

Personal Encounters in Near Death Experiences

by Paul Eddy Wilson
wilson-paul@lycos.com

While discussing a metaphysical argument for postmortem survival, David Ray Griffin says that near death experiences (NDE's) offer "*impressive evidence*" for human survival of death. [1] Griffin asks his readers to examine the data "with the presupposition that it might be genuine." [2] After one page Griffin wraps up his discussion with the modest claim that the evidence may "lead one to conclude that a hypothesis based on survival is less implausible." [3]

My essay shall focus on a narrow aspect of NDE's, the personal encounters in NDE's. Griffin says, "Besides their out-of-body feature, they often involve encounters with a 'welcoming committee' which sometimes includes people of whose death the person did not previously know." [4] After I have examined the data available on personal encounters in NDE's I shall consider what evidence they may offer.

I. Near Death Experiences and Scientific Research

Prior to the 1960's there was no significant scientific research on NDE's. [5] In 1975 Raymond A. Moody, Jr. published his well known work, Life after Life. [6] This work presented NDE's within the context of contemporary medical and psychological research. Though it is regarded as non-scientific, investigators still use Moody's hypothetical description of a core experience as a model for further research. [7] Parapsychologist Kenneth Ring said the following about Life after Life: "

As for Moody's published work, he is at pains to be explicit that his investigation should not be regarded as a scientific study. The case history material he presents appears to be highly selective, his 'sampling procedures' were essentially haphazard, and his data were not subjected to any statistical analysis. [8]

In another study, At the Hour of Death, Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson summarize data from the earliest scientific surveys of NDE's. They include a Pilot Study conducted in 1959-1960; a United States Survey conducted in 1961-1964; and an Indian Survey conducted in 1972-1973. I shall refer to this body of data as the Osis surveys. Most of the cases included in the Osis surveys are reports of dying patients rather than survivors who experienced NDE's. [\[9\]](#)

The Osis surveys used a questionnaire designed by Karlis Osis. Replies came from health care professionals who attended dying patients rather than persons having NDE's. Of the 5,000 physicians and 5,000 nurses who were contacted in the Pilot Study in the 1950's only 640 chose to respond. These respondents had observed the deaths of 35,540 patients. Osis said, "A surprisingly large number of patients were said to have experienced relevant phenomena: 1,318 of them saw apparitions, 884 experienced relevant phenomena." [\[10\]](#) So, only 2, 937 or 8.3 % of the patients who were observed by the respondents experienced "relevant phenomenon". [\[11\]](#) Regarding the Osis surveys Ring said, "Despite severe problems in representative sampling and other methodological flaws, their results, presented in detailed statistical fashion, show a remarkable internal consistency and closely resemble those reported by Kübler-Ross and Moody." [\[12\]](#)

Kenneth Ring compiled the Connecticut study. To be included in the study individuals had to meet the following criteria: (1) be a survivor of clinical death or of near death; (2) be mentally stable and cognizant; (3) report in English; and (4) be of legal age. [\[13\]](#)

Using health care professionals for referrals data was gathered from 102 participants. Ring said, "Of these, 52 nearly died as a result of a serious illness; 26 from a serious accident; and 24 as a result of a suicide attempt." [\[14\]](#) Almost half reported some sort of paranormal phenomenon. Ring said, "Altogether, forty-nine of our cases, or 48% of our entire sample, recounted experiences that conform in an obvious way, at least in part, to the core experience pattern as delineated by Moody." [\[15\]](#) Whether some of the remaining 52% simply forgot or

never experienced NDE's remains uncertain. [\[16\]](#)

These two surveys make the claim of being scientific inquiries, since they give attention to variables that may alter or confuse the data. What sort of variables may affect reports of NDE's? I divide these into three groups: (1) psychological variables; (2) physiological variables; and (3) documentation variables. The psychological variables include factors like the individual's background beliefs, mental health, and attitude toward death. The physiological variables include the individual's general health at the time of the experience and the presence of drugs in the individual's body. The documentation variables include the identity of the reporter, how much time had elapsed since the experience, whether the report is given voluntarily or if it is coaxed, and the individual's familiarity with other reports of NDE's.

