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Belief and Awesomeness

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Abstract

Near-death experiences are awesome, if anything is, and thinking through competing explanations of them can reveal some striking features of awesomeness and its relationship with belief.

I want to think a bit about awesomeness. Actually, I'm interested in a rather small slice of the awesome pie. I want to focus on things, especially experiences, that inspire awe. Specifically, I want to consider near-death experiences (NDEs). I've never had an NDE myself. But I've spoken with many people who have, and I've read many accounts. They certainly strike me – and many others – as awe-inspiring. Thinking through them, I hope to show, can reveal something striking about awesomeness and its relationship with belief.

Let's begin by considering some famous NDEs.

Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven* details a trip to a 'beautiful, incredible dream-world' during a seven-day coma caused by bacterial meningitis. Alexander, a neurosurgeon committed to the scientific worldview, rode on butterfly wings, met a deceased sister he never knew he had, and was told in a non-verbal language that he was loved. The experience changed his life, as well as his outlook on reality.

Todd Burpo's *Heaven Is for Real*, written with Lynn Vincent, focuses on Colton Burpo, Todd's son, who underwent emergency surgery (twice!) for a burst appendix at age three. Over the next several months, Colton related an amazing experience he had during his first surgery. He told of leaving his body and visiting heaven, personally meeting Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. He also told of meeting his deceased grandfather and a miscarried sister he'd never been told about. He related seeing his parents in the hospital while he was under the knife, and the details were accurate: they really were in separate rooms, his mother praying and talking on the phone, his father praying alone.

These NDEs were not only profound and meaningful to those who had them; they have been a source of inspiration to millions of people. But NDEs are not only found in the pages of bestsellers.

In an article in the medical journal *The Lancet*, cardiologist Pim van Lommel and colleagues tell of a man whose dentures went missing after they were taken out of his mouth so he could receive CPR following cardiac arrest.[1] The hospital staff was unable to locate his dentures for several days, until he saw a male nurse walk into his recovery room and said 'Oh, that nurse knows where my dentures are.' It came out that the patient had watched himself receiving CPR from a position near the ceiling, and he

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recalled seeing the nurse remove his dentures and place them in a drawer. His dentures were found because his recollection was accurate.

My favourite is the case of Pam Reynolds.[2] In 1991, she underwent a radical form of brain surgery. In addition to being put to sleep with anaesthetic, this surgery involved taking her brain offline, which they verified in several ways. EEG electrodes on her skull picked up electrical activity; earplugs moulded into her ears pumped in rapid clicks, the reception of which was measured all the way down on her brain stem. Once her brain was shut down, they cooled her body temperature and drained her brain of blood. Having repaired the aneurysm, they brough her back to life.

After waking up, Reynolds recalled her experience of floating out of the top of her head and witnessing various strange things. She heard a conversation between members of the medical team about her difficult veins and the unpleasant sound of the bone saw used to cut her skull. The conversation really did happen, and the bone saw was as she described it. But that was not all she experienced. She also had an incredibly vivid, life-changing experience in some other realm, where she was bathed in bright light and visited with deceased relatives who eventually sent her back to her body.

These experiences share some core features. All of them, except the man with the missing dentures, involve travelling to another realm and communicating with deceased loved ones. And all of them, except Alexander's, involve some form of what, in the literature, is referred to as veridical perception: these subjects saw or heard things that actually happened around and to their bodies. Burpo saw his parents praying; the unnamed patient saw his dentures being removed; Reynolds heard the medical staff talking about her veins. They also involve things like pleasant feelings,

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tunnels and lights, and profound personal transformations.

NDEs are awesome, if anything is. Now that we have some examples before us, I want to think about what's so awesome about them. Specifically, I want to think about the relationship between explanations and awesomeness. I'm going to argue that we don't need to believe that NDEs reveal supernatural elements of reality to make room for their awesomeness.

> 'Over the next several months, Colton related an amazing experience he had during his first surgery. He told of leaving his body and visiting heaven, personally meeting Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit.'

Explaining NDEs

A common view has it that the naturalist offers debunking explanations of NDEs, incompatible with accepting NDErs' experiences as real. But I don't think this is at all correct. To see why not, consider a distinction between two senses in which an experience may be considered real. To put some (well-worn) labels on things: there's the *subjective* sense and the *objective* sense.

