

*Death and Dying: Are Near-death  
Experiences the Guide to the Afterlife?*

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Death is a subject which has captivated humans for thousands of years, as we continue to question the cycle of life and what happens after we die. We have an insatiable desire to uncover the unknown mystery, the enigma that is death: Is there an afterlife? Or do we just *end* at death? The only people on Earth who can answer those questions with the most certainty are the select few who have had near-death experiences, or clear and memorable visions which occur when one dies and comes back to life. In fact, these people seem to confirm that there *is* in fact something after death, giving hope to thousands who have for years pondered the beyond – it seems as though these near-death experiences do in fact corroborate the existence of an afterlife. However, many have been critical of the claims made by those who have died and come back to life. As science begins to creep into the realm of death, many have analyzed these afterlife experiences and claimed they are simply brain malfunctions. Others have become confused as to what or who to believe. Cultures around the world, alternatively, have had their own ideas about death for centuries, ranging in beliefs from going to heaven or hell to reincarnation or enlightenment. Death and the afterlife continue to mystify humans as we clamor to know the truth, and as science begins to uncover the mystery of death, we get closer to a possible answer. Can near-death experiences help us to understand death, or are they scientifically explainable?

Death is formally defined as the end of a life in an organism, and scientifically defined as the permanent ending of vital process in a cell or tissue. Death has become a subject of widespread debate and personal or cultural interpretation around the world. To our knowledge, there is no way to bring back the dead – once you're gone, you're gone for good. But why are we so intrigued by what happens after we die? We fear death, and yet our culture has a fascination with it, an insatiable yen to discover the truth about the afterlife. We fear death when in fact, we have a long, full life ahead of us, with most Americans living until the age of 78.<sup>1</sup> According to the BBC, our fascination of death may stem from multiple sources, including that it “helps people to make sense of life...gives support and comfort at times of loss...[and] provides a purpose to life.”<sup>2</sup> It comforts us to know that we are traveling towards a destination, instead of roaming aimlessly and blindly throughout life. It brings us solace to think that one day we might end up in a better place than where we are now. In many ways, we look to death as a way to cope with life.

Different cultures have varying ideas regarding what happens in the afterlife, and yet there are striking similarities regarding our conjectures about death. The most common belief is that there is a “Heaven” and a “Hell” which good and bad people are sorted into; this is believed by Greek Orthodox, Christian, Jewish, and Roman Catholic followers.<sup>3</sup> Many of these faiths also believe in Purgatory, or the so-called ‘gray area’ of the afterlife where the people who have not sinned badly enough to go to Hell end up. Mainly, these faiths believe, according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, that “behind the various Christian ideas about heaven and hell lies the more basic belief that our lives extend beyond the grave.”<sup>4</sup> Essentially, these religions believe that there *is* life after death – usually, in a celestial, paradisiacal kingdom.

Other religions believe that there are certain criteria for gaining entry to the afterlife: Confucianism states that you go to heaven if your soul has reached purification, and to Hell if

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<sup>1</sup> Stobbe, Mike. “U.S. Mortality Rate: Deaths Surpass 2.5 Million For The First Time.” Huffpost Healthy Living. The Huffington Post, 10 October 2012. Web. 29 April 2014.

<sup>2</sup> “Christianity: Beliefs About Life After Death”. GCSE Bitesize. The BBC, 2014. Web. 30 April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, Augusta. *The Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009. 46, 70, 92. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Hasker, William. “Afterlife”. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford Center for the Study of Language and Information, 6 July 2010. Web. 30 April 2014.

you are far from it.<sup>5</sup> Islam believes that you will gain access to Heaven by completing the five pillars of faith.<sup>6</sup> Both of these faiths state that something must be accomplished (usually enlightenment or purification) before one can reach heaven, and morality is a large part of this. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ largely influence when one will reach this enlightenment.

Alternatively, reincarnation is also a popular belief in many faiths. Reincarnation, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, refers to “the aspect of an individual that persists after bodily death – whether it be consciousness, mind, the soul, or some other entity – in one or more successive existences.”<sup>7</sup> Buddhism has a particularly interesting interpretation, believing that one is stuck in a cycle of reincarnation until he or she reaches Nirvana, a state of enlightenment which will free you from the cycle of reincarnation.<sup>8</sup> Hinduism believes in the the cycle of reincarnation as a path towards Moksha, a transcendent state of mind, at which point you are then released from the cycle of Samsara (reincarnation) and achieve Brahman, or ultimate reality.<sup>9</sup> Scientologists believe in rebirth until one becomes a ‘clear immortal being.’<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, there are several patterns that are dominant within these theories. Heaven and Hell are both major beliefs, as many faiths believe that sinners and non-sinners will be separated in the afterlife. Morals are largely influential in this decision – ‘good’ and ‘bad’ actions largely influence one’s place in the afterlife, and religions rely heavily on these definitions to draw a distinction between the possible destinations during afterlife. Clearly, most religions support the claim that there *is* something after death – for some, a divine and exquisite kingdom exists in the afterlife, while for others a fiery and macabre pit of morbidity awaits. Another pattern is that of reincarnation. We are simply a phase of life, a continuous cycle of birth and death with our being manifesting itself into different forms, the body only a temporary vessel for our souls. One’s life is simply a temporary passage, another chance to figure out what the meaning of all this is. It seems that every religion has some sort of plan for the afterlife – the only ones who predict pure nothingness after death are atheists.

