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WHAT COMES NEXT? AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER UNCOVERS QUANTUM PHYSICS' HIDDEN AFTERLIFE HYPOTHESIS

By Michael Schmicker. Palladino Books. 2024. 199 pp. £7.39.
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"Nineteenth-century Newtonian science closed the door on an afterlife", writes Michael Schmicker at the start of his new book. "Twenty-first century quantum physics reopens it" (p. 12).

What Comes Next? might be described as an entry-level book on the subject of postmortem survival and its possible connection to quantum physics. The book is aimed at readers with little or no background in either area, who are looking for a breezy, informative, uncomplicated overview. It's well written and probably will offer reassurance to people hoping for a non-religious reason to believe in an afterlife.

That said, the book isn't perfect. Its simplicity can veer into oversimplification at times. And not all the information provided is reliable.

Schmicker introduces himself as a reporter who has "written books about scientific anomalies, including near-death experiences, deathbed visions, and reincarnation claims" (p. 12). He is perhaps most well-known for his first book, *Best Evidence*, published in 2000, about the evidence for psi phenomena, survival after bodily death, and more.

In *What Comes Next?*, he has two main purposes: first, to establish that materialism, as an ontological position, is not only unnecessary to modern science but effectively disproven; and second, to relate specific quantum phenomena to the possibility of consciousness operating outside the brain.

Part I, "The investigation", addresses the first issue. After providing an overview of near-death experiences (NDEs) as evidence for extracerebral consciousness, Schmicker goes on to engage in a broad critique of materialism (or physicalism), arguing that Newtonian physics does not describe physical reality at its deepest level. He writes:

> Nineteenth-century Newtonian classical physics is grounded on the philosophy of Materialism. The only thing real is the physical world of measurable, tangible objects, knowable through our five senses. It's a universe created by blind chance, following impersonal, mechanical laws. There's no grand purpose to our universe. There's nothing special about us. We're simply a temporary collection of chemicals

> and atoms. Cut humans open, put them under a microscope, and you won't find such a thing as a soul. Consciousness is created by the brain, by the firing of neurons. (p. 17)

But physicalism, he says, is invalidated as a total explanation of reality because physical structures ultimately consist of subatomic particles that behave more like bits of information than like solid, material things.

> As Werner Heisenberg … explained: "The atoms or elementary particles themselves are not real; they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts."

Physical matter is fundamentally an illusion of our five senses. ...

> At the most fundamental level of reality, you don't find a world of tiny, hard, discrete particles obeying the laws of Newtonian physics. Matter—as understood by 19th-century science—disappears.
>
> What doesn't disappear when reality turns out not to be made of matter? What continues to exist, unchanged, operating as usual?
>
> Consciousness. Mind, observing this astonishing disappearance of matter.
>
> Consciousness is fundamental, not matter. (pp. 40–41)

On this basis, Schmicker concludes:

> If consciousness is not made of Newtonian matter, then the death and dissolution of the material brain does not affect a non-material consciousness. Thus, the survival of consciousness is scientifically both logical and possible. This is quantum physics' hidden afterlife hypothesis". (p. 122)

I found most of Part I well-presented and interesting, but Schmicker makes a mistake when describing Pam Reynolds's famous NDE. He writes:

> Flatlined EKG and EEG monitors verified her state of clinical death. During this state of death, the woman found herself fully conscious, out of her body, floating above the operating table …
>
> The records confirmed Reynolds had no electrical activity in the brain (no neurons firing) during the time she said she was conscious and floating above the operating table observing the bone saw operation. (pp. 23–24)

It is true that, at a certain point in the procedure, Reynolds was placed in a condition called 'standstill', in which her heart and brain activity shut down. This phase of the operation, however, took place after the point at which she reported leaving her body and was observing her surroundings. The veridical part of her NDE occurred when the surgeon was opening her skull with a bone saw, a detail she observed and remembered, but the standstill phase commenced only after her skull had been opened. As Kelly et al. (1999–2000, p. 517) note in a write-up of the case:

> In addition to this out-of-body experience, which occurred early in the surgical procedure, Ms. Reynolds also reported experiencing many other features frequently reported in connection with near-death experiences … These [later] features of her

> experience seem to have occurred at about the time the aneurysm was removed, when complete cardiac arrest and suppression of the EEG activity had occurred.