An experience is real in the subjective sense if the experiencing subject really had that experience. A wide variety of experiences are real in this sense, among them: everyday perceptual experiences, such as hearing my words and seeing the person sitting next to you, and also hallucinations, such as the proverbial pink elephant.

While both the experience of seeing your neighbour and seeing the elephant are real in the subjective sense, only the first is real in the objective sense. The content of your visual experience matches reality in the case of seeing the person seated next to you, but not in the case of seeing the pink elephant. Hallucinations, by definition, do not correspond to reality. And not just hallucinations. There are perceptual illusions of various kinds. It's even possible to misremember things, recalling a past experience in a manner that doesn't align with how things really went down.

In all of these cases, we have real experiences, that is, experiences that are real in the subjective sense. But the fact that the hallucination is real, in the subjective sense, doesn't mean it's real tout court. There's no pink elephant, which means that the hallucinating subject's visual experience is both real and not real. It's subjectively real and objectively unreal.

It's possible, then, both to believe someone who woke up from a coma saying that they travelled to another realm and to insist that there's no such other realm. We can believe that they had this experience without believing that the content of the experience was accurate. Maybe the explanation is that their brain activity spiked in the moments they were coming out of their coma and this generated an intense perceptual experience of a journey through dimensions. In the subjective sense, this experience was very real. But that doesn't mean that they actually left their body and travelled to another realm.

What about experiences that include contents that *do* match reality? How do we explain Colton Burpo seeing his parents praying or the dentures guy seeing where his dentures were placed or Pam Reynolds hearing the conversation between attendants? In these cases, there appears to be no distinction to be made between subjectively and objectively real experience. If we believe that Reynolds heard the conversation about her veins, and we know that this conversation took place as she recalls, then we seem to be forced into conceding that her NDE was real in both senses.

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Then again, perhaps not. Pursuing these issues can quickly get us into deep waters. But I want to say something about how the naturalist can go about explaining NDEs that involve veridical perception, and this comment will be relevant when we turn to awesomeness.

In our book, *Near-Death Experiences: Understanding Visions of the Afterlife*, John Martin Fischer and I lay out a three-step strategy for explaining NDEs in naturalistic terms:

1. Explain how the subject of the NDE acquired the information relevant to their experience;
2. Explain why this particular content would be included in an NDE; and
3. Explain when the experience took place.

And we point out there that not all NDEs would have the same explanation; indeed, to think that they must is to misunderstand the ways explanation works in general. Not all house fires, for instance, are explained in the same way. Why would all NDEs be explained the same way? We also emphasized that we're not currently able to give naturalistic explanations for all NDEs. But this is just how science works: we build on what we know, expanding our resources as we go.

Let me say something about how this explanatory strategy might play out in relation to one of the NDEs we've been considering. Auditory sensations may have registered in Pam Reynolds's brain, below the level of conscious awareness and despite the presence of the earphones and clicks. She may not have been fully sedated at the time of the conversation about her veins, and her brain stem may not have been shut down yet. That's the first step. The second step is to note that this content may have been important to her because it could have had the function of reducing her anxiety about the operation to have knowledge of what the medical staff was doing to her body. The third step is to note that it is entirely possible that the time at which these auditory sensations registered in her brain may not be the same as the time at which she became consciously aware of them. Though it seemed to her as if she experienced hearing the conversation at the time the conversation occurred, she may have had the experience of hearing it later, perhaps as she came out from under anaesthesia.

Now, I want to acknowledge that this is a rather provisional and speculative explanation of only one part of Pam Reynolds's NDE. I don't pretend to have just made sense of all of it. That's not my point. My point is to illustrate how one might go about explaining this NDE in naturalistic terms. It doesn't seem out of bounds to say that we may be able to piece together naturalistic explanations of these experiences, some elements of which may involve placeholders where we aren't quite certain what to say or where we need to wait for improvements in technology and our understanding of how our brains and bodies work. And I readily admit that there is room to question things. My aim isn't to provide the definitive naturalistic explanation of Pam Reynolds's NDE. My aim is to suggest that there's reason for optimism that such an explanation is possible.

In fact, the incompleteness of this explanation may be welcome. Part of what's awesome about NDEs is that they reveal our lack of understanding. But before we turn to awesomeness, I want to consider one other issue.

Believing NDErs

It may seem that to explain NDEs in naturalistic terms is to disrespect NDErs. Even if, strictly speaking, it's possible to believe their stories in the way I've been suggesting, many people think that NDErs have special standing as the subjects of these profound experiences. To deny their supernatural interpretations is to discount them all the same.

