

## BOOK REVIEW

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**On the Other Side of Life: Exploring the Phenomenon of the Near-Death Experience, by Evelyn Elsaesser Valarino.** New York: Insight Books, 1997, 353 +xiv pp, \$29.95 hb.

Although this book was intended, as Kenneth Ring states in his Foreword, to be a “theoretical and philosophical examination of the NDE and its implications” (p. vii), the shaky empirical foundations on which it is built unfortunately make it a book of limited theoretical and philosophical value. The concept for the book was an excellent one: The author would present the text of her interviews with several leading scholars and scientists about near-death experiences and their implications for science, religion, and philosophy. The book falls short of its goal, however, because of an interviewer/author too prone to make unsubstantiated and often exaggerated statements about near-death experiences (NDEs) and a group of interviewees who seemed, for the most part, too uninformed about the phenomenon of NDEs to keep the discussions anchored in the reality of what we currently know about NDEs.

Evelyn Valarino opens with an introductory chapter that presents the basic phenomenology of NDEs, a brief history of near-death research, and her views about the importance of the near-death phenomenon. She believes that the study of NDEs provides an empirical means of confirming a belief in survival, that it “might lead to major discoveries that would confirm quantum theory” (p. 8), and that it suggests that death is a step in the evolution of human consciousness “toward a higher, more autonomous, and more efficient level of functioning” (p. 9).

In Chapter 2, Valarino provides a more detailed analysis of NDEs by listing 31 “stages,” or features, of NDEs and then describing and

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providing an illustrative example of each. In Chapters 3 and 4, she interviews two people about their own NDEs: Jean-Pierre Girard, a professor of medicine in Geneva, whose experience occurred when he suffered a heart attack following a bee sting; and Henry H., a former drug addict whose experience resulted from an overdose of heroin and cocaine. In the remaining 6 chapters, Valarino interviews Ring, a psychologist and long-time NDE researcher; Louis-Marie Vincent, a biologist; Regis Dutheil, a physicist, and Brigitte Dutheil, a professor of classical literature; Paul Chauchard, a neurophysiologist; Monsignor Jean Vernette; and Michel Lefeuvre, a philosopher of science. In these chapters, Valarino questions these people about their views on NDEs and the implications of NDEs for their particular fields of interest and expertise.

One of the questions that arose in my mind almost immediately was why the author chose these particular people to interview. Virtually no introductory information is given about any of them other than an occasional mention, almost in passing, of a book the person wrote. Valarino clearly took care to choose people from different disciplines; but it is not so clear that she chose people with different philosophical orientations. Not only Monsignor Vernette, but Girard, Vincent, and Chauchard seem to be committed Christians to some degree. Perhaps more importantly, no information whatever is given about the familiarity or involvement of the interviewees with near-death research. Even the two experiencers interviewed seem odd choices, given the author's propensity to view the near-death phenomenon in grandiose ways, since neither of them had a particularly rich experience, phenomenologically speaking. It is clearer why Valarino chose to interview Ring, however: she apparently regards him as the pre-eminent authority among near-death researchers. If one may judge by her end-notes, her analysis of NDEs in Chapter 2 is based almost entirely on Ring's book *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984) [Melvin Morse's *Transformed by the Light* (Morse and Perry, 1992) and Raymond Moody's *Life after Life* (Moody, 1975) are the only other works cited]; and nearly a quarter of the entire volume (75 pages) is devoted to her interview with Ring.

I also found myself becoming increasingly uncertain and uneasy about the extent of Valarino's exposure to or knowledge about near-death research. Despite a long and for the most part good list of books about NDEs and related topics in her bibliography, not a single journal article is listed, indicating that her exposure to scientific, peer-reviewed literature may be minimal. Moreover, despite the many books listed in the bibliography, the few references to near-death literature in the

whole book are almost entirely confined to citations to the Ring, Morse, and Moody books that I mentioned above. Beginning on page 1 of the book, Valarino makes so many simplistic, exaggerated, even outrageous statements about NDEs that it quickly becomes obvious that her enthusiasm about the phenomenon has not been tempered by acquaintance with much empirical data or views conflicting with her own. For example, she perpetuates the popular belief that NDEs occur when a person is “clinically dead.” She writes that when an NDE occurs, “life has left the physical body, all physiological functions are stopped, brain activity is nonexistent” (p. 172). She further claims that this has been confirmed by medical documentation: “During an NDE, brain activity is often observed by medical staff to be nonexistent” (p. 233). In fact, in practically no studies of NDEs have medical records been consulted to establish the person’s physiological state; and the few that have show that people can be in a wide range of medical conditions when they have an NDE (Stevenson, Cook, and McClean-Rice, 1989–1990; Owens, Cook, and Stevenson, 1990). I know of only one case in the entire literature about NDEs—and that was published after Valarino’s book (Sabom, 1998)—in which electroencephalographic (EEG) or other such monitoring has documented any cessation of brain activity.

