

# Science, scientism and the near-death experience

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We live in a world that has been miraculously transformed by science and technology. This is very good in some ways, not in others. One negative aspect of particular concern is that this material progress has been accompanied by a shift in our belief systems that is unhealthy in many ways, including a partial crushing of the human spirit by *scientism*. Note carefully that I said *scientism*, not science. I am a scientist, which I consider a noble calling that demands the best from me, and I am very much in favour of using *genuine* science to help our understanding in all areas of life, including the spiritual. Scientism, on the other hand, is a perversion of genuine science. Scientism in our time consists of a dogmatic commitment to a materialist philosophy that 'explains away' the spiritual rather than actually examining it carefully and trying to understand it<sup>1</sup>. Since scientism never recognises itself as a belief system, but always thinks of itself as true science, confusion between the two is pernicious.

Genuine science is a four-part, continuing process that is *always* subject to questioning, expansion, and revision. It is a process that begins with a commitment to observe things as carefully and honestly as you can. Then you think about what your observations mean; that is, you devise theories and explanations, trying to be as logical as possible in the process. The next, third, step is very important. Our minds are wonderfully clever, so clever that they can 'make sense' out of almost anything with hindsight, that is, come up with some sort of plausible interpretation of why things happened the way we observed them to. But just because our theories and explanations seem brilliant and logical does not mean that we really

<sup>1</sup> Wellmuth, J. (1944) *The Nature and Origin of Scientism*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin : Marquette University Press.

understand the world we observed; we could have a wonderful *post hoc* rationalisation. The third part of the genuine scientific process is a requirement that you keep working logically with, refining, and expanding your theories, your explanations, and then make predictions about new areas of reality that you have not yet observed. You have observed the results of conditions A, B, and C, for example, and come up with a satisfying explanation as to why they happened. Now develop your theory to predict what will happen under conditions D, E, and F, and then go out and set up those conditions and see what actually happens. If you have successfully predicted the outcomes, then you keep developing your theories. But if your predictions do not come true, your theories may need substantial revision or need to be thrown out altogether.

It does not matter how logical or brilliant or elegant or emotionally satisfying your theories are; they are always subject to this empirical test with new observations. Indeed, a theory that has no empirical, testable consequences may be philosophy or religion or personal belief, but it is not a scientific theory. Thus science has a built-in rule to help us overcome our normal human tendency to get emotionally committed to our beliefs. This is where scientism corrupts the genuine scientific process. Because people caught in scientism have an emotional attachment to a totally materialistic view of the world, they will not really look at data like near-death experiences that imply a spiritual, non-material side to reality. They do not recognise that their *belief* that everything can be explained in purely material terms should be treated like any scientific theory; that is, it should be subject to continual test and modified or rejected when found wanting.

This requirement of continual testing, refinement, and expansion is part of the fourth process of genuine science, namely open, full, and honest communication about all the other three aspects. You share your observations, theories, and predictions so that colleagues can test and extend them. You as an individual may have blind spots and prejudices, but it is unlikely *all* your colleagues have the same ones; so that a gradual process of refinement, correction, and expansion takes place and scientific knowledge progresses. While this process is genuine science, it is also a quite sensible way of proceeding in most areas of life.

Now let us apply these thoughts about science and scientism to near-death experiences. Scientism, a dogmatic materialism masquerading as science, dismisses the NDE from the outset as something that cannot be what it seems to be, namely, a mind or soul travelling outside the physical body, either in the physical world or in some non-physical world. So the NDE is automatically dismissed as a hallucination or, more likely, as some kind of psychopathology. But what if we practise actual science and look, with a view as objective as possible, at experiences like the NDE without prejudging them as impossible?