II. NDE's - What the Surveys Tells Us

The Osis surveys and the Connecticut study are useful tools for making statistical analyses about NDE's. In contrast Moody synthesizes the data he gathered to describe a core experience. Though considered nonscientific Moody's core experience provides a format for collating the data found in the surveys. Ring identifies the following eleven motifs in Moody's core experience: (1) ineffability; (2) hearing the news of one's own death; (3) feelings of peace and quiet; (4) the noise; (5) the dark tunnel; (6) an out of the body feeling; (7) meeting others; (8) the being of light; (9) the review; (10) the border; and (11) coming back. [\[17\]](#)

Ring and Moody caution that someone who had a NDE may not experience all core motifs nor have them in the same sequence. In some cases an individual may not be able to determine whether he or she has had some of these without prompting. Moody treats each motif as a sufficient and not a necessary condition of a NDE. This essay focuses upon just

one of these recurring motifs: #7, meeting others. According to Moody the personal encounter occurs at an advanced state of the NDE. It is preceded by a feeling of loneliness.

[\[18\]](#)

Ring's discussion of the personal encounter experience appears in his chapter, "The Decision to Return to Life." Whether Ring intended to suggest that the experience of meeting others signals a dramatic climax to a NDE is not entirely clear. The others seem to help resolve the conflict about dying. Ring said, "For the majority of the core experiences, there is a point in their passage toward (apparent) death when they become aware that a decision has to be made concerning their future: Are they to return to life or continue toward death?" [\[19\]](#)

Two fifths of the group surveyed in the Connecticut study had a personal encounter experience. Most individuals reported that they saw either deceased relatives whom they prized or an otherworldly being. [\[20\]](#) Ring says, "The experience of the presence and that of encountering deceased loved ones were almost always mutually exclusive - a respondent would encounter either one or the other, *but not both*." [\[21\]](#) Generally the others who were encountered were not persons known to be among the living. [\[22\]](#)

The Osis surveys include data from individuals who died in America and India. Whom did these dying individuals encounter? Indians were more likely to encounter male figures or an otherworldly being, and this may be directly related to their religious belief in a god of death. [\[23\]](#) In both American and Indian cultures deceased relatives were frequently encountered in NDE's. [\[24\]](#) Osis summarized his findings as follows:

American apparitions are female three times more frequently than are the hallucinatory figures seen by Indians. Furthermore, although the sex of the apparition figure modifies the experience, it does not affect the core phenomena. The majority of cases are still of a take-away nature, and the apparitions are predominantly of close deceased relatives. [\[25\]](#)

Osis spoke of these encounters having a "take-away nature." Osis said, "Most of the apparitions so identified (65 percent) had the ostensible purpose of taking the patient away to postmortem existence by calling, beckoning, demanding, and so on. [26] Osis's description assumes that there is a duplicity of space. One can leave the space of the living and continue one's existence in another space with no temporal discontinuity. Later we will have to consider whether that assumption is warranted. [27]

In NDE's reporters must make a judgment about the identity of any being whom he or she encounters based on perceptual data. The reporter may infer that he or she encountered someone familiar like a former family member. [28] Osis said, "Let us be aware that such apparitions do not wear name tags or speak their names. It is the patient who announces the apparition's name and title. But the factors governing a patient's ability to recognize the apparition and know its name are hard to evaluate." [29] One woman surmised that she had encountered Jesus, since the figure whom she encountered had blonde hair and wounds like the stigmata. [30]

