



The Metaphysics of Near-Death Experience

David Lawton, Manchester

'That which lets now the dark, now the light appear is Tao'

'NDE can be defined as the reported memory of the whole of impressions during a special state of consciousness, including a number of special elements such as out-of-body experience, pleasant feelings, seeing a tunnel, a light, deceased relatives, or a life review.'
(Van Lommel)

Preface

My article presents an explanatory model of near-death experience (NDE). This explanatory model is a metaphysical theory. Unlike previous psychological, physiological, neurochemical, neuroanatomical or transcendent models of NDE, the present model makes claim to explain *all* features of NDE: perceptual, cognitive, affective, paranormal and mystical.

The new metaphysical theory (or paradigm) is called 'Transcendental Vitalism'. Transcendental vitalism has its philosophical ancestry in the transcendental idealism of Kant and Schopenhauer. It is Schopenhauer's transcendental idealism that I have revised and reconceptualised in order to produce transcendental vitalism. The important differences between my philosophy and Schopenhauer's lie in the nature of the noumenon (the underlying metaphysical reality): Schopenhauer's Will is replaced by Tao; that by which the phenomenal world is conditioned is not the mind/subject but life itself; and the form of representation is not Newton's space *and* time but Einstein's spacetime. Both philosophies are identical in respect of the noumenon being non-plural and death being the end of the phenomenal world.

In his 'On Man's need for Metaphysics' (*The World as Will and Representation* II, Chapter XVII), Schopenhauer writes:

'The corrected, extended, and more thorough knowledge of nature is the very knowledge that always undermines and finally overthrows the metaphysical assumptions that till then have prevailed... such knowledge presents the problem of metaphysics itself more distinctly, correctly, and completely, ...The whole of experience is like a cryptograph, and philosophy is like the deciphering of it, and the correctness of this is confirmed by the continuity and connection that appear everywhere. ... it is not possible for the agreement and consistency, in which all the signs of that writing [cryptograph] are placed by this explanation, to be merely accidental ... the deciphering of the world must be completely confirmed from itself. It must spread a uniform light over *all* the phenomena of the world, and bring even the most heterogeneous into agreement... for every false deciphering, even though it suits some phenomena, will all the more glaringly contradict the remainder.'

Scientific materialism is an example of such a false deciphering, and so are identity, causal or functional models of the mind-brain, consciousness-brain, mentation-brain relation.

The heterogeneous phenomena of the NDE explained and harmonised in my article are the perceptual phenomena of the out-of-body perspective, transparency, the void and the tunnel to the light; the cognitive phenomena of enhanced mentation, heightened awareness, lucid thinking, vivid sensations and clear memory; the affective phenomena of complete peace, total calm, absolute joy and unconditional love; the paranormal/psychic phenomena of out-of-body experience, precognition, clairvoyance, telepathy and healing; and the mystical phenomena of oneness, wisdom, holiness and other-worldliness.

Introduction

For two decades or so, researchers into the near-death experience (NDE), and other paranormal and transpersonal phenomena, have been predicting a paradigm shift in science and metaphysics. I hope here to realise that shift and produce that long-anticipated revolution in our understanding of ourselves and the world.

In the field of near-death studies certain terms (and even beliefs) have now become established. What had been words used in the attempt to describe that for which we previously had no words, have now become the conceptual framework for understanding and examining cases of NDE. In this there lies the danger that once words become fixed as terms the 'as if' of the first person's articulation becomes the 'is' of the third person conception. In the light of the new paradigm, I will propose a radical reconceptualisation of NDE, but one perfectly consistent with the 'as if' descriptions of near-death subjects.

It is well to remember that every NDE is the experience of a unique individual, so 'as if' accounts may well be subject to personal, cultural and religious factors influencing the vocabulary used in each description and interpretation. Here my focus will be purely on the core elements of the full, '10-scoring', classic NDE. That being said, this article, written in separate numbered paragraphs, will not, because of considerations of both space and its revolutionary content,

4 Network Review Summer 2008

fully cover the aspects of NDE most associated with personhood: self-consciousness, good and evil, conscience, ego, free will etc.. These aspects require additional concepts and I fear that I am already in danger of overburdening the reader with new ideas. Here I will cover the elements of NDE as they apply to all human beings, from infants to adults; but first I will present the new paradigm:

TRANSCENDENTAL VITALISM

Transcendental Idealism

One of the cornerstones of Kant's philosophy of transcendental idealism is that space and time do not characterise things as they are in themselves. Space and time are the subject's necessary forms of representation. They are what Kant terms 'synthetic a priori' – they are not discovered *through* experience but are the very conditions of experience. Transcendental idealism *means* conditioned by the subject - by the mind. Reality is divided into two aspects: the conditioned and the unconditioned, the phenomenal world of things and what Kant terms the noumenon: the realm of things-in-themselves, things not subject to the subject's necessary forms of representation.

