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. 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 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

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NDEs: Near-Death Experiences

This is the process of investigation, where a specific theory is used to test the hypothesis that the human mind and consciousness can survive death. The goal is to test the theory in a controlled environment where the variables can be isolated and measured.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the experimental design of the DSE study, which was conducted in a double-blind manner. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of two groups: the experimental group, which received a placebo, and the control group, which received the actual treatment.

In order to test the hypothesis that consciousness can survive death, a series of experiments were conducted using various techniques, including EEG recordings, brain imaging, and psychometric testing.

The results of the experiments were analyzed using statistical methods, and the data were compared to the predictions of the theoretical framework.

Conclusion

The findings of the DSE study suggest that consciousness may persist after death, and that the human mind and consciousness can survive death. Further research is needed to confirm these findings and to understand the mechanisms underlying consciousness.

References