III. Seeing Encounters as Evidence

Two broad possibilities lie before us. We may see NDE's as being intentionally referential or extensionally referential. To say simply that NDE's are intentionally referential is to affirm that NDE's have intentional meaning, and it is to withhold judgment about their extensional reference. To say that NDE's are extensionally referential is to say that the term NDE denotes some set of objects whose existence we judge to be on a par with natural objects like rocks or trees. In his work, An Introduction to Logic, Irvin Copi notes that "there are terms which, although perfectly meaningful, do not denote anything at all." [31] Copi adds, "When we say that there are no unicorns, we assert that the term 'unicorn' does not denote, that it has an 'empty' extension or denotation." [32] Do NDE's denote anything or

have an empty extension like the term "unicorn"? This I shall term the NDE reference question. Osis said, "Our central hypothesis is that the dying become aware of postmortem existence by means of ESP. . . . the rise of mood at the time of death could also be based upon the patient's unconscious awareness of postmortem survival." [33] Osis implies that NDE's are extensionally referential. While that hypothesis takes NDE's as evidence of immortality, it assumes the soundness of several premises like ESP and the unrestricted passage of "the dead" between our space-time continuum and another space-time continuum. [34] Thus, death is treated as a metaphysical shell game.

The scientific hypothesis is that NDE's are intentionally referential. Scientific data offers no warrant for the claim that they are extensionally referential. Ring said, "the *meaning* of the core experience is critically dependent on the interpretation we are justified in giving it. [35] Though Ring believed more research was needed, he did not find the scientific explanations convincing. He said,

if scientific explanations are not convincing, we may find ourselves driven to one of two alternatives: (1) to enlarge our concepts of science so as to subsume this phenomenon or (2) to employ another framework in an attempt to understand what the near-death experience represents. [36]

Scientific explanations may be divided into pharmacological explanations and psychological explanations. Like Ring I shall assume pharmacological explanations do not provide ample data for answering the reference question. [37] Can psychological explanations answer the reference question? One psychological explanation rejected by Ring was the "depersonalization explanation." [38] Russell Noyes, Jr. and Roy Kletti, who conducted their own survey in 1976 of the NDE's of 104 individuals, concluded that NDE's were a form of the depersonalization syndrome which is a psychological defense mechanism. In the depersonalization syndrome an individual whose identity is threatened will seek personal affirmation as a defense mechanism. So, in NDE's the others appear at a time when the identity of the individual is in question, and the others assist the individual to combat

depersonalization. This psychological explanation tells how the experience may be intentionally referential. [\[39\]](#)

Should we follow Ring and reject the depersonalization explanation? I suspect not, if we invoke the law of parsimony. Simon Blackburn says the law of parsimony "counsels us to expect nature to use the simplest possible means to any given end." [\[40\]](#) NDE's are nonveridical experiences, i. e., bystanders cannot confirm the data of the reporters. Corroboration of the experience of one reporter is offered by analogy when another reporter claims he or she had a similar experience. If an explanation of NDE's can be given that adequately demonstrates how they are intentionally meaningful, and if NDE's are nonveridical, i. e., not publicly accessible experiences; then we should accept the explanation that does not necessarily assume another space-time continuum, given the law of parsimony. Some version of the depersonalization explanation may count as the simplest explanation available.

Researchers like Ring maintain that the experience is real and reject the possibility that this is merely wishful thinking, a dream, or a hallucination. [\[41\]](#) I suspect there may be a false dichotomy at work. The notion that NDE's must be either dreams or reality fails to give an adequate account of the role of dreams in our experience. The reporters may be experiencing a phenomenological state similar to a waking dream. Mary Watkins, one of the first investigators of waking dreams, suggests that we routinely experience waking dreams, though few of us become aware of the process. [\[42\]](#) A waking dream may be understood as an ongoing imaginary script arising at a subconscious level that is ignored by self-conscious beings when they are not attending to it. [\[43\]](#) For purposes of behavior modification some therapists help individuals become attuned to their "inner 'mind talk'". These therapists maintain that an individual's self-esteem may be raised by quieting the mind and redirecting the ongoing self-talk in more positive patterns. [\[44\]](#) The first step toward the quieting of the consciousness may be a breathing exercise. [\[45\]](#) If NDE's are psychological defense mechanisms, then they could be phenomenological events similar to waking dreams.

