

ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER STYX: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TERMINAL LUCIDITY AND OTHER NEAR-DEATH PHENOMENA

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A number of professionals across various fields have come together in this anthology to shed new light upon terminal lucidity, while also exploring some other near-death phenomena. Challenging still-prevailing ideas of death, this forward-thinking volume calls for the recognition and integration of these phenomena into the dying process. It also offers intriguing speculation regarding the extent to which they may support a post-materialist worldview. While the anthology has some loose ends and a number of balance issues, it is, nevertheless, a timely piece that brings much of value while opening doors for others to take up further research.

PART 1: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TERMINAL LUCIDITY

Terminal lucidity is here categorised as a form of end-of-life experience (ELE), but remains somewhat nebulously defined (Fenwick & Brayne, 2011). Generally speaking, however, it is the unexpected return and surge of lost mental clarity, often very soon before death. Most strikingly, this can occur despite what are considered irreversible Alzheimer's, dementias, and other degenerative diseases associated with catastrophic brain damage, memory loss, and confusion. While there has been continued, if limited, conversation as to the nature of what is actually occurring, that *something* mysterious is occurring persistently across cultures and time now seems beyond debate.

Natasha Tassell-Matamua and Karalee Kothe open the work strongly with a chapter dealing with terminal lucidity in children, an almost entirely unexplored area. However, while some of the included accounts are certainly thought provoking, others are more open to interpretation as to whether or not they specifically fit the phenomenon in question. While again, there can be wiggle room in this regard, and the authors seem aware of their limitations, examples such as the final case of Jack (p. 14) don't seem to fit any definition of terminal lucidity. Rather, such examples seem more like the kinds of general visionary experiences of the dying so often recorded. I was hence confused as to their inclusion (the same is true of some other cases in the book). With

this said, the brilliance of the chapter is in casting light on terminal lucidity in children and drawing attention to their sometimes surprisingly nuanced conceptualizations of and experiences around death.

Following this are a number of excellent chapters offering numerous new case reports and witness perspectives on terminal lucidity, a goldmine for those interested. Chris Roe and then Maryne Mutis gather and present cases from carefully crafted surveys, offering interesting statistical insights into certain aspects of terminal lucidity's phenomenology, something overlooked in some of the previous research. Worth noting is also that many respondents considered what they witnessed to be indicative that consciousness is independent of brain activity, potentially bringing into question the extent to which terminal lucidity and related phenomena have engendered or bolstered afterlife beliefs historically (p. 32). Indeed, there are clear examples of this referenced in the book (p. 52). This would be a truly fascinating frontier to be explored. I am reminded in some ways of the early decades of near-death research, and while the number of cases is relatively smaller, this, to reiterate, is very much a work of asking questions and opening doors.

While indications towards the position had already been made, Marjorie Woollacott's chapter delves more pointedly into ideas of non-local consciousness, post-materialism, and their relation to terminal lucidity. Beyond familiar sceptical appeals to the frailty of human memory, observer bias, or soul of the gaps arguments (Shermer, 2025)—appeals that are often simplistic and risk pre-empting deeper analysis—it can at least be said that the phenomenon of terminal lucidity seems fairly well accommodated by a non-local explanation of consciousness. However, there have been a number of proposed alternative explanations (Zelevnikov-Johnston, 2025), and a more direct engagement with those here, even if brief, may have been a boon.

References are made to philosophical idealism, to Jamesian theories of consciousness, and to other frameworks and philosophies that seemingly accommodate terminal lucidity, though these ideas are only briefly explored. In addition, I would have liked to see more cases in this chapter to support its conclusion that “research on terminal lucidity does not support the commonly held belief that consciousness solely emerges from neural activity” (p. 57), although those few included are quite profound and certainly suggestive on their own.

While there are some brief insider references (such as clocks stopping during ELE events, and animals behaving strangely), part one is a strong showing with enough new material, analysis, and insight to warrant attention. I was pleased to see terror management theory spoken of in relation to the behaviour of nurses around the dying. Examination of experiences and behaviours around death, dying, and near-death phenomena in light of this theory may, in my opinion, prove extremely fruitful, and is something I hope is taken up more readily and often in the future.

PART 2: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON OTHER NEAR-DEATH PHENOMENA

To open part two, Michael Nahm defines *paradoxical awareness* as a general term covering terminal lucidity and other instances of lucid awareness in spite of brain conditions that usually “render impossible the abilities to reason coherently and form memories” (p. 62). The even more encompassing *paradoxical consciousness* is also elucidated. While the layered terminologies potentially remain mildly confusing, Nahm’s lucid writing speaks carefully to such things as they occur during conditions like coma, anaesthesia, and locked-in syndrome. While informative, this chapter should perhaps have appeared earlier, since it provides something of a primer for many of the subjects covered.

Marieta Pehlivanova and Bruce Greyson invite us into the realms of the near-death experience (NDE) and deal primarily with critiquing neurophysiological attempts to explain NDE phenomenology. While this has often been covered before, they orient their critique also around more recent work. Some of this work (e.g., Martial et al., 2025) expressly omits dualistic interpretations from the outset.

Pehlivanova and Greyson address the issues surrounding attempts to conventionally account for the NDE in this context (while other works entirely downplay or ignore the NDE’s more anomalous and paradoxical aspects). They dismantle what are often rather lacking arguments, which is especially clear in their treatment of ideas that NDEs are produced by temporal lobe dysfunction or ostensible spikes in the brain’s electrical activity at death (pp. 82–84), pointing out a distinct lack of supportive references. While some of the critiques are rather brief, Pehlivanova and Greyson ultimately make the case that “post-materialist” explanations also deserve consideration.