Similarly, Valarino considers the life review to be “one of the most important elements of the NDE” (p. 38), and she writes that “during the life review, the experiencers understand, with the help of the ‘being of light,’ every one of their actions, both good and bad, and feel the pain they have caused others” (p. 136). Further, the life review is “a distressing exercise,” but the person’s “remorse and guilt feelings are eased by the kindness of the being of light, who points out mistakes in order to help him or her improve, not to punish” (p. 4). In fact, in our studies of the life review phenomenon (Stevenson and Cook, 1995), relatively few people (13 percent) experienced any revival of memories; and in other studies, the incidence has ranged from 3 to 29 percent. Less than half of the experiencers in our study reported that they saw their whole life; a quarter of them reported experiencing only one or a few memories. Less than half reported any sense of being judged, and most of these did the judging themselves; few of them had the life review experience in the presence of a “being of light.”

Valarino also does a disservice to near-death research, in my opinion, when she claims that “*all* who have undergone a near-death experience” afterwards exhibit a “radical and lasting” transformation (pp. 10, 265; my emphasis). She even goes so far as to assert that “initially, these people are no different from you and me. But when they come back

to life, they are transformed into the precursors of a new race, with an expanded consciousness—mutants, so to speak” (p. 133). Clearly, NDEs have a profound effect on most experiencers, and many—though by no means “all”—are changed in more or less fundamental ways by the experience. But people with less messianic tendencies than Valarino are not likely to tell researchers or others about their experiences if they believe they are going to be labeled publicly as “mutant precursors of a new race.” Statements like this are likely to drive many experiencers underground, not out in the open.

Valarino is not alone in making unsubstantiated statements in this volume. Ring says that blood flow to the brain has been “monitored” in many instances (p. 111), and Chauchard says that neurophysiological experiments have “register[ed] flat EEGs” during an NDE (p. 231); he actually says that “*all* they’ve managed to do is register flat EEGs” [my emphasis], as if this were inconsequential! Chauchard even describes a case of a Russian physicist who was resuscitated, even though “he was truly clinically dead; there were no signs of life; and this had gone on for months” (p. 256), though he gives no source for his information about this case. Several people, including Valarino, apparently believe that the events witnessed during an out-of-body experience (OBE) have been “relatively easy to corroborate” (p. 7). Lefeuvre says that the “testimony is corroborated by those who were at the scene” (pp. 289, 290). Chauchard says that during OBEs and mystical states, “individuals leave their bodies, go visit others, and give them advice” (p. 252). Ring says that “in many instances when we’ve been able to look into this, people have made statements that could not have been made on the basis of ordinary perception and yet turn out to be true” (p. 89). In fact, although there are quite a few cases of apparently veridical perception during an NDE, in very rare instances has an outside investigator been able to corroborate the events independently (for a review of both the corroborated and uncorroborated OBE/NDE perceptions, see Cook, Greyson, and Stevenson, 1998).

Claims of other paranormal or unusual capacities are also referred to vaguely, without either substantiation or qualification. Valarino writes that an “altered perception of time [that] continues well beyond the NDE . . . seems to be one of the profound and lasting changes that characterizes experiencers” (p. 33). Ring says that after an NDE people “report consistent changes in their physiological, neurological, and brain functioning” (p. 159), and Valarino says that NDErs claim to have “direct control over their physical bodies, confirming current medical opinion, which largely acknowledges the importance of the mind–body relation in the healing process” (p. 14). Both Ring and Valarino

claim that a wide variety of paranormal phenomena occur among experiencers following an NDE (pp. 52, 143), including “frequent reports of experiencers who see apparitions of loved ones at the precise moment of the latter’s death” (p. 52) or who are “often able to predict an accident or the death of a loved one” (p. 53), though again they provide no references to these “frequent” reports. As Ring acknowledges, none of these claims have been “tested” or corroborated; yet his conclusion is that this failure simply leaves us unable to decide whether such abilities develop only after an NDE or have been there all along but are not recognized until after an NDE. He does not mention the possibility that some or even many such claims might be erroneous, for one reason or another.