Preceding the encounter the individual may feel a sense of disorientation or bodily detachment as well as loneliness. Bodily functions are at a low level much like that of someone who attempts to quiet his or her mind by breathing exercises. [\[46\]](#) The individual feels spatially detached, and attending health care professionals who are reporting the status of the patient may offer cues that the patient is dying. According to Moody when individuals became aware of the presence of someone else in their NDE's they stopped feeling lonely. If one were suddenly to find himself or herself in a subconscious world that is unpopulated, and if one could, then it seems likely that one would repopulate that world to ward off the feeling of loneliness.

The dead or celestial beings who could offer positive affirmations appear in these experiences, but not the living. [\[47\]](#) The fact that the living do not interact with the subject in NDE's may be a sign that the subject is subconsciously aware that his or her death is immanent.

The encounter often takes the form of a problem solving dialogue where the subject prepares to make a radical transition. [\[48\]](#) This transition may be psychological. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross suggests that the dying undergo several identifiable stages prior to death. Those stages are: (1) denial and isolation; (2) anger; (3) bargaining; (4) depression; (5) acceptance. [\[49\]](#) The dead or celestial beings may help the living work through these psychological stages, since they represent freedom of emotional dependency on other living beings. They can serve the purposes of the dying individual.

Unlike the living a dead person or a celestial being can be manipulated within the subject's script without the risk of introducing a conflicting purpose. Sartre said, "To be dead is to be a prey for the living. This means therefore that the one who tries to grasp the meaning of his future death must discover himself as the future prey of others." [\[50\]](#) In

Sartre's view the living maintain control of the deceased. [\[51\]](#) One purpose of the living may be that of sustaining the life of the dying. Since the purposes of the living may conflict with the purposes of the dying, the living may not be participants of choice in NDE's. [\[52\]](#)

Four psychological reasons have been offered that would justify the presence of deceased or celestial persons in these experiences: (1) the individual either had a general expectation of seeing the other at death or the individual felt at ease with the other; (2) the other was prepared to help the individual work through the experience of dying; (3) the other symbolized the impending break with the living; (4) the other could bring the internal drama to the desired conclusion.

IV. Some Objections to the Parsimonious Explanation

Above I suggest how the presence of others in NDE's can be viewed as a defense mechanism against the depersonalization syndrome. This explanation offers warrant for the claim NDE's are intentionally meaningful. Two objections against this explanation are the physiological objection and the noetic objection. The physiological objection treats NDE's as hallucinations of diseased brains. In this view reports of NDE's become a sufficient condition for the claim that the individual making the report has a diseased brain. Since I have assumed that NDE's are a type of altered state of consciousness experienced by normal individuals rather than dysfunctional individuals, I shall not discuss that objection here. [\[53\]](#) The noetic objection claims that some information available in NDE's warrants the claim that they are extensionally meaningful.

The noetic objection is that the explanation could not account for cases where the reporter encounters someone recently deceased whom the reporter would have believed to be alive. Ring said, "a woman respondent informed me that her father, as he lay dying, saw a vision of two of his brothers, one of whom had been dead for years while the other had died

only two days previously -- a fact unknown to her dying father." [\[54\]](#) The father survived the incident, and he claimed that he decided not to die when his (living) wife called to him.

Griffin alludes to a similar case to show that NDE's offer genuine evidence of survival. [\[55\]](#)

Let us assign names to the unidentified persons in the case just describe. Joe is the father, Sam is the first brother of Joe, and Saul is the second brother of Joe. Joe has a NDE. In his NDE he see both Sam and Saul. Sam is known by Joe to have been deceased for fifteen years. Joe has no recollection of being told about Saul's death two days earlier. Joe sees both Sam and Saul beckoning to him, but Joe decides not to die.