This complaint relies on the claim that NDErs have a privileged epistemic status with respect to their experiences. Since they were the ones directly acquainted with the contents of their experiences, we should accept their interpretations of them. More to the point, we should accept their interpretations of how to explain what they experienced. So, if an NDEr is convinced that their experience of watching themselves receive CPR is best explained in terms of their soul separating from their body, then we should defer to this explanation.

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I don't want to deny that the subject of an experience has a privileged status with respect to what they experienced. This is part of the reason why I think it's important to default to the position that, no matter how extraordinary, we should take NDErs at their word and accept their experiences as real in the subjective sense – they really did experience them. Now, of course, there are exceptions to this rule. So, I'm not saying that we should believe people no matter what. What I'm saying is that we should be disposed to believe that NDErs' experiences were subjectively real, that they experienced what they say they did. But it doesn't follow that we should accept that their experiences were objectively real – that the contents of their experiences were accurate – or that we should accept that they have any special insight into why they experienced what they did.

'An experiencing subject may be an expert when it comes to what they experienced, but that doesn't make them an expert about the workings of our perceptual systems.'

An experiencing subject may be an expert when it comes to what they experienced, but that doesn't make them an expert about the workings of our perceptual systems. We can (and should, in the absence of compelling reasons not to) accept that the CPR patient saw himself receiving CPR, and we can corroborate the contents of that experience with the testimony of the medical staff. But we need not accept that the explanation of what happened is that he was, for a time, a disembodied soul, no matter how convinced he may be that this is the truth.

Awesomeness

Now it's time to turn our attention to awesomeness. In their influential account of awe, Keltner and Haidt take the emotion to have two central themes: that which inspires awe is greater than oneself and requires an updated understanding of things.[3] NDEs clearly satisfy the first of these themes, and that is a large part of why they are so meaningful for those who have them and so fascinating for the rest of us. Careful attention to the explanations of NDEs, however, reveals two surprising conclusions with respect to the second theme. First, given the awesomeness of NDEs, supernaturalist explanations of them reveal that the gaps in our understanding need not be about the awe-inspiring experience itself. Second, contrary to popular portrayals, naturalistic explanations of NDEs are not only compatible with their awesomeness; they're more congenial to it than supernaturalistic explanations.

According to the supernaturalist, the explanation for how Pam Reynolds was able to hear the conversation between medical staff about her veins, visit deceased relatives and return to her body is that she was a soul that detached from her body, hovered in the waiting room for a bit, and then travelled to another realm. And the explanation for why this experience was so transformative for her is that she encountered an aspect of reality that was hidden to her as long as she was trapped in her body. She came to have a deeper, truer grasp of things through this experience.

Similar remarks apply to the supernaturalistic explanations of NDEs like Eben Alexander's and Colton Burpo's, with one crucial difference between them. In Alexander's case, he claims that his NDE changed his understanding of things. It challenged his scientific worldview to such an extent that it upended it. In Burpo's case, it confirmed elements of his and his family's Christian worldview. Burpo experienced meeting Jesus and God, having his soul separate from his body and travel to a heavenly realm that appeared to him as described in the Bible. For Colton Burpo, his parents, and many who've read about it, this NDE is proof that heaven

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is real and reality is as they believe it to be. The same goes for many who read Alexander's bestseller, even though it doesn't quite hold for Alexander himself. His NDE changed how he saw reality.

Depending on your prior beliefs about whether we have immaterial souls and whether there is more to reality than the physical world described by science, accepting supernatural explanations of these NDEs will either confirm your understanding of things or challenge it. The gaps in understanding revealed by these NDEs will be different depending on what your understanding of things was in the first place.

It may seem as if supernatural explanations of NDEs like Burpo's or Reynolds's don't reveal gaps in understanding for someone who already believes in immaterial souls and realms. And if not, we seem forced either to deny that they're awesome or else revise our account of awesomeness. Happily, I think we need do neither thing. Supernatural explanations of NDEs are incomplete in ways that reveal gaps in our understanding, even for those predisposed to supernatural worldviews. It's just that the incompleteness of these explanations is more difficult to pinpoint.