Part II, "The scientific evidence," goes into more detail about NDEs, quantum physics, and consciousness. Schmicker says that it "is aimed at skeptics (like me) who require evidence: blue-chip scholarly experts; credible, vetted citations; and step-by-step deductive reasoning. They'll find them here" (p. 14).

This part is divided into chapters. They are not numbered, but the titles give a good idea of their content. First up is "NDE research says consciousness survives death". In a brisk but thorough survey, we are whisked from Plato's myth of Er in *The Republic* to today's researchers, including Raymond Moody, Bruce Greyson, Peter Fenwick, Pim van Lommel, Michael Persinger, and Sam Parnia. Eben Alexander's best-selling *Proof of Heaven* and Jeffrey Long's Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF) online database are also cited.

Next is "Neuroscience can't solve the 'hard problem'". This refers, of course, to David Chalmers's 'hard problem' of neuroscience—the difficulty of determining just how consciousness could arise as an emergent property of matter. Schmicker quotes Donald Hoffman, University of California professor emeritus of cognitive sciences:

> Despite centuries of effort by the most brilliant of minds, there is as yet no physicalist theory of consciousness, no theory that explains how mindless matter or energy or fields could be, or cause, conscious experience. There are, of course, many proposals for where to find such a theory – perhaps in information, complexity, neurobiology, neural Darwinism, discriminative mechanisms, quantum effects, or functional organization. But no proposal remotely approaches the minimal standards for a scientific theory: quantitative precision and novel prediction. (p. 96)

The third chapter, in Part II, is "Reality isn't made of Newtonian matter", which, if true, means that materialism cannot fully explain it.

"Newtonian scientific materialism is false" further develops this argument. It is followed by "Does consciousness create the universe?" I'll return to this chapter in a moment.

The remaining three chapters cover mainstream science's reluctance to abandon materialism; physicists who showed an interest in paranormal phenomena; and brief discussions of ancillary issues such as the paradox of Schrödinger's cat, the possibility of retrocausality at the quantum level, and the enigma of quantum entanglement.

As I noted, there are times when Schmicker's reader-friendly, gee-whiz approach, "Whew! OK, end of science lesson" (p. 54), can become overly simplistic. I found the discussion in "Does consciousness create the universe?" to be the principal offender in this regard.

"I was fascinated by Max Planck's explanation of how consciousness creates the universe …" (p. 46) Schmicker writes.

> According to the 'consciousness causes collapse' variation of the current, leading interpretation of quantum physics (Copenhagen interpretation), our consciousness helps create the physical world we experience with our five senses. By the very act of our observing and measuring the subatomic objects existing in a state of superposition, our consciousness collapses them into material "things" with size, weight, and location in physical space-time.
>
> In other words, reality doesn't exist until consciousness observes it.
>
> Wow. You might want to read that sentence again. (p. 49)

The Copenhagen interpretation certainly was the leading interpretation from about 1930 until the late 20th century. Today, however, things are different. A recent survey of 1,100 physicists by the journal *Nature* showed that while a plurality, 36%, subscribed to the Copenhagen interpretation, the other 64% were divided among several alternatives. The same survey showed that "only 24% of respondents thought their favoured interpretation was correct; others considered it merely adequate or a useful tool in some circumstances" (Gibney, 2025).

Unfortunately, nowhere in *What Comes Next?* do we learn much about rival interpretations. The unwary reader is likely to conclude that Copenhagen is the standard, consensus view, when actually there is no single standard and no consensus.