The objection is that incidents like the one just described render the psychological explanation inadequate. The objector believes that something more is needed to complete the explanation, and that is an extensional reference. The objection itself is a conclusion reached by three (suppressed) premises: (1) the reporter forms the true belief that someone is dead, since the reporter had a NDE; (2) the reporter believes that he or she is in dialogue with a dead person, since the reporter infers that a dead person rather than a living human being is discussing the reporter's pending death; (3) the dead person could be engaged in this dialogue, only if he or she had survived death.

If the third premise is correct, then an adequate explanation of the phenomenon would need to be extensionally referential. Yet, the third premise may be asserted only if the other two premises both prove to be sound. There is no compelling reason to assume that the first premise is sound. In the case just described it is possible that the second brother, Saul, was included by mistake or by association with the deceased brother. This is the mistaken identity thesis. While I am inclined to find the mistaken identity hypothesis convincing, we may wish to suppose the sighting is no mistake.

Given the first premise, we must examine carefully the second premise. Under

normal circumstances the father, Joe, would believe that the second brother, Saul, was alive. However, the claim is now made that Joe knows that Saul is deceased; and Joe cannot recall that anyone has told him the news of his brother's death two days before. So, the premise claims that Joe has knowledge of the death of his brother, since he has both died and survived. The premise works on the additional assumption that what Joe knows is not only that the second brother died but also that he survived to interact with Joe in the NDE. Knowing that the brother died does not entail that the brother also survived. Now we must determine whether he could know that his brother died.

The Osis surveys and Griffin assume that humans are capable of ESP. One of the claims made about ESP is that it gives an individual knowledge at a distance. If ESP is an alternate means for gathering knowledge, then this could explain how someone could know that a relative is deceased even though this news has not been communicated publicly to the individual. Just as one may hear a radio signal go dead, a living person could sense when another person is dead assuming he or she gathers knowledge by ESP

Suppose Joe knows Saul is dead. There is no reason to suggest that he also knew that the Saul survived. Recall Sartre's claim that the deceased become the prey of the living. If Joe knew that Saul was now deceased, then Saul could participate in the NDE. A deceased brother would not attempt to recall Joe to the land of the living. The deceased brother would be at the service of the subconscious mind of Joe. Thus, the encounter with the brother would be intentionally meaningful. Its meaning would not be contingent upon another space-time continuum. While this sort of hard case presents many difficulties for someone trying to explain NDE's, it does not confirm the notion that NDE's are extensionally referential.

Conclusion

NDE's have become a proper research subject for parapsychologists within the last thirty years. Not all investigators are convinced that these experiences confirm postmortem survival. After stating the general hypothesis about NDE's given by Noyes and Kletti, I gave a detailed explanation of how the personal encounter experience could be intentionally meaningful. While the evidence of NDE's is treated as genuine evidence, upon inspection this evidence points to the wonderful ability of the human mind to cope with its own demise. To say that NDE's are intentionally meaningful is to maintain that they they play a significant role in the phenomenological experience of conscious beings. Attempts to demonstrate that they are extensional meaningful demand that we validate metaphysical categories like another space-time continuum and in doing so we ignore the law of parsimony. Other reasons may yet be offered for the hope of postmortem survival, but we would be building false hopes by demanding more of NDE's than their intentional meaning warrants. [\[56\]](#)

P. Eddy Wilson

Shaw University

End Notes

[1] David Ray Griffin, "Life after Death, Parapsychology, and Post-Modern Animism," in Death and Afterlife, edited by Stephen T. Davis (New York: Macmillan Press,1990).

Hereafter cited as Griffin.

[\[2\]](#) Griffin, p. 103.

[3] Griffin., p. 104.

[4] Griffin., p. 103.

