the way, Blackmore's reasoning frequently involves various logical fallacies (pp. 151, 209, 245, 248, 250, 262).

Evidential NDE Cases

Without question, the pro-afterlife argument that Blackmore treats most seriously is that which claims various sorts of objective corroboration for the experience—what she terms "a direct challenge" to her thesis (p. 111). This corroboration most frequently consists of reports by NDERs that they observed phenomena they would not have been able to learn had they not been beyond their body (in some sense)⁶ during the time they were near death.

Blackmore makes it clear more than a half dozen times that such data could potentially disprove her naturalistic perspective on NDEs. For example, at the close of her study she repeats that if "truly convincing" cases were to be documented, "then certainly the theory I have proposed will have to be overthrown. . . ."⁷ Further, and almost as many times, she also admits that such evidence for NDEs could, in fact, exist. In one such instance she concludes: "Like so many other cases before, this one stirred in me the thought that I might indeed be quite wrong. I could not ignore such potential evidence against my theories. . . ."⁸

But if such evidence would disprove her position and such data may actually exist, what keeps her from recognizing the evidence for NDE phenomena? For Blackmore, two objections appear to be central. Perhaps most important, too many of the reports claiming external corroboration cannot be verified later. Rather, they depend on memories which alone are an insufficient basis since we tend to remember confirmatory details and disregard incorrect ones. Further, if the brain is still functioning, it may still be receiving sensory input that can account for the reported data. Blackmore adds that "prior knowledge, fantasy and even lucky guesses" could also play a role (chapter 6).

I agree with Blackmore's thesis to this extent: the question of external evidence for NDEs is crucial to any conclusions regarding their being evidence for an afterlife.⁹ Are there cases that can address her objections, especially with regard to the possibilities of faulty memories and ongoing brain activity? We will concentrate on just a few of the instances that may answer her concerns.

Blackmore highlights two special sorts of phenomena that would be very significant if they could be discovered, perhaps even providing the "convincing evidence": remote viewing and NDEs in blind persons (p. 125). Of the first, she

⁶This is an almost unexplored aspect. While most researchers appear to assume a dualistic metaphysic with an immaterial "something" extending beyond the body, a few favor a more holistic metaphysic that involves some sort of distant sight by the near-death individual.

⁷P. 262. Similar comments are found on pp. 51, 113, 125, 128, 130, 263.

⁸P. 131. Other comments about the potential strength of the evidence occur on pp. 113, 118, 126, 135.

⁹It should be noted that although the connection between NDEs and the possibility of an afterlife is certainly close to the forefront of Blackmore's treatment (for examples, pp. 1–8, 130, chapter 13), such a connection is not argued here. We are concerned with the antecedent question of whether the necessary evidence exists even to view the NDE as an objective experience.

clearly states that pro-NDErs think that experiencers "should be able to see things correctly at a distance. I predict that they should not" (p. 182). She treats the second as an unfulfilled, rather anecdotal aspect of pro-NDE research (pp. 128–133).

Blackmore considers the famous tennis shoe report of social worker Kimberly Clark Sharp to be one of the most potentially important cases of remote viewing. Maria, a heart attack victim, reported an NDE in which she saw a number of confirmed items both in and out of Harborview Hospital in Seattle. But more interestingly, she told Sharp that she especially concentrated on a single item—a tennis shoe—located on a hospital ledge around the corner of the building she entered and currently occupied. Maria explained that the shoe had a worn little toe and the lace was under the heel. After unsuccessful attempts to find the object, Sharp finally located and retrieved the shoe.¹⁰

What is Blackmore's conclusion concerning this particular claim of remote viewing? She declares that it would be "extremely important" if it were true. However, "[T]his is, sadly, one of those cases for which I have been unable to get any further information." Thus she "can only consider it as fascinating but unsubstantiated" (p. 128). But equally unfortunately, Blackmore does not specify what it would take to convince her of the objective nature of Maria's NDE (or whether any data could do so).