It seems that, as a matter of common sense, Kant took there to be unconditioned things-in-themselves corresponding to the conditioned things of the phenomenal world. However, Schopenhauer argued that Kant was wrong to think of there being things-in-themselves i.e. things (in the plural)-in-themselves, for without space and time there could be no individuation. The very idea of individuation or differentiation only made sense either with respect to space or to time or to both. If something is identical in time and space it is identical period, it is one and the same thing. Hence, Schopenhauer argued, the noumenon, the thing-in-itself, must be non-plural.

If the non-plural thing-in-itself manifests itself in space and time as the world of phenomena then, Schopenhauer argued, we ought to be able to divine the nature of the thing-in-itself by close examination of the phenomenal world. Schopenhauer took the examination of the human organism to be the key to understanding the nature of the noumenon, for we know the human organism in virtue of being it. By this method Schopenhauer postulated Will as the thing-in-itself and spent much of the rest of his life as a philosopher trying to show that all phenomena were the manifestations of Will.

For both Kant and Schopenhauer, as later for Wittgenstein, the phenomenal world is for a subject, an object is always an object for a subject, and hence 'at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end... death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.' (*Tractatus*, Wittgenstein)

The New Metaphysics

In NDE the world does seem to alter and does not come to an end... dying is an event in life: we do live to experience dying.

Contra Kant and Schopenhauer, it is not the subject for which there is a phenomenal world, but life for which there is a phenomenal world. This is not just a fact – it is a definition:

Life *is* that for which there is a phenomenal world.

This fact, if it be a fact, results in the most radical reconceptualisation of ourselves imaginable and one that may make the most open mind reel:

We are not alive *within* the phenomenal world.

That by which the conditioned *is* conditioned is not itself conditioned. In transcendental idealism the conditioned is conditioned by the subject/mind hence the subject/mind is not itself conditioned i.e. is not an item within the phenomenal world. Exactly the same reasoning applies in the case of transcendental vitalism: the conditioned is conditioned by *life* hence life itself is not conditioned i.e. is not within the phenomenal world. It is in *this* sense that we humans, other animals, indeed all organisms are not alive within the phenomenal world. And, if we are not alive within the phenomenal world, this raises the question: what are we, if *not* alive? We are either awake or asleep, we are conscious or unconscious. Being awake/conscious and being asleep/unconscious are fundamental and irreducible states of an organism. It is not *that* we are awake or asleep that is the product of evolution but, in its broadest sense, *how* we are. Herein lie the solutions to the problem of consciousness and the mystery of sleep. Being awake and being asleep cannot be understood by science because being conscious or unconscious are irreducible states of the organism. To be 'alive' is to be either conscious or unconscious; to be declared dead is to be declared neither conscious nor unconscious. The organism at death becomes a physical object within another's phenomenal world.

It is not space *and* time that are the forms of representation; the synthetic a priori is spacetime. Einstein wrote that 'Time and space are modes by which we think and not conditions in which we live'. Au contraire, I maintain that spacetime *is* the condition in which we live, condition used in the Kantian sense of transcendental.

If the phenomenal world is the manifestation of a non-plural thing-in-itself and if Schopenhauer is correct in believing we can divine the nature of the noumenon from the nature of phenomena, then, I propose, the noumenon is Tao.

The Way that may truly be regarded as the Way is other than a permanent Way.

The terms that may be regarded as terms are other than permanent terms.

The term Non-Being indicates the beginning of heaven and earth;

the term Being indicates the mother of ten thousand things.

For it is through the constant alterations between Non-Being and Being

that the wonder of the one and the limitation of the other will be seen.

These two, having a common origin, are named with different terms.

What they have in common is called the Mystery, the Mystery of Mysteries, the Gate of all Wonders.