[5] Scattered throughout history there have been reports by the living of NDE's or encounters with the dead. For instance, there is the report in I Samuel 28 of Saul's encounter with the deceased prophet Samuel. Even as late as the nineteenth century detailed accounts of NDE's were lumped together with descriptions of out-of-body experiences, and accounts were assembled without regard to scientific methodology. For instance, Emanuel Swedenborg or William James speak of their paranormal experience. A two volume work, Phantasms of the Living, edited by Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, includes sightings of celestial beings, long dead heroes, etc. Popular literature on the occult resembled today's grocery store tabloids. While clinical psychiatrists and medical professionals may have heard about NDE's firsthand, these scattered reports were rarely seen as a matter for serious scientific investigation. In describing the period of research from the 1880's to the 1930's Ian Stevenson said, "investigators mainly engaged in collecting, classifying, and analyzing spontaneous experiences of persons who saw apparitions of deceased persons or had other experiences that suggested to them some communication from a disincarnate personality." See Ian Stevenson, "Research into the Evidence of Man's Survival After Death", Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease 165(1977): 152. Stevenson divides the research into three periods: 1880's to 1930's, 1930's to 1960's, 1960's to today. Finally, in 1969 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published her book, On Death and Dying. This work made available to the general public some of the recent advances in thanatology, and it opened the way for further scientific research on the process of dying.

[6] Raymond Moody, Life After Live (New York, New York: Bantam Book: 1975)

[7] Moody's work set the tone for future studies by including data from first hand reports of NDE's only. One book length account of NDE's, Betty J. Eadie's Embraced by the Light,

topped the New York Times's Bestseller List.

[8] Kenneth Ring, Life at Death (New York: Quill, 1982), p. 20. Hereafter cited as Ring.

[9] Due to Moody's popularization of the NDE's the assumption is made that NDE's are experiences of individuals who have been declared clinically dead and have survived. Instead, in many instances dying patients report NDE's to their family or health care attendants prior to death.

[10] Karlis Osis and Erlender Haraldsson, At the Hour of Death (New York: Avlon, 1977), p. 27. Hereafter cited as Osis.

[11] The last statistic is one that researchers rarely discuss - the percentage of patients who have these experiences as opposed to those who do not. Of course, the main concern of the Osis surveys is to understand what is experienced by those having NDE's. Yet, if NDE's are supposed to be genuine evidence of something, then it behooves researchers to examine and to explain the statistical data regarding the absence of this phenomenon for many dying patients.

[12] Ibid., p. 20.

[13] Ring, p. 27.

[14] Ring., p. 29.

[15] Ring, p. 32.

[16] While it is possible that the individuals had a core experience and did not recall it, silence cannot be taken as evidence that survivors did have a core experience.

[17] Ring, p. 23.

[18] In the idealized account a feeling of loneliness precedes the personal encounter experience. The Connecticut study did not inquire about feelings of loneliness, and it is difficult to determine scientifically what percentage of the survey population did experience loneliness. Ring said, "this matter [of loneliness] was raised with only about half of our respondents." (Ring, p. 98) Not everyone who reports that they had a NDE describes it as a lonely experience. Some reporters say they felt frustrated that they could not communicate with those who were giving health care, but they were not combating a feeling of loneliness. Those who reported that they did feel loneliness associated it with the out-of-the-body motif.

According to Ring in the Connecticut study only "about half a dozen" indicated they experienced loneliness. Moody investigated the problem of loneliness but offered no statistical data about it. Ring quotes Moody as saying, "feelings of loneliness are brief and are dispelled when an individual gets farther into the experience and encounters a reassuring presence of some kind." (Ring, p. 98) So, loneliness often preceded the personal encounter experience.

[19] Ring, p. 67

[20] Osis observed, "we would expect to see the traditional middlemen between us and the other world-people such as ministers, brahmins, and rabbis who are always around to perform the funeral services and other evocations of the spiritual forces. Yet not a single case occurred in which a dead clergyman acted as an otherworldly envoy to his dying parishioner." Osis, p. 93.

