

EXPÉRIENCES DE MORT IMMINENTE: REVUE DE VIE, SORTIE
DE CORPS, VISIONS ... CE QUE DIT LA SCIENCE
[NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: LIFE REVIEW, OUT-OF-BODY,
VISIONS ... WHAT SCIENCE SAYS]

*By Renaud Evrard in collaboration with Ronald Beurms. Albin Michel.
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Prof. Renaud Evrard is a clinical psychologist at the University of Lorraine, France. He is a former president of the Parapsychological Association (PA) and has published numerous articles and books on multidisciplinary and behavioural science approaches (psychology, anthropology, sociology) to parapsychological topics. Among his many awards is the 2024 PA Book Award for this book.

This book features the near-death experience (NDE; *expérience de mort imminente* (EMI) in French) of Belgian comedian and set/costume designer Ronald Beurms, putting it in the context of an extensive review of scientific literature on NDEs. The central theme is that depth analysis of individual cases can both shed light on the general theory of NDEs and provide a basis of clinical support for experiencers.

Apart from the overall thoroughness of the literature review, researchers accustomed to English-only sources would benefit greatly from this treatment. Evrard includes a great many European studies, especially in French but also some in German.

In his practice, Renaud Evrard gives free consultations to people with a variety of exceptional experiences, of which the NDEs are far from the strangest. What strikes him is the high variability in the cases and the gap between them and the prevailing general theories about NDEs. The way forward in improving our understanding involves thick descriptions of individual cases, he says, and exploring the implications of their similarities and differences in various aspects, leading to a better understanding of the range of interrelated phenomena that may fall under the umbrella of NDEs.

In the central case featured in this book, Ronald Beurms was driving his motorcycle at high speed in 2008 when he began to lose control. Anticipating a crash, he considered a suicidal jump but then saw a succession of images flood past him as external time seemed to slow down. Entering mentally into one of these life-review images, he found an unlikely solution that included speeding

up, thereby regaining control. Evrard analyses the details of this report and shows how they connect to various aspects of the NDE literature.

Beginning with the popularity of *Life After Life* (Moody, 1975), there has been a standard description of NDEs emphasizing fifteen common characteristics, including a tunnel, an OBE (out-of-body experience), the appearance of departed relatives and friends, a being of light, and a life review. There is also a common reliance on Bruce Greyson's (1983) NDE scale, which includes sixteen questions about different dimensions of the experience, on a scale from zero to two, yielding a maximum score of thirty-two. Evrard criticizes this scale for overemphasizing the mystical and religious, such as the spiritual beings, extra-terrestrial environment, and a special light. He thinks that this model narrows the definition and misses other aspects.

This critique falls into the methodological issues of validity and reliability. How do we know if a scale measures some theoretical construct like NDE in a way that represents real experience? Do the component dimensions correlate in a meaningful and reliable way? One sociological joke states sarcastically that a statistical scale 'turns experience into numbers'. This is why ethnographic interviewing, as in Evrard's clinical cases, contributes to understanding complex phenomena like NDEs beyond the simple statistics, an argument for multiple methodologies.

Evrard then surveys multidisciplinary treatments of NDEs, including especially neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy, examining different aspects of how individual cases vary. There are many types of crisis situations people can experience, like childbirth, accidents, being hit by lightning, and being wounded in battle. And these 'fear-death' or 'near-death' experiences are interpreted subjectively by the experiencer. By definition, Evrard points out, they are all about crises in life rather than death, since no one who is completely dead returns like Lazarus. Also, he documents the impact of cultural filters, pointing out that Western cases include more subjective reports of spirits of relatives and friends, whereas Eastern cases are more likely to include religious figures.

Some researchers conceptualize a separation of the NDE into two aspects: first, material, and then seemingly non-material. In a process similar to stages of preparing to die, perhaps, first the brain tries to avoid death, and then it looks toward adjusting to death. Much of the NDE can be seen as a search for a way out before yielding to death. This leads to 'disjunction', separating the internal thought process from the body and external physical reality. If there is a life review, this may, as in motorcyclist Ronald Beurms' case, be a search through the experiencer's crypto-memory for a solution. This would explain why internal brain time seems to speed up to find a solution quickly, while the external world subjectively slows down to give more time. 'Being in the flow' operates this way for athletes, when they are able to make quick micro-adjustments as the game seems to slow down for them.

Another element in NDEs that seems to have a practical function is the subjective experience of being out-of-body and looking down on oneself from above (disjunction). Evrard notes that experiencers may feel that they are 'two', one in the physical body and another spiritually and spatially separate. One example was that of a soldier looking down on himself and seeing himself in flames with a pool of water nearby. He then popped back into his body (reunification after disjunction) and rolled over into the water, putting the fire out.

Although Beurms' motorcycle experience seems to be a rare example of the life review being used for finding a solution to a threat situation, it seems to me that the example of the soldier on fire mentioned above might be another example of an NDE providing a solution. Even when no solution is involved exactly, the out-of-body aspect might be a mental means of dissociating from a negative experience in order to cope with it, something that can happen in physical abuse cases, and perhaps in other, less traumatic, but uncomfortable situations as well.

Some experiencers claim that they have global vision, being able to see in multiple directions at once, a step beyond the previous point of seeing merely from a different angle. Laboratory evidence of people subjectively feeling that they are having anomalous perception of their surroundings suggests that the brain is capable of constructing the impression of global vision.

I have admittedly condensed Evrard's complex treatment of disjunction, but I think that it is a useful oversimplification. I would also point out that the explanation of how the brain operates through disjunction and reunification has good internal validity, since it makes sense of the functionality of the NDE as a way of coping with a crisis situation.

Another issue of validity and interpretation is the possibility of false memory on the part of NDE experiencers. However, Evrard presents several points that make the prevalence of false memory less likely. NDE memories tend to be very detailed and stable over time, especially compared to fantasy memories. In fact, they seem to be hyper-real.

Evrard argues for further research, focusing of course on detailed analysis of his experiencer reports. He has been supervising his graduate students' theses on different types of experience, noting gaps in the literature, for example on lightning victims and NDEs at the moment of birth. Although the latter represent about 20% of NDE cases, they could find no previous scholarly articles on this.

What about NDEs as evidence for life after death or consciousness apart from a live brain? Evrard notes that parapsychology remains controversial and marginalized in France. He also criticizes what he considers sensationalized popular treatments, arguing that NDE research should focus on what this strange phenomenon tells us about humanity and not on whether or not it provides evidence for survival. He asks, "Have I been too harsh?" by limiting his treatment to scientific journals and rare attempts at controlled experiments,

passing up sensationalized accounts. This will not be to some people's taste, he says.

This book is partly not to my taste, because I am interested in looking at reasonable treatments of NDEs that may provide clues to the issue of survival, and comparing NDEs to other related phenomena, such as OBEs, remote viewing, spirit mediumship, apparitions, and reincarnation. However, it's my job to review the book Evrard wrote, not the book I might have liked him to write. Also, this book is still extremely important for those who do have an interest in survival, because it is very well written, lively (pun intended), interesting, and well grounded in the international scientific literature about normal aspects of something parapsychologists study.

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