I attempted to supplement Sharp's earlier account and discovered some interesting details. Maria had just arrived in Seattle and Sharp had interviewed her the exact same day as this NDE. Maria had never been in the area of the hospital where the shoe had been located, the shoe could not be seen from the ground, and the hospital was not surrounded by any nearby buildings of sufficient height.

Concerning the tennis shoe itself, neither the worn toe nor the position of the lace could be seen from the window through which Sharp had retrieved it. Further, Maria had identified it as a big, blue shoe. She was correct in all her details, from the toe (further described by Sharp as "down to threads"), to the lace under the heel, to the large size, to the blue canvas exterior. Sharp even brought it to Maria's room and held it behind her back while Maria described it one more time before the object was shown to her! Maria was later interviewed by several other researchers. Sharp communicated regularly with Maria over a three-year period, when contact was broken during Sharp's leave of absence.¹¹

It would seem that few would be prepared to question Sharp's veracity, but this as well as Maria's testimony, was repeatedly confirmed in later interviews by others. Besides, Maria provided at least enough data to find the shoe in the first place! It would certainly seem that the remote viewing of an object during an NDE is the explanation that best accounts for the data.

This example is so incredible that similarly detailed cases would be helpful. Since Blackmore's challenge, Kenneth Ring and Madelaine Lawrence reported

¹⁰Blackmore, pp. 127–128. Sharp's own account is found in her "Clinical Interventions with Near-Death Experiences," *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives*, ed. by Bruce Greyson and Charles P. Flynn (Springfield: Charles Thomas, 1984), pp. 242–255.

¹¹Personal interviews with Kimberly Clark Sharp, November 16 and December 2, 1994.

three other confirmed NDE cases. In one of these, another NDEr in Hartford Hospital declared to a nurse that she floated above the roof and observed the Hartford (CT) skyline. Then "out of the corner of her eye she saw a red object. It turned out to be a shoe. . . ." The shoe was retrieved the same day by a skeptical resident.¹² Incidentally, the nurse had never heard of the case in Seattle.

Another more evidential case was reported by a pediatrician Melvin Morse, who resuscitated a young girl who had nearly drowned after being under water for nineteen minutes. With massive swelling of the brain, fixed and dilated pupils, and breathing with the assistance of an artificial lung, "Katie" had perhaps a ten percent chance of surviving. Three days later she recovered fully. In the follow-up exam, Katie correctly described Morse and another physician, plus numerous other details of the emergency room as well as the resuscitation, in spite of the fact that she was "profoundly comatose during the entire experience" with her eyes closed.

Perhaps more convincingly, Katie could also recall many details far beyond the hospital. In one glimpse inside her own home, she described what her mother was preparing for dinner (roast chicken and rice), where her father was sitting and what he was doing, as well as the specific toys being played with by her brother and sister. When Morse checked the details, the family confirmed that these events had occurred just days before.¹³

What about the other sort of desirable evidence singled out by Blackmore—NDEs in the blind? Here, too, more work has been done since her book was published. Ring and Sharon Cooper have undertaken such a study, currently numbering nineteen cases, including "external corroboration." Ring states that "it will be interesting and instructive to see how Blackmore will respond to the data on NDEs in the blind when our study is published."¹⁴

An upcoming book by Kimberly Clark Sharp will also document a highly confirmed case of this sort. One congenitally blind woman had an NDE complete with color images, reporting correctly several items from her surroundings. But even more evidential, she reported a rendezvous with two close friends, both of whom were also blind, and was able to give accurate physical descriptions of each, even though she had never seen either one! Further, both of these friends were dead!¹⁵

Cases such as the last one may also help address Blackmore's other major charge—that the still-functioning brain might account for the data in question. Here and in many similar instances verifiable knowledge concerning those who have already died must also be adequately explained. In a stirring example, a

¹²Kenneth Ring and Madelaine Lawrence, "Further Evidence for Veridical Perception During Near-Death Experiences," *Journal of Near Death Studies* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 226–227.

¹³Melvin Morse with Paul Perry, *Closer to the Light: Learning from Children's Near Death Experiences* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 3–9; personal interview with Melvin Morse, December 2, 1994.