[21] Ring, 288, nt. 4. Ring added that there was only one exception to this in the case of a woman who had a conversation with "God" and also had a vague sense of the presence of deceased individuals. He said, "Her perception of them, however, was very indistinct compared to most of the instances where an encounter with a loved one was claimed." So,

we may surmise that these others were neither involved in the resolution of the conflict about dying nor were they observers of an exchange between the woman and God.

[22] Below I shall deal with the problem of apparitions of deceased persons who were not known to have been deceased. Another variation on this problem is the presence of deceased relatives who were (relatively) unknown to the reporter like a grandmother.

[23] Osis, p. 107.

[24] Osis offered the following statistics: "In the United States and India, respectively, the figures ran: dead father 93%, 94%; dead mother 93%, 77 percent. There was a surprisingly large number of dead spouses (79 percent) and siblings (85 percent) in the United States . . . " p. 97

[25] Osis, p. 100

[26] Osis, p. 82.

[27] I shall call that the transitivity assumption. It is the assumption that the deceased who appear to the living appear for the purpose of helping the individual leave the living to enter another space-time continuum. The explanation I offer in the text treats the take-away mission as a nontransitive mission. In my explanation the dead simply help the dying to leave.

[28] An objector may cite the case where a nearly dead individual encountered a grandmother whom they had not met during their lifetime. The objector may argue that this is further confirmation that these encounters offer evidence of survival. The claim rests on the idea that encountering a long dead relative whom the reporter did not know previously is stronger evidence than the citing of a recently deceased relative. I find that objection to be weak. If the reporter was capable of identifying the other as his or her grandmother, then we must ask

what criteria he or she used to make the identification. Only if he or she had prior information about the grandmother could such a judgment be made. Furthermore, the fact that the individual believed he or she encountered a relative who was not known to the reporter during his or her lifetime offers no stronger evidence for survival than either an encounter with a recently deceased relative or an encounter with an otherworldly presence.

[29] Osis, p. 152.

[30] In the Connecticut survey one participant reported that she had seen Jesus. She concluded that this was Jesus on the basis of observations about the man's general appearance, a wound on the man's chest like the stigmata, and the man's discussion of the sacrament of communion. Her description of the man whom she took to be Jesus follows: "I can see that form now: It had blond-gold hair and it had a beard, a very light beard and a moustache. It had a white garment on. And from this white garment there was all this gold shining. There was a red spot here [she points to her chest], on his gown, there was a chalice in his hand . . . " See Ring, p. 60.

[31] Irving Copi, An Introduction to Logic, Seventh Edition (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986), p. 150.

Hereafter cited as Copi.

[32] Copi, p. 150.

[33] Osis, p. 139.

[34] Elsewhere I have examined Griffin's arguments for immortality from the perspective of postmortem animism. See my essay, "Post-Modern Animism's Case for an Astral Body" delivered at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion. One of the important factors in Griffin's defense is the idea that a human may have the power of ESP. As I shall argue in the next section of the paper, the assumption that one has the power of ESP is no confirmation of the idea that the soul is immortal.

[35] Ring, p. 206.

[36] Ring, p. 206.

[37] Researchers may or may not see psychological explanations working in tandem with physiological explanations; but an adequate physiological explanation would need to make clear its phenomenological ramifications, since the experience to be explained is phenomenological.

[38] Ring, p. 207.