The Copenhagen interpretation involves two principles: wave–particle duality and the observer effect. Wave–particle duality holds that subatomic particles like electrons can behave as both corpuscles and waves. Under certain conditions, an electron does not occupy a single, definite location but instead exists in a 'superposition'—a state described by a probability wave, representing many possible positions. When a measurement is made, this wave appears to collapse to a single outcome, a process known as 'wave function collapse'. Although augmented by the newer concept of quantum decoherence, wave function collapse remains a standard part of quantum physics, accepted by most physicists.

The observer effect proposes that this collapse occurs only when a conscious mind observes the system. Unlike the idea of collapse, the observer effect has run into considerable opposition in recent decades. Even the original Copenhagen formulation includes 'measurement' along with conscious observation as a trigger of collapse. Today, most physicists view observation as a subcategory of measurement, since an observation can be made only with measuring instruments. In other words, they see collapse as occurring because of a physical, not mental, interaction. Any entanglement of a subatomic particle with its environment is likely to lead to decoherence and thus to collapse. And this happens whether or not anyone is watching.

As a result, large systems adhere to the classical rules, even when they are not under observation. The sheer complexity of interactions taking place within the system is enough to break the superposition and force the system into a definite, classical state.

But haven't laboratory experiments demonstrated superposition in relatively large systems? Yes, as Schmicker points out:

> In 2023, *New Scientist* magazine reported that researchers had succeeded in putting a sapphire crystal into a superposition of quantum states, bringing quantum effects into the macroscopic world. The implications of this experiment are huge: quantum physics applies to all reality, further pressuring us to abandon our old 19th-century Newtonian science worldview. (p. 63)

Well … not exactly. What such experiments demonstrate is that when quantum systems are 'isolated' under rigorously controlled conditions, superposition can persist temporarily. But such conditions are seldom found in the real world. Outside the lab, subatomic particles involved in a system normally will be sufficiently disturbed to 'collapse' without an observer. At least, this is the viewpoint of those who understand wave function collapse in physical terms.

The observer effect still has its adherents, who hold that even very large systems—perhaps the entire universe—can remain in superposition until observed by a conscious mind. They say we cannot know that a collapse has taken place until we have observed it, and therefore the observer is still the final link in the causal chain. But how would we test such a claim? We would have to remove all observers at all stages of the process; and if that were done, no observations could be made and no conclusions could be drawn. The idea is unfalsifiable. It may be true, but it's essentially an epistemological stance, not a scientific theory.

Schmicker acknowledges that the observer effect has come under criticism. He cites a paper by Chalmers and McQueen (2021), which refutes three arguments against the hypothesis. But he doesn't give us those arguments or their refutations.

He goes on to ask:

> Can Nature by itself, or an inanimate detection machine, replace human consciousness in terms of performing the act of observation/measurement, as some Materialist-minded physicists believe?
>
> Stanford University physicist Andrei Linde argues no … Linde says conscious observers are an essential component of the universe and cannot be replaced as observers by inanimate objects. 'The universe and the observer exist as a pair,' Linde contends. "You can say that the universe is there only when there is an observer who can say, Yes, I see the universe there … I do not know any sense in which I could claim that the universe is here in the absence of observers". (pp. 144–145)

It is indeed true that 'I' cannot claim anything about the universe if 'I' am not there to observe it. But it does not follow that the universe exists only when it is observed.

Schmicker also paraphrases physicist Henry Stapp as arguing "that the logic is irrefutable: the output of a detector only becomes known when it is

consciously observed" (p. 146). Again, true. The output 'becomes known' when it is observed. And again, this is not the issue. The issue is whether or not the output exists even if it is unknown.

While it may be the case that material phenomena manifest only in the presence of consciousness, it is not a conclusion forced on us by quantum physics. The most we can say is that it is compatible with one interpretation. Other interpretations are possible. Some, like the many-worlds theory, don't posit wave function collapse at all.

Despite the book's occasional missteps, I believe it will prove useful for the audience it aims at—people who want a relatively uncomplicated reassurance that science does not rule out postmortem survival and, according to some interpretations, may even favour it.

The non-technical reader will find much to like in Michael Schmicker's book, and may even learn to stop worrying about *What Comes Next?*

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