First, there are the data from a hundred years of scientific parapsychological research that, using the best kind of scientific methodology, show us that we

cannot simply dismiss the NDE out of hand as impossible. A world view that

Hundreds of experiments have shown that the human mind can sometimes do things that are *paraconceptual* to our understanding of physical reality; that is, they make no sense given our current understanding of physics and reasonable extensions of it, but they happen anyway. They are empirical realities. The four major psychic phenomena, collectively referred to as *psi* phenomena, that are well established, are telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis (PK). Sometimes a person can detect what is happening in another's mind (telepathy), detect what is happening at a distance in the physical world when it is not currently known to another mind (clairvoyance), predict the future when in principle it is not predictable (precognition), or affect physical processes just by willing them to be changed (PK). The reality of the these *psi* phenomena requires us to expand our world view from a world that is *only* material to one that also has mind as some kind of independent reality in itself, capable sometimes of doing things that transcend ordinary physical limits<sup>2</sup>. So if in an NDE a person feels outside her or his body, or claims to have acquired information about distant events, for example, it *may* be an illusion in a particular case, but you cannot scientifically say it *must* be an illusion. You have to examine the actual experience, the data, not ignore it or prejudicially 'explain it away' without really paying attention or being logical. Thus *psi* phenomena give us a wider view of reality that calls for a careful look at NDEs, rather than dismissal out of hand.

Let me end by making four points. First, there is no doubt that the physics and chemistry of body, brain, and nervous system are important in affecting our experience. Further research on these areas is vitally important, especially if it is done without the traditional scientific arrogance that assumes that physical findings automatically 'explain away' psychological and experiential data.

Second, the findings of scientific parapsychology force us pragmatically to accept that mind can conduct information-gathering processes like telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition, and can directly affect the physical world with PK – processes that cannot be reduced to physical explanations with current scientific knowledge or reasonable extensions of it. Therefore, it is vitally important to investigate what mind can do *in terms of mind*, rather than wait for these processes to be 'explained away' some day in terms of brain functioning, a form of faith that philosophers have aptly called *promissory materialism*, since it cannot be scientifically refuted. You can never prove that some day everything will not be explained in terms of a greatly advanced physics – or a greatly advanced knowledge of angels or dowsing or stock market movements. Recall that if there is no way of *disproving* an idea or theory, then you may like it or dislike it, believe it or disbelieve it, but it is not a scientific theory.

<sup>2</sup>Tart, C.T. (1977) *Psi: Scientific Studies of the Psychic Realm*. New York, Dutton.

Third, the kind of research on the nature of mind called for above is vitally important, because most forms of scientism have a psycho-pathological effect on people by denying and invalidating their transpersonal experiences. This produces not just unnecessary individual suffering, but also attitudes of isolation and cynicism that worsen the state of the world.

Fourth, two of the most important kinds of transpersonal experiences people can have are OBEs and NDEs. They have major effects on experienters' attitudes towards life. Both seem to constitute a revelation of a more ultimate or higher understanding of who we really are. While this is important, it is also important to investigate these phenomena extensively, as they themselves may be, at least partially, simulations of even higher-order truths. The genuine scientific approach to them, then, is to take them seriously indeed, but with humility and dedication:

- (a) try to get clearer data on their exact nature;
- (b) develop theories and understandings of them both in our ordinary state and in appropriate altered states of consciousness, along the lines of state-specific sciences that I have proposed elsewhere<sup>3</sup>;
- (c) predict and test consequences of these theories; and
- (d) honestly and fully communicate all parts of this process of investigation, theorising, and prediction.

Genuine and open scientific enquiry of this kind has a lot to contribute to our understanding of our nature.

<sup>3</sup>Tart, C.T. (1972) 'States of consciousness and state-specific sciences' *Science*, 176, pp. 1203-1210.

## Human experiences and parapsychology

The veteran parapsychologist Montague Ullmann writes about some of his own Exceptional Human Experiences in the October 1998 issue of the *Paranormal Review*. He prefaces them with the remark that from what he has read of the writings of Rhea White and William Braud he senses 'there is a fresh wind blowing that may ultimately chart a new direction for parapsychological research'.

CP has long believed that laboratory experimentation is not the only way of studying parapsychology, and that human experiences have been sadly neglected in recent years. We have long hoped that this should not always be the case, and are glad to note another swallow which may herald a coming summer.