(*Tao Te Ching*)

Yin and Yang must be understood in a pure metaphysical sense and not in any sexualised sense as female and male principles, let alone as the intuitive and the rational.

Yin is to be defined as the realisation of the Non-Being of Being.

Yang is to be defined as the realisation of the Being of Non-Being.

Tao, like Nicholas de Cusa's God, is 'beyond the coincidence of the contradictories': the contradictories in

this case being Yin and Yang and hence the adoption of Tao 'to name' the noumenon.

WAKING, SLEEPING AND DYING

1. All organisms have periods of quiescence, or, at least, an activity-rest cycle. Being asleep and being awake are yin-yang polarities of the human being within the phenomenal world. Being asleep and being awake form a yin-yang complementary pair: yin-consciousness and yang-consciousness. They are as complementary a yin-yang pair as position and momentum or mass and energy in physics. It has been perfectly natural for us to speak of being asleep in these terms: a heavy sleeper, being fast asleep and so forth.
2. As is the phenomenal self so is the phenomenal world and as is the phenomenal self so is the synthetic *a priori*. Any polarisation of the phenomenal self is the polarisation of the phenomenal world and of the synthetic *a priori*. The polarisation of spacetime is the polarisation of the principle of individuation, for spacetime is, as for Schopenhauer, the very principle of individuation.
3. Polarisation of the phenomenal self is polarisation toward dying. Polarisation of the phenomenal world is polarisation towards the ending of that world. Polarisation of spacetime is polarisation towards the ending of representation. Polarisation of the principle of individuation is polarisation toward becoming non-plural. The ending of representation is the ending of plurality. The ending of plurality is the becoming of oneness,
4. Death is the end of the phenomenal self, the end of the world, the end of representation and the end of plurality. Dying is the *ending*. NDE is the experience of these endings.

OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE

'Getting 'out' of my body was like going through a magnetic field. Each magnet was attracted to the other and then to another and another until the first was attracted to the last and then I was free. I knew I had just gone through the elements of the earth that made up my physical body. This registered in my brain as pain but it wasn't pain exactly but the process of going through the elements and overcoming gravity.' (Alise)

1. At the onset of the NDE, the phenomenal self enters a hypnagogic/hypnopompic state – these are the initial feelings of peace and well-being. Subsequent out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are not out of body experiences. An OBE is a yang-polarisation of the phenomenal self within the phenomenal world. The 'out-of-(dead)-bodiness' of NDE is the yang-polarised phenomenal self witnessing the phenomenal self becoming a physical object within the phenomenal world.
2. The yang-polarisation of consciousness results in vividness of sensation, speed and clarity of thought, and lucidity of awareness.
3. The yang-polarisation of the phenomenal self is the yang-polarisation of spacetime. The OBE of precognition, associated with events around the death scene, is the yang-polarisation of spacetime in its temporal aspect and is equivalent to the atomic clock in orbit getting ahead of its initially synchronised counterpart on earth. 'The subjects say sometimes that they observed the doctors and nurses working on their body and could see

and hear what they were doing and saying. However, they sometimes say that they knew what they were going to say or do just before they did it.' (Ellison, 2002)

4. The yang-polarisation of the phenomenal self, being the yang-polarisation of the phenomenal world, results in the OBE of clairvoyance, associated with, for example, clearly knowing and seeing your loved ones on their way to visit you from a different part of the hospital. If the phenomenal self is yang-polarised so is the phenomenal world, as one is transparent to oneself so the world is transparent. 'I looked in the mirror and could not see myself.' (David Oakford). In the transparent world of OBEs, we are experiencing the yang-polarisation of spacetime, in its spacial aspect, manifest in 5 dimensions (viz. the work of Jean Pierre Jourdan, director of IANDS in France) - the Kaluza-Klein *unification* of gravity and electro-magnetism?
5. The OBE of telepathy is the yang-polarisation of the phenomenal self in relation to another phenomenal self within the yang-polarised phenomenal world. In yang-polarisation the phenomenal self is becoming de-individualised within the phenomenal world – the experience of becoming de-individualised and in union is love, hence one can explain why love has been demonstrated to enhance telepathic communication.
6. The OBE of the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, of pain, deformities, handicaps, disfigurements and wounds disappearing is, in yang-polarisation, the phenomenal self becoming de-individuated within itself, i.e. becoming whole, becoming healed.