Perhaps the most fascinating stories about death are the ones told by those who have undergone a near-death experience. Near-death experiences (or NDEs, as they are often abbreviated to), are described as being “clear and memorable visions occurring close to death”<sup>11</sup>, with a patient being considered near to death if they are so physically compromised that they would die if their condition did not improve.<sup>12</sup> According a 2011 study in the *Scientific American* examining NDEs, only about 3% of the United States’ population claims to have had an NDE,<sup>13</sup> and yet near-death experiences are a phenomenon that has been reported for years throughout history. Near-death experiences are what a person undergoes when they essentially die and come back to life; NDEs typically last for a few minutes, and then the person will miraculously resurface, alive.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*, 30

<sup>6</sup> *The Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*, 58

<sup>7</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Reincarnation”. Encyclopedia Britannica. Britannica, 2014. Web. 1 May 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *The Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*, 16

<sup>9</sup> *The Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*, 50

<sup>10</sup> *The Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*, 104

<sup>11</sup> Sartori, Penny. “Is This Proof Near Death Experiences Are Real? Extraordinary New Book By Intensive Care Nurse Reveals Dramatic Evidence She Says Should Banish Our Fear of Dying.” Mail Online. The Daily Mail, 24 January 2014. Web. 19 April 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Long, Jeffrey. *Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences*. New York: Harper-Collins 2010. 5. Print.

<sup>13</sup> Choi, Charles Q. “Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations.” Scientific American Online. Scientific American, 12 September 2011. Web. 20 April 2014.

NDEs have been classified as occurring in three distinct categories: cognitive, which includes a distortion of time and a review of one's life or memory, affective, which includes a feeling of peace and joy, and transcendental, which includes visual images of a heavenly world with deities and the deceased.<sup>14</sup> In his book *Evidence of the Afterlife*, Jeffrey Long explains that there are twelve recognizable elements which have proved characteristic of NDEs. Many undergo highly vivid sensations such as an out-of-body experience, heightened senses, and intense emotions or feelings. Typical experiences also include passing through a tunnel, encountering a light, and encountering the deceased. There is a noted sense of alteration of time or space, a life review, and the encountering of an unworldly realm. Many also claim to learn special knowledge and recall encountering a boundary or barrier. Ultimately, all will return to the body.<sup>15</sup> Many or all of these elements have been found to appear often in NDEs, perhaps suggesting that the appearance of similar elements means that everyone is 'visiting' the same place – heaven, perhaps.

Typically, near-death experiences are induced when something traumatic occurs – getting hit by a car, something going wrong during surgery, succumbing to a devastating disease – something powerful enough to jeopardize a human life. And yet, incredibly, many NDErs (people who have had near-death experiences) often come out on the other side miraculously unscathed. Terminal patients go into remission, pain disappears, victims survive the most gruesome and devastating events. This is the part of NDEs that is unexplainable: how do NDEs have the capability to virtually erase any trace of the event that caused them in the first place? People are still searching for this answer. Moreover, NDEs usually cause a person to undergo a character-altering transformation resulting from their brush with death. Typically, people who have had NDEs become suddenly religious or highly moral after their experiences, a change that affects them to their very core. These are fundamental changes in personality that resonate with a person for the rest of their life – NDEs can alter a person's disposition forever.<sup>16</sup>

Near-death experiences, seeming to some as true miracles, have been dismissed by scientists as simply malfunctions of the mind. "It is the dysfunctional brain that produces these phenomena" says Dr. Steven Laureys, head of the Coma Science Group at the university hospital in Liege, Belgium.<sup>17</sup> Laureys has been documenting and researching the accounts of NDErs, and says that NDEs can be brought about simply by fear of death itself: "many individuals having had NDEs were not physically in danger of death suggesting that the perception, on its own, of the risk of death seems to be important in eliciting NDEs".<sup>18</sup> It seems as though scientists would like to disprove the theory that a human near-death experience can tell us what happens in the afterlife; what certain people are experiencing is not a reliable fact that we can base our assumptions about the afterlife on. Death, science claims, is as far away as ever from our knowledge – NDEs are not to be trusted in drawing conclusions about the afterlife.

The most common theory which explains NDEs is that they occur when the brain is starved of oxygen; as oxygen levels reduce in the blood, the brain becomes confused and

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<sup>14</sup> Appleby, Louis. "Near Death Experiences: Analogous to Other Stress Induced Psychological Phenomena." *British Medical Journal*. PMC US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, n.d. Web. 18 April 2014.

<sup>15</sup> *Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Greyson, Bruce. "Dissociation in People Who Have Near-Death Experiences: Out of Their Bodies or Out of Their Minds?" *The Lancet*, 5 February 2000. ProQuest. Web. 18 April 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Brumfield, Ben. "'Afterlife' Feels 'Even More Real Than Real,' Researcher Says". CNN Labs. CNN, 10 April 2013. Web. 30 April 2014.

