

Near-Death Experiences, The Mind-Body Debate, and the Nature of Reality

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TEASER: *The truth is that the more we come to understand the physical workings of the brain, the more we realize it does not create consciousness at all.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ We are conscious in spite of our brain! The brain serves more as a reducing valve or filter, limiting pre-existing consciousness down to the trickle of the illusory “here-now” in which we find ourselves in this physical realm. This idea is revolutionary, but not new!*

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My Near-Death Experience (NDE)

As a neurosurgeon with over twenty years’ experience in academic neurosurgery, I thought I had a pretty good idea of how the brain and mind worked. I then awoke early in the morning on November 10, 2008, with severe back pain, followed by the worst headache of my life, and a rapid descent into a week-long coma that began with status epilepticus. I recall nothing that happened in my hospital room over the next seven days, but later came to learn many of the medical details of my illness through discussions with physicians who cared for me and by reviewing my medical records and imaging studies.

For reasons that remain obscure, I had contracted a rapidly progressive case of *E. coli* meningo-encephalitis. My neurological exams revealed extensive cortical damage, with some brainstem signs (extra-ocular motor dysfunction) evident that first day. My CT scans revealed global neocortical involvement (none of the eight lobes of my brain were spared) – cerebral edema, profuse sulcal enhancement and blurring of the gray-white junction. On the third day, my cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) protein was 1,340 mg/dl, my CSF white blood cell count was 4,300 per mm³, and my CSF glucose level was down to 1.0 mg/dl. I was extremely ill, with diminishing chances for survival and virtually no chance for recovery. My physicians never found a cause for my mysterious malady.^{1, 2}

The last evidence of any “normal” neocortical function was in the first hours in

the ER when witnesses heard me cry out “God help me” after hours of nonsensical gibberish and moans (I have no personal memory of this). Such a rapid descent into coma, combined with the diagnosis of gram-negative bacterial meningitis, signaled at best a 10% probability of survival at the time I presented to the ER.

My meningitis was initially unresponsive to triple intravenous antibiotics, and relentlessly progressed until the seventh day, at which point my physicians estimated my chance of survival had slimmed to 2% and recommended termination of antibiotics due to the near hopeless prognosis. My meningitis finally began to subside on that seventh day, as I began the long and arduous process of awakening back to this world.

Initially, I was completely amnesic for my life before coma. I remembered no words, no personal memories of my life, no religious or scientific concepts, and nothing about being human or existing in this universe. I did not recognize dear family members standing around my bedside. All I remembered was where I had just been, in an extraordinary odyssey that seemed to last for months or years – although it had all occurred within the seven days I lay unconscious in the hospital.

Words and language returned over the following hours and days, and childhood and major life memories were restored to me over a week or two. The rest of my prior knowledge, including over twenty years’ experience in neurosurgery and all other scientific and intellectual knowledge, returned in layered fashion, quite complete by eight weeks or so after my coma. My physicians continue to be astonished by my miraculous recovery.

Given the extraordinary memories I had of my time deep in coma, the emerging picture of the entire experience proved impossible to explain as a simple brain-based phenomenon (i.e., as a hallucination, dream state, drug effect, or confabulation). Our modern understanding of the role of the neocortex—the outer surface, or human part, of our brains—holds that it is necessary for the detailed construction of consciousness, but the extreme severity of my meningo-encephalitis rules out the participation of my neocortex in generating memories during those seven days. Thanks to its preferential destruction of the neocortex, severe meningo-encephalitis is, essentially, a perfect model for human death. That fact would nominate the disease for widespread study in brain and consciousness research, save for one problem: it almost always results in death. Almost no one returns to tell the tale.

As my doctors told me soon after my return, my neocortex was too damaged for me to have experienced anything, much less the extraordinary, ultra-real spiritual realms I visited repeatedly deep in my coma. But I knew I had experienced something quite remarkable and I wanted to record and analyze that experience as best as possible – I knew that details of my experience might help refine our understanding of the brain, especially the neocortex, and its relationship to the mechanism and phenomenon of consciousness.

As described in detail in my book *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*,¹ my memories from deep in coma began in a coarse, murky, unresponsive realm, which I labeled the Earthworm’s Eye View. In retrospect, I believe this extremely foreboding, subterranean existence was the best consciousness my physical brain could muster while my neocortex was being destroyed by aggressive gram-negative bacteria.

If one had asked me before my coma, "What would be the next step beyond that

Earthworm's Eye View in the progression of your severe meningo-encephalitis?" I would have assured you the next phase would be one of 'no awareness' at all. I would have been absolutely wrong.