[39] See Russell Noyes, Jr. and Roy Kletti, "Depersonalization in the face of Life-Threatening Danger: A Description," Psychiatry 39(1976): 19-27. Noyes and Kletti investigated 114 NDE's given by 104 individuals. They published their findings in 1976 prior Moody's popular account of a "core experience". Although they could not use Moody's eleven part description for comparisons, the reports they investigated read like the ones we find in the surveys of Osis and Ring.. For instance, one 14-year-old boy suffering from a gunshot wound to the chest said, "In the emergency room I found myself outside my body, as though I were standing off to one side." (p. 22) For 75 percent of the individuals time seemed to slow. (p. 23) Noyes and Kletti approached the problem as one that calls for a diagnosis. They concluded the individuals had experienced depersonalization. (p. 25) There are some features of the classical depersonalization syndrome that do not correspond to the features of the NDE's, but what is important to notice is that this syndrome or one very similar to it gives us a way to explain the phenomenon psychologically. Whether we care to identify it as the same syndrome or if we choose to modify the idea may not be as important as recognizing the fact that the psychological explanation may offer a coherent account of the phenomenon. Noyes and Kletti said, "the syndrome developed as a normal reaction to suddenly-presented, life-threatening danger. It seems clearly to have represented an adaptive, even life-saving, response in many instances."(p. 27)

[40] S.v., "parsimony, law of" in The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, by Simon Blackburn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 278.

[41] Ring, p. 208.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Mary Watkins, Waking Dreams, 3rd edition (Dallas, TX: Spring Publishing, Inc., 1984).

[44] Shakti Gawain, Creative Visualization (San Rafael, CA: New World Library, 1990).

[45] Adelaide Bry, Visualization (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1979), p. 36

[46] Ibid.,

[47] Osis, p. 43.

[48] Osis, p. 56

[49] Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 38ff.

[50] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 695.

[51] Ibid, 456f.

[52] In the Osis surveys we find that some Indians encountered a deity that their religion associated with death. While this caused anxiety in some individuals, it was something they had been taught to expect. In other words, even this presence was not a surprise that would

have been out of place.

[53] First, one may object that this explanation treats NDE's as mere hallucinations of diseased brains. Since the experience is nonveridical, the objector may argue that the depersonalization syndrome treats NDE's as if they were products of an unhealthy brain.

We do not expect someone who has a diseased brain to be able to function normally. However, the Osis study suggests that individuals who had neurological or pathological disorders were less likely to report such experiences. Osis said, "Patients with brain diseases or nephritis saw significantly fewer apparitional figures (35 percent in the United States, 65 percent in India)" (Osis, p. 104) Since NDE's are experienced by the mortally ill or trauma patients, these individuals may be experiencing some abnormal psychological events.

According to Noyes and Kletti this is a normal psychological function. If the brain were damaged it would be less likely to occur, and that is what both surveys suggest. Ring said that individuals who were heavily sedated were less likely to report NDE's. Yet, we must not underestimate the the fact that the brain would be compromised if the individual were nearly dead. One of the notable aftereffects of such experiences is a feeling of elation. Ring admits that one physiological explanation for NDE's that has not been thoroughly investigated is the possibility that the brain is releasing endorphins.(Ring, p. 196) The release of endorphins could account for a feeling of elation as well as the reduction of pain. Thus, the release of endorphins could serve as an occasion for the phenomenological events. Even if this were the occasion for some NDE's it would not rule out the possibility that there could still be other physiological explanations for the same phenomenological events.

So, the psychological explanation above is consistent with the idea that individuals who have NDE's do not also suffer from a neurological or pathological defect. Whether we want to call these hallucinations of normal humans or if we do not may depend on our understanding of a hallucination. If we assume that a hallucination is a deception that is

causally dependent on some external source, then my explanation does not treat NDE's as hallucinations. If we use a broader definition of hallucinations so that we include waking dreams and other nonveridical subconscious experiences, then we could call these hallucinations. Since the term is vague and connotes that there is something deceptive about the experience, I would refrain from identifying NDE's as hallucinations.

[\[54\]](#) Ring, p. 208

[\[55\]](#) Griffin, p. 103.

[\[56\]](#) The first public presentation of this essay was given at the 2001 meeting of the North Carolina Religious Studies Association. An early draft of the essay was written in 1994. In the intervening time I have continued to research the subject and gather first hand reports of NDE's from relatives or personal acquaintances, and the essay has undergone several revisions to reflect some of these accounts. The present version is an attempt to follow one line of reasoning to its logical conclusion about the meaning of NDE's.