¹⁴Kenneth Ring, review of the English edition of Blackmore's *Dying to Live*, *Journal of Near Death Studies*, in press.

¹⁵Personal interviews with Kimberly Clark Sharp, November 16 and December 2, 1994.

family was involved in a fiery car wreck. The mother had died at the scene while two brothers were each removed to separate hospitals. The youngest child briefly came out of his coma and though in considerable pain was at peace.

Responding to the doctor's question, the little boy replied: "Yes, everything is all right now. Mommy and Peter are already waiting for me." With a contented smile, he lapsed back into his coma and died. But even the doctor did not know Peter's fate. But as she walked past the nursing station, she learned that a call had just been received from the other hospital: Peter had died just minutes earlier.¹⁶

A different sort of response to questions about the NDEr's central nervous system can also be addressed by extended cases of heart stoppage in the presence of corroborated data. Morse reports confirmed evidential perceptions throughout a forty-five minute heart stoppage.¹⁷ Other verified details have been reported during the measured absence of brain waves (flat EEG).¹⁸

Conclusion

Blackmore has issued a direct challenge to those who would understand NDEs in an objective manner (p. 262). Yet she struggles even to explain factors such as the realistic and transforming nature of NDEs, let alone the evidential cases. With the former, it is nearly impossible to understand how coming to grips with the nonreality of the external world and oneself, including death and an afterlife, can fairly account for the NDEr's peace.

However, with the corroborative cases it would appear that Blackmore is even more clearly mistaken. She specifically requested two special sorts of data: distant viewing and NDEs in the blind. She even predicted that such long range sight would not occur (p. 182). Yet, some serious stretching is required to give an adequate, naturalistic account of the minute details mentioned here and elsewhere, reported over a distance. Further, Sharp's case of the congenitally blind woman and the forthcoming Ring-Cooper study indicate other significant problems. Blackmore will no doubt defend her position, but the requested evidence is being supplied, including NDEs in the blind.

Confused memory (pp. 115–116, 134) does not adequately account for the best veridical cases. Neither is prior knowledge (pp. 116–120) the best explanation for the distant and blind NDE data. Contrary to Blackmore's assertions, we can investigate the reports in order to ascertain the facts. Hallucinations (p. 6) or "prior knowledge, fantasy, and lucky guesses" (p. 115) did not pinpoint the specific whereabouts of tennis shoes or detailed events miles away!

Neither does Blackmore's additional suggestion concerning the ongoing operation of the brain (p. 115) relieve her problems and for two crucial reasons. First, no known bodily function can account for the dozens of corroborated reports

¹⁶Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Children and Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. 210.

¹⁷Morse, pp. 32–33; for other cases, see Habermas and Moreland, pp. 76–77.

¹⁸Details are presented in Habermas and Moreland, p. 77.

during clinical death, especially remote viewing. Thus, naturalistically unjustified, veridical consciousness at death is not magically explained by referring to still-existing brain activity. Further, that such confirmed phenomena would occur right up to the brink of biological death, then suddenly cease as the subject is resuscitated, is quite problematic in itself. Second, previously unknown, specific information about dead individuals as well as evidenced data during long absences of heartbeat and measurable brain waves, appear to bypass this objection entirely.

Of course, one brief review essay cannot answer all possible challenges and good questions that could be raised. Neither, as we said earlier, is it our purpose to prove an afterlife. In fact, we have not offered any proof at all.¹⁹ But it would seem that substantial doubt has been cast on naturalistic positions such as Blackmore's. Our chief conclusion is this: the data indicate that NDErs apparently report objective data that could not have been gained by natural means. It is true that distortions can take place in the reporting of such experiences (p. 134), but this knife cuts both ways. One can also distort data or their interpretation by one's commitment to a naturalistic explanation.

¹⁹For a detailed treatment of issues such as possible objections, an afterlife, and world view concerns, see Habermas and Moreland, chapters 5–6, especially pp. 101–105.