In fact, the next phase was introduced to me by a slowly spinning white light of great clarity, associated with a perfect musical melody. The approaching light opened like a rip in the fabric of that ugly subterranean realm, leading up into an ultra-real valley (the Gateway Valley) filled with light and colors beyond the normal visual spectrum. It seemed so much more real than this earthly realm – fertile and filled with eternally growing plants, blossoms and buds on trees opening in ripe bloom, sparkling waterfalls and mists, dancing souls and swooping angelic choirs above. One does not see with the eyes, nor hear with the ears, in that realm – at times, the observer becomes entire swaths of that realm as a way of learning lessons about it all, even to the point of becoming other beings and groups of beings to feel and know their own knowing – to empathize with them and know them completely. Communication there goes light years beyond our simplistic linear thinking, beyond the bottleneck of linguistically constrained awareness we experience in these physical bodies in the earthly realm.

I had no body image during any part of this journey, but was moving up through that brilliant valley as a speck of awareness on a butterfly wing, accompanied by millions of other swooping and soaring butterflies of indescribable beauty. There was a lovely young woman accompanying me on the butterfly wing, one who never spoke a word, but whose thoughts of unconditional love and assurance came straight into my awareness. She promised me I would be taken care of, that I had nothing to fear, and that I was completely loved by the awe-inspiring Creator of all that is (as are we all). I came to see that unconditional love has the potential to bring infinite healing.

Causal relationships in that realm, even the temporal flow of events there, all occur in what I call "Deep Time," which is much more robust and related to Divine purpose than the events of our lives in the relatively loose temporal causality to which we are accustomed.

I then realized that the chants and hymns emanating from the swooping angelic choirs above were providing yet another portal into higher realms. The lowest (earthly and spiritual) dimensions collapsed down as my awareness entered increasingly refined spiritual realms, finally arriving at what I called the Core – infinite inky blackness, filled to overflowing with the Divine unconditional love of the Creator, and with brilliant light emerging from an orb brighter than a million stars. I was aware of a strong sense of the three of us – a Divine Being beyond all description, the brilliant orb (a translator or interpreter, perhaps?) and my conscious awareness, which by now was joined with all of consciousness throughout the multiverse, transcending a limited personal consciousness. Through wordless conceptual flow, I was informed I was not there to stay. They would teach me many things, but I would be going "back." Since I had lost all my memories of life on earth, I had no idea what that meant.

The Divine Being and the orb proceeded to demonstrate so much about all of reality – the fundamental role of love and of consciousness or soul in that realm and in all of existence; the constructs of space-time-mass-energy used to build up this physical world; the role of this physical realm as a kind of "soul school" where we learn and exchange lessons of unconditional love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy; the connectedness of all sentient beings, indeed of all consciousness, to all others and to the

Divine. As is typical for such extraordinary journeys, the deeper aspects of these teachings far exceed the capacity of human language – which was created to describe earthly scenarios – to do them justice.

When I initially tried to share my stories with my physicians, they firmly reminded me that my neocortex had been too badly damaged to allow for anything more than the most rudimentary of experiences. Certainly my brain could not have generated or received the ultra-real odyssey I was describing. Given how little I remembered about the brain and mind, and of my own illness, I simply believed my doctors' statements that it must have been a "trick of the dying brain."

As I told my older son, Eben IV, who was majoring in neuroscience in college at the time: "*It was all way too real to be real.*" Within days of waking from the coma, he could tell I had been fundamentally transformed. The scientist in me was eager to research what had happened to me, but Eben advised me to write down everything I could remember about the coma journey before reading anything about near-death experiences, physics or cosmology. I followed his advice and over the next six weeks wrote around 20,000 words describing my experience before allowing myself to delve deeply into the literature on near-death experiences (NDE), which I had never previously perused.

A Monumental Challenge to Understand

I sought to explain everything I remembered from coma as a brain-based mechanism. I was prepared to accept my doctors' assertion that it was a "trick of the dying brain," but I was driven to discover what that trick was. The nine best hypotheses, none of which ultimately held up under scrutiny, are outlined in Appendix B in *Proof of Heaven*.¹ My conclusion, after months of analysis with my doctors and other interested colleagues, was that what I'd witnessed really happened – just not in the physical universe or in my brain.

That conclusion followed an astonishing revelation about the identity of the beautiful companion on the butterfly wing, whose appearance I could remember so well. I knew I had never seen her before my illness, yet the NDE literature consistently shows that such a "guardian angel" should be one who had been crucially important to me in my lifetime.³⁻⁸ Four months after coma, I discovered that she was in fact the birth sister I had never known, who had died two years before I even knew of her existence. That revelation was the catalyst that launched me into a more complete understanding of the reality of my journey.