THE VOID

'After death, there are various states that souls must pass through before arriving in heaven or hell. The first state involves their more outward aspects and the second involves their more inward aspects. The first state after death is very much like their state in the physical world, since at that point they are similarly involved in outward matters. This is why some souls are unaware that they are dead.' (Swedenborg)

'The first thing I remember about my NDE is that I discovered myself in a realm of total darkness. I had no physical pain, I was still somehow aware of my existence as George, and all about me there was darkness, utter and complete darkness - the greatest darkness ever, darker than any dark, blacker than any black. This was what surrounded me and pressed upon me.' (George Rodonaia)

1. The inward aspects are the yin 'experiential counterpart of the physiological transition to biological death', which have been much neglected by investigators in comparison with the yang. The yin aspect has been called the void and its 'as if' descriptions are those of gravitational collapse. The inward aspects involve the yin-polarisation of consciousness. The inward aspects have their polar counterparts in the OBE, the tunnel and the light. NDEs in India are generally more yin than yang.
2. The phenomenon of 'leaving the body' with its buzz or roar is the yang equivalent of the buzz and roar of a 200 pound man at +1Gz (the everyday gravitational stress experienced by earth-bound humans) being transformed in one second or less at +9Gz to an 1800 pound man in a fighter aircraft. The experience is one of paralysis and heaviness, of which position and mass are the yin-physics equivalents. The inwardness of becoming 1800lbs generates the outwardness of an OBE.

6 Network Review Summer 2008

3. Cayce reports 'There are various degrees of darkness to this realm, and it is darker and denser at the center than at its outer fringes. The closer we are to the outer edges, the more interaction there is with others in the realm. The closer to the center, the darker and more painful is the solitude.' Others report senses of falling into a deep dark pit or well or cave, of claustrophobia, of enclosure in a small space, of compression.
4. The encephalitic disorder known as 'sleeping sickness' and its treatment with L-DOPA, as inspiringly narrated by Oliver Sacks in his book 'Awakenings', provide me with an intermediate case, between everyday experience and the void, of spacetime being synthetic a priori. Sacks writes: '{Miss D} once said of her 'freezing': 'It's not as simple as it looks. I don't just come to a halt, I am still going, but I *have run out of space to move in...* You see, *my space, our space*, is nothing like *your space*: our space gets bigger and smaller, it bounces back on itself, and it loops itself round till it runs into itself.' ('Awakenings' p.339)
1. The void is not the tunnel. The tunnel is yang, the void is yin.
2. In NDE the phenomenal self does not move through a tunnel. The phenomenal self as yang-polarised is accelerated up to speeds approaching that of light and the phenomenal world appears as a tunnel (in accordance with the theory of relativity).
'Immediately the blackness began to erupt into a myriad of stars and I felt as if I were at the center of the universe with a complete panoramic view in all directions. The next instant I began to feel a forward surge of movement. The stars seemed to fly past me so rapidly that they formed a tunnel around me. I began to sense awareness, knowledge. The farther forward I was propelled the more knowledge I received. My mind felt like a sponge, growing and expanding in size with each addition.'(Virginia Rivers)
3. Between the out-of-body experience and the tunnel, there can occur intermediate phenomena, when the transition from OBE to the tunnel is not so immediate. These phenomena are of the nature of shamanistic journeying and travelling clairvoyance. In an OBE, speed gradually increases as you get further away from the 'physical' body, the phenomenal self becomes lighter, and it is more energised and freer to move. The phenomenal self is accelerated beyond the body's location, beyond the area of that location, beyond the country, beyond the earth, beyond the solar system,

TOWARD THE LIGHT

The Tunnel

'Many near-death accounts, as you will see later, involve souls entering the void immediately after death. From here, the soul may then enter the tunnel toward the light in the next heavenly realm.' (Kevin Williams)



beyond the stars until 'the stars seemed to fly past me so rapidly that they formed a tunnel around me.'

The Light

'During this time the light just radiated a sense of peace and joy to me. It was very positive. I was so happy to be in the light. And I understood what the light meant. I learned that all the physical rules for human life were nothing when compared to this unitive reality. I also came to see that a black hole is only another part of that infinity which is light.' (George Rodonaia)

4. Entering the presence of the light is an OBE to the nth degree. It is yang-polarisation literally to the ending of the world – the barrier reported in NDE. Being in the presence of the light is the OBE to the nth degree in terms of the vividness of sensation, the speed of thought and the lucidity of awareness.