The naturalist admits that his explanation of what they reported experiencing is speculative in crucial respects: he doesn't have a complete story to tell about how Burpo came to know about his mother's miscarriage or how exactly Reynolds was able to relate the conversation about her veins. The supernaturalist, by contrast, contends that these aspects of these NDEs are explained by an encounter with another disembodied soul in heaven, on the one hand, and the direct perception of earthly activities by a disembodied soul, on the other.

But if we push a bit deeper, we can see that the supernaturalist, too, has some explaining to do. As John and I point out in our book, even if the supernaturalist has a ready explanation for how Reynolds heard the conversation during her surgery, they still need to explain how Reynolds was able to hear conversations before and after her NDE. How can the soul interact with sensory organs while inside the body?

This isn't a new problem at all. It's been around for a long time. The interaction problem, as it's known, is one of the challenges facing the dualist, who thinks that there are both material and immaterial substances, such as bodies and souls. That's one way in which the supernaturalist explanation of NDEs is incomplete. It has to explain, not just how things work during NDEs, but also how they work in run-of-the-mill contexts.

A second way in which the supernaturalist explanation is incomplete is that it bottoms out, ultimately, in something that we can't fully grasp. In Burpo's case, the explanation offered bottoms out in God. The idea is supposed to be that Burpo's NDE was so profound because he had direct acquaintance with a higher power that the rest of us must accept on faith. We can't see or hear or touch God directly, earthly creatures that we currently are. We have to accept His truth on the basis of testimony, such as that presented in scripture and shared by those, such as Colton Burpo, who've been granted direct, even if momentary, access to the afterlife.

Perhaps Pam Reynolds's case bottoms out in something slightly different; there are many interpretations of the other-worldly realms NDErs experience. But the same basic point holds: what's so special in the case of NDEs like these is that they transcend what we can directly experience through our five senses. Whatever proof these NDEs provide for what lies beyond our ken depends, ultimately, on faith. We must have faith that the reports we're receiving are true and accurate, and we must have faith in the foundational aspects of reality they're supposed to have revealed to those who've come back from the other side.

My point isn't that we shouldn't have such faith. Many do, and who am I to instruct them otherwise? My point is that supernaturalist explanations of NDEs are in important ways incomplete. Both naturalists and supernaturalists have more explaining to do. These experiences reveal gaps in understanding no matter one's prior beliefs.

NDEs inspire awe, in part, because we can't quite fully wrap our heads around them. Yet consideration of how this is so in the case of supernatural explanations shows that it's not always because we can't wrap our heads around

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the awesome experience itself. Sometimes, our attempts to grasp fully the awesome experience reveal gaps in our background understanding of things. How does embodied perception on Earth work? If our souls can see and hear outside our bodies, then how do they do so from within and in conjunction with them? What is God like? And what's the relationship between us worldly creatures and the divine?

Supernatural explanations of NDEs reveal the limits of our understanding by raising questions about related things. Naturalistic explanations of NDEs, by contrast, reveal the limits of our understanding more directly. These explanations of NDEs are works in progress. We may have a framework for how to provide them, but we're not entirely sure how to fill in the details. Naturalistic explanations need not undermine the awesomeness of these experiences. In fact, they seem to hew quite closely to what makes them so awe-inspiring. The naturalist readily admits that these experiences reveal things greater than oneself and gaps in our understanding. They face up to the fact that these experiences challenge our ability to grasp our world and ourselves.

There's a sense, then, in which the naturalist is the one whose mind is most open to awe. They're comfortable with explanatory placeholders, and at the same time confident in humanity's future progress understanding the world through better tools and better theories. The supernaturalist plugs gaps in understanding by appeal to explanatory factors we must take on faith; the naturalist leaves the gaps unplugged, at least for now, in full recognition of the limits of our powers of understanding.

Thus, despite appearances and contrary to what many claim, the naturalist seems to be an even greater friend to awe than the supernaturalist. By pointing out and sitting with the gaps in our empirically based web of belief, the naturalist calls direct attention to what's awesome. And when the current gaps get filled in, they welcome the new ones that open up. There's plenty of room for awesomeness within the scientific worldview. And perhaps surprisingly, we can better appreciate this by thinking carefully about the limits of our ability to explain things like NDEs in naturalistic terms.

Notes

1. Pim van Lommel, Ruud van Wees, Vincent Meyers and Ingrid Elfferich, 'Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands', *The Lancet* 358 (2001), 2039–45.
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3. Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, 'Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion', *Cognition and Emotion* 17 (2003), 297–314.

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