Alan Pearce deals with cases of reported consciousness during coma, including those who claim to have lived out full alternate lives while in medically induced comas. Pearce presents a number of accounts, some of which are quite extraordinary, such as that of a man who lives out a life on another planet (p. 97). There is a suggestion of the psychedelic compound dimethyltryptamine (DMT) taking on the role of mediator here. For example, some of these experiences “closely match” the accounts recorded by Strassman (2008); however, little is actually offered in support of this point (p. 103). A single comparative example would have been helpfully illustrative. Nevertheless, this subject deserves careful attention.

While intriguing, sobering, and greatly educational in its own right, Kali Dayton’s chapter calling for reforms in sedation and attentively detailing delirium, sedation, and their long-term negative effects seems somewhat out of place here. The contents belie the book’s title, and the chapter reads a little jarringly in relation to those surrounding it.

Hannah Maciejewski and Christopher Kerr describe the often profound pre-death visions and dreams. The majority of the cited dreams are considered

‘more real than real’ by the dreamers, something that intriguingly links them to NDEs and other experiences during altered states, which are often described in the very same language (e.g., McKenna, 1991; Strassman, 2008; Thonnard et al., 2013). Maciejewski and Kerr studied fifty-nine patients over four hundred and fifty-three interviews, carefully screening for delirium and other potentially confounding variables. The experiences commonly involved the comforting presence of deceased relatives and others towards the end. Many of the messages received in dreams and visions were those of a positive future beyond death itself. In concert with some of the book’s overall themes, these experiences speak to space for spiritual growth even at the end of life. However, while there is much of merit here, some of the conclusions seem questionable. For instance, that children have end-of-life dreams or visions means that “these experiences are related to the psychological and emotional transition to death and not to aging or physical decline” (p. 125). The logical conclusion, rather, would surely be that this simply suggests such experiences are not *solely* related to those things and certainly may also be otherwise engendered by ageing and physical decline in other cases.

Shared death experiences (SDEs) and the ELEs of animals, fascinating and understudied, are covered by William Peters, Monica Williams, and Nancy Philpott. Regarding SDEs, the percipients’ experiences themselves accompany the dying on their way to the other world, often even encountering the same things NDErs encounter, such as an uncrossable boundary (p. 138). Such accounts offer real food for thought—one wonders, for example, why a hallucinatory episode (if it were such at all) would so specifically mirror phenomenological aspects of the NDE at a contextually relevant time.

The authors move next into the ELEs of animals, something I personally found to be of great interest, as I have had just such an experience myself. Like much of the volume, this chapter, by Michael Nahm, Pam Smart, and Rupert Sheldrake, is a calculated and carefully suggestive contribution that addresses a real gap in the literature. The reader will find a number of accounts involving such things as possible terminal lucidity, near-death visions, premonitions, and others in animals. Some of the anecdotes are compelling; others are vague and less impressive, although the parallels between these experiences in animals and those of humans hold great interest and deserve to be studied further. While the authors are aware of the limitations of their work, they conclude that ELEs for humans and animals seem to be “remarkably similar” (p. 157).

Penultimately, we come to a chapter on after-death communications (ADCs) by Evelyn Elsaesser. She and her colleagues have done excellent and contemporarily unprecedented work in this area. These pages will be greatly educational to those unfamiliar, speaking to various instances of apparent contact between the living and the dead. However, I do not consider an ADC *generally* to be a near-death phenomenon, as they often occur long after the communicator has died. Indeed, the definitions of such ADCs given by pioneers

in this area do not include any temporal restrictions (e.g., Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1996, p. 15).

The final and rather ambitious chapter, by Vasileios Basios, describes his work involving quantum tunnelling random number generators (a hardware device producing truly random numbers by exploiting the inherently unpredictable quantum tunnelling effect) in the vicinity of the terminally ill. The devices were entirely passive, required no upkeep, and apparently detected “measurable deviations from pure chance in the temporal vicinity of the transition from life to death of human consciousness” (p. 174). Seemingly careful analysis and control methodologies were employed, and while greatly intriguing, this is very much tentative work and largely awaiting broader community critique and replication. With this said, the care taken in these experiments is certainly impressive and speaks to the seriousness with which this work has been undertaken and pursued.

CONCLUSION

At times a cutting-edge contribution, *On the Banks of the River Styx* should be especially considered by anyone wishing to expand their knowledge regarding terminal lucidity. Increasing knowledge in these areas could revolutionize clinical practice around death, dying, and particularly degenerative brain disease (and hence have implications for palliative care, dementia treatment, end-of-life protocols, etc.). For this reason, the work comes highly recommended not only to the newcomer or those more seasoned in these areas but also to clinical professionals and others in and around the medical profession.

While, in its format of short chapters, the extent to which this openly post-materialist volume supports the idea of non-local consciousness is more cumulatively suggestive than anything especially robust, it most certainly contributes to that conversation. While a little more attention to opposing arguments may have been beneficial, there is also something to be said for works that simply do not set out with this goal but rather attempt to redress some perceived imbalance across the relevant literature. It will then be for the discerning reader to decide its ultimate value within the broader landscape of both materialist and post-materialist philosophy and science alike.

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