5. OBEs to the nth degree generate psi phenomena to the nth degree.

Clairvoyance to the nth degree is the total transparency of the phenomenal world. Telepathy to the nth degree is to become one with all other organisms. Precognition to the nth degree constitutes visions of the future. Healing to the nth degree is to experience perfect wholeness.

6. In meeting deceased loved and loving ones in the near wholly de-individualised phenomenal world, we meet their phenomenal selves within that phenomenal world as they were in their own dying. The living never appear to one, the yang-polarised phenomenal world of the light is peopled by those who can inhabit such a phenomenal world.

7. To experience the life review is to experience oneself as one's lifetime, to experience, with the barest form of representation, atman in its manifestation.

'All of my life up till the present seemed to be placed before me in a kind of panoramic, three-dimensional review, and each event seemed to be accompanied by a consciousness of good or evil or with an insight into cause or effect. Not only did I perceive everything from my own viewpoint, but I also knew the thoughts of everyone involved in the event, as if I had their thoughts within me. This meant that I perceived not only what I had done or thought, but even in what way it had influenced others, as if I saw things with all-seeing eyes. I cannot say how long this life review and life insight lasted, it may have been long, for every subject came up, but at the same time it seemed just a fraction of a second, because I perceived it all at the same moment. Time and distance seemed not to exist. I was in all places at the same time, and sometimes my attention was drawn to something, and then I would be present there.' (Quoted in Van Lommel)

8. In the NDE we learn what love truly is. Love is becoming one; love is the transcending of spacetime because it is the transcending of the principle of individuation. To love is to be fused with others; the synthetic a priori is only the means of representation - and representation is not reality. In the NDE we cannot but learn that love conquers all, for love is the overcoming of allness. Love makes one.

IN CONCLUSION

1. Many researchers into NDE, and other paranormal and transpersonal phenomena, have called quantum mechanics to their aid, whether literally or metaphorically, in their attempts to provide an explanation or explanatory framework for their data. Quantum mechanics has, I fear, become their God of the Gaps. It is true that quantum mechanics constitutes our best understanding of the physical and how the physical underlies the chemical and the biochemical. But what is physics? Firstly, physics is purely epistemic, in Bohr's pithy phrase 'Physics is not about what there is, but about what we know'. Secondly, M-theory would suggest that physics is the mathematical mindscape of spacetime, hence the mathematical mindscape of the synthetic a priori. A completed physics is not the theory of everything but the theory of how everything is represented.

2. NDEs are not evidence for survival after death. NDEs are experiences of the polarisation of the phenomenal self *within* the phenomenal world. Neither veridical apparitions nor the objectively verifiable statements of mediums are evidence of survival after death. The deceased exist as phenomena within the yang-polarised phenomenal world, but the polarised phenomenal world does not exist for the deceased, for the deceased are dead and life alone is that for which there is a phenomenal world. However, features ranging from birthmarks and birth defects to traits and traumas are evidence of reincarnation conceived as the psychosomatic re-manifestation of atman, hence, for example, Diana Firth's living grandson can be the reincarnation of the deceased fiancé with whom she is still now in contact.

3. NDE does not support the belief in cosmic consciousness, let alone the hypothesis that consciousness has ontological primacy. Becoming wider and wider awake in an increasingly de-individuated world generates the idea of cosmic consciousness, but in NDE we are becoming cosmically conscious, we are not experiencing cosmic consciousness.

4. NDEs are enlightening but not enlightenment. We learn love and compassion,

We gain wisdom and understanding, and we lose the fear of death. It is thus that NDEs are transformative. In returning to the everyday world we become more loving, act more compassionately, seek wisdom and understanding, and attain new degrees of confidence and courage.

5. The 'para' is removed from paranormal. Normal waking or normal sleeping states are normal *only* in that they are the norm. Precognition, telepathy, clairvoyance, healing, apparitions, OBEs and NDEs et al. should now themselves be accounted normal, i.e. continuous with the norm.

David Lawton is a philosopher. In addition to doing research in philosophy at the University of Manchester, he is working on a book in which he fully develops the metaphysical paradigm presented in his article and applies it not only to the understanding of other anomalous phenomena but (more importantly) to the traditional problems of philosophy.