<sup>18</sup> "'Afterlife' Feels 'Even More Real Than Real,' Researcher Says".

disoriented, resulting in the projection of nonsensical or out-of-body experiences.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, out-of-body experiences are not uncommon (they can even occur often during interrupted sleep patterns)<sup>20</sup>, and scientists in a 2005 study researching out-of-body experiences found that these can even be artificially triggered by stimulating the right temporo-parietal junction in the brain, which is responsible for visual and auditory systems.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that the sensory ‘confusion’ (or heightened senses) felt during an NDE can alter how one feels in their own body, thus leading to out-of-body experiences. Additionally, the visions which appear during NDEs are explainable as well: the article “Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations” in the *Scientific American* states that these hallucinations can be a result of abnormal functions of dopamine in the brain, or could be triggered by noradrenaline, a stress hormone the body releases in high levels during trauma.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the sensation of ‘moving towards a bright light’ or ‘going through a tunnel’ can be attributed to tunnel vision which precipitates when blood and oxygen flow to the eye is depleted, which typically happens with extreme fear or oxygen loss.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, the scientific conclusion regarding near-death experiences is that they are explainable, trauma-induced brain malfunctions. NDEs are your mind tricking you into an illusion of floating up into heaven and meeting the dead, according to scientists. NDEs, according to the article “Near Death Experiences, A Multidisciplinary Hypothesis”, can also be provoked by imbalances of various neurotransmitters or electrolyte disturbances during times of physical crises.<sup>24</sup> Other theories include the ‘expectation hypothesis’ (when life-threatening situations can cause NDEs as a projection of expectancy of the afterlife), and ‘depersonalization’ (a form of detachment explaining heightened senses).<sup>25</sup> And yet, one may wonder: why is it that science is so hastily disproving the validity of a near-death experience in helping us to better comprehend our own life cycle? Perhaps it is the lack of any true and concrete evidence about the afterlife that is forcing scientists to doubt the legitimacy of a near-death experience. Until now, NDEs have been completely scientifically explainable, disproving any theory of there being an afterlife. After all, the notion of there being an alternate realm inhabited by all of the dead souls of the world accumulated over centuries, possibly ruled by a higher power that we cannot see nor hear, does seem rather dubious. And yet, in some way all NDEs substantiate the same report, regardless of a person’s age, race, language, intelligence, or culture: there *is* something after death. Everyone who experiences an NDE is seeing the exact same thing – is it purely coincidental that those who have died and come back to life have all ended up in the same place during death?

As a person who has always been partial towards the scientific explanation of things, I have found myself having a hard time picking a side to believe in the debate over the truth in near-death experiences. On one hand, science offers a perfectly rational and very logical explanation: in trauma, your brain malfunctions, creating a hallucinative experience akin to that

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<sup>19</sup> *Is This Proof Near Death Experiences Are Real? Extraordinary New Book By Intensive Care Nurse Reveals Dramatic Evidence She Says Should Banish Our Fear of Dying*

<sup>20</sup> *Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations*

<sup>21</sup> *Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations*

<sup>22</sup> *Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations*

<sup>23</sup> *Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations*

<sup>24</sup> Bókkon, István, Mallick, Birendra N., and Tuszynski, Jack A. “Near Death Experiences: A Multidisciplinary Hypothesis”.

Frontiers in Human Neuroscience. U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, 11 September 2013. Web. 1 May 2014.

<sup>25</sup> “Near Death Experiences: A Multidisciplinary Hypothesis”

of a near-death experience. On the other hand, accounts of near-death experiences are so similar and consistent that I cannot help but think that they might hold some truth – if everyone is experiencing the same place with the same feelings, then maybe they really *are* going to Heaven and just going through the regular ‘procedure’. However, my opinion is somewhat biased: I am not religious, so I do not follow the beliefs of a certain faith when it comes to the afterlife. Rather, I am open to any interpretation or possible outcome when it comes to death – I am not bound to one belief that Heaven, or reincarnation, or enlightenment, exists after death. To me, both sides seem equally convincing: near-death experiences have been felt by thousands of people for centuries, and are the closest thing we have to knowing what happens after death. And yet science refutes these accounts in an equally convincing manner, factually explaining everything as plainly and matter-of-factly as ever and obliterating a centuries-old explanation of death in seconds. The facts are here; now, it is up to you to choose what to believe.

Ultimately, you can believe what you want to, and perhaps because of this we will never reach a true answer. Buddhists will continue to believe in reincarnation, Christians in Heaven and Hell, and Confucianists in Enlightenment, regardless of what we may conclude about the afterlife. Conclusive proof of the afterlife would not make anything different for us – dying is inevitable, and whatever the outcome of death is, everyone will encounter it sooner or later. Knowing about death will not postpone dying. Ultimately, the existence of something in the afterlife really doesn’t concern us. Perhaps there is a reason why we do not know what happens after death – we should focus more on the life we are living rather than the termination of it.

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