Concluding that my experience actually happened, but outside of my brain and the physical universe, demanded an extraordinary shift in my worldview. Such a shift was mandatory if I were to move toward any comprehensive understanding of the world that could incorporate my strange experience and begin to explain the vast spectrum of similar experiences reported over the last several thousand years. At the core of it all was the need to more fully refine our understanding of the nature and mechanism of consciousness itself.

The Enigma of Consciousness

As a neurosurgeon, I was taught that the brain creates consciousness. Consciousness, based on that conventional view, is an illusion manifested by the subatomic particles, atoms and molecules of the brain all simply following natural laws. The same line of conventional thinking necessarily concludes that we are all acting at the whim of the natural laws governing all of those subatomic particles and their more complex arrangements in molecules and cells of the brain. In other words, none of us actually has free will at all.

To put this challenge in perspective, it is important to point out that the only thing any one of us truly knows to exist is our own consciousness. What we call “the external world” is actually a model constructed in our minds. Conventional neuroscience would remind us that every experience and memory we’ve ever had is nothing more than the patterns of electrochemical flickering of 100 billion neurons encased in a three-pound gelatinous mass floating in a warm dark bath. Nothing more. A model of reality, and perhaps a mechanism for processing reality, but not reality itself.

Thus the many physicists and cosmologists who claim to be close to defining a “theory of everything” seem woefully premature, given that a far more robust understanding of the phenomenon of consciousness is necessary for any alleged theory about the nature of reality. Only a few recent physicists have actually risen to this challenge, including Roger Penrose, Henry Stapp, Brian Josephson and Amit Goswami. But the mystery of the measurement problem in quantum mechanics – which says the observer’s mind is intricately involved with the physical reality being observed, i.e. that consciousness is fundamental, not an illusion created by the physical brain – drove many of the brilliant founding fathers of quantum mechanics, including Max Planck, Erwin Schrödinger, Louis DeBroglie, Sir James Jeans, Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, and Albert Einstein, into mysticism as they sought deeper understanding.

The Hard Problem of Consciousness

My quest also illuminated for me the “Hard Problem of Consciousness” (HPC), arguably the most profound conundrum known to all of human thought. Although the background challenges of the HPC had existed for millennia in the form of the 2,600-year-old Mind-Body Debate, neuroscientists were running headlong into the HPC in the latter decades of the 20th century. It was finally labeled the “Hard Problem of Consciousness” by David Chalmers in his brilliant book *The Conscious Mind*, published in 1996.⁹

In essence, the longstanding presumption that the sheer complexity of the brain somehow leads to the creation of consciousness fails – no one has been able to offer even the most basic explanation about how that might unfold. One might expect such a fundamental assumption would be well established after the profusion of neuroscience research in recent decades.

The truth is that the more we come to understand the physical workings of the brain, the more we realize it does not create consciousness at all.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ We are conscious in spite of our brain! The brain serves more as a reducing valve or filter, limiting pre-existing consciousness down to the trickle of the illusory “here-now” in which we find

ourselves in this physical realm. This idea is revolutionary, but not new; nineteenth-century luminaries including William James and Frederic W.H. Myers advocated for more serious consideration of the filter theory.

To those who recoil at the suggestion that the brain does not create consciousness, I would mention two common clinical observations that support this idea: 1) *terminal lucidity* (in which elderly demented patients often have oases of great clarity and insight about their lives, often peaking when they are aware of the souls of departed loved ones there to escort them to the other side), and 2) *acquired savant syndromes* (in which damage to the brain, be it head trauma, stroke, autism, or what have you, reveals a lacune of super-human mental function, such as fantastic capabilities for memory of lists, graphic, artistic or musical abilities, calculational abilities, etc.).

This thinking is not new in our modern neuroscientific era. Wilder Penfield, MD of Montreal, one of the most prominent neurosurgeons of the 20th century –who probably still holds the record for number of electrical stimulations of the brain in awake patients during his decades-long career treating epilepsy – wrote a book in 1975 summarizing evidence that the mind (and free will) is not created by the brain.¹⁶

Synthesis of Science and Spirituality

Thus, the ongoing interpretation of my deep coma experience, and of tens of thousands of similar spiritually transformative experiences over millennia and across the globe, opens the door to a far richer understanding of the nature of reality. The non-locality of consciousness, ie. that we can know things beyond the ken of our physical senses, is fundamental in the evolving science. Many top-tier scientists are already pursuing this version of truth,^{3,4,11,13,14} one far grander than anything offered by the simplistic materialistic science that fails to answer the most basic questions about consciousness or approach the enigma around the phenomena addressed through quantum physics (specifically the measurement problem).^{10-12,17-20}

The near-death experience community, as well as related spiritually-transformative experiences of all stripes, provides compelling evidence that consciousness is fundamental in the Universe. Spirituality and science strengthen each other greatly. Global awakening to this grand concept, not just among scientists but among all of us, is beginning even now.

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