Statements such as these, and many others throughout the book, cry out for references or further clarification; but there are practically no references in the book. I would like to point out one further example illustrating the danger of making undocumented claims, often based only on a secondary or popular source. Valarino repeats the claim, made by Morse (Morse and Perry, 1990, pp. 102, 103) and others (Blackmore, 1993, pp. 212, 213), that Wilder Penfield’s electrical stimulation of the brains of epileptic patients reproduced many of the phenomena of an NDE. According to Valarino, Penfield “found that electrical stimulation of the ‘fissure of Sylvius,’ located in the right temporal lobe just below the right ear, can produce an out-of-body experience, an encounter with deceased loved ones, and even a life review—hence, the main elements of a typical NDE” (p. 232). In the book by Morse cited by Valarino, he reported a “casual” discussion about NDEs with a colleague who claimed that Penfield had “one patient who experienced every trait of the near-death experience while Wilder Penfield poked an area of his brain with an electric probe” (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 102); but Morse provides no other source for this claim. He later refers to “a forty-year-old textbook” that describes patient reports of out-of-body experiences while their brains were being electrically stimulated; but again he provides no reference to this textbook. The only reference to Penfield’s work in Morse’s bibliography is to a 1955 paper by Penfield in the *Journal of Mental Science*, also the only paper [along with Penfield’s book *The Mystery of the Mind* (Penfield, 1975)] cited by Susan Blackmore. When one finally turns to this original source, however, one finds that there is no mention whatever of encounters with deceased loved ones or a life review. (Stimulation of one or a few isolated, random images that may or may not be actual memories does not constitute, in my opinion, a “life review,” although it seems to be true, contrary to what Valarino and some others say about the life review, that more NDEs involve a Penfield-like revival

of one or a few images than a full-blown review of “everything that was experienced during mortal life” [p. 289].) Moreover, in the 1955 Penfield paper there was only a single, brief mention of what seems to resemble an OBE: One patient, on apparently one occasion, cried out (in fear, unlike most NDEs): “Oh God! I am leaving my body” (Penfield, 1955, p. 458). This is the *only* mention by Penfield in this paper of an experience remotely resembling an NDE feature. Until someone can provide references to other examples reported by Penfield, I have to insist that one single example of one feature that may not even be phenomenologically similar to what is reported in many NDEs hardly constitutes the basis for theories or conclusions or even speculations about the origin or nature of NDEs.

Ring complains that the cardiologist Maurice Rawlings has based his conclusions on

one case; he shows the same man over and over again. It is not clear how representative it is of the whole of people who report NDEs. The problem with Rawlings is that he has particular religious views that certainly influence his position. There has never been an independent replication of this work. . . . He may be right, but we have to wait for an independent investigator to come up with findings such as he reported. (p. 115)

This assessment captures some of the reasons for my dissatisfaction with this book. Valarino’s objectives seem much more evangelical than scientific. She believes that “by listening to the near-death experiencers, the pieces of life’s puzzle begin slowly but surely falling into place. Things take on their proper perspective, true values are revealed, and the meaning of life is implicitly understood” (p. 15). Her zeal too frequently results in blatantly leading questions to her interviewees, as when she asks Girard such questions about his NDE as “Do you think you have been transformed by this experience?” (p. 62), “Has your NDE changed your relationship to church? Do you now consider it to be more like an intermediary?” (p. 62), or “What do you think about the *fact* that the psychic abilities of those who have an NDE seem to increase *considerably* following this experience?” (p. 65; my emphasis). Similarly, Ring believes that people experiencing an NDE “have access to total knowledge” (p. 93); the NDE is “a revelation that occurs at the moment of death” (p. 117). Moreover, the NDE is not simply a personally meaningful experience; it is “a mass phenomenon [with] a lot of implications for planetary transformation” (p. 148), as well as evidence of “a higher orchestration . . . on the part of what I would call a planetary intelligence” concerned about the destruction of the earth (pp. 95, 96). Like

Rawlings (and like Chauchard and Vernet in this book), Valarino and Ring seem driven more by faith than wide observation.

I have gone on at some length in criticizing this book, not to single out Valarino or her interviewees particularly, but to plead for some restraint and caution among all those who write or speak about NDEs—scientists, popular writers, the media, and experiencers—and who go beyond the boundaries of what we currently know about this phenomenon in general and perpetuate what I can only characterize as myths and exaggerations. The reality of NDEs is far more complicated than the simplistic characterization of them as, say, universal revelations of those who were resuscitated after being clinically or “brain” dead. In my opinion, NDEs are fascinating enough, in all their complexity, and we should be eager to understand them with their entire range of precipitating conditions, differing makeup of features, and wide variety of aftereffects, as well as in the broader context of other experiences that resemble them in one or more ways. There are some interesting and provocative ideas expressed in this book. I found, for example, the speculations by Vincent and Regis Dutheil about superluminal particles (that is, hypothetical particles that travel faster than the speed of light) and their implications for theories of consciousness and matter to be intriguing. (On the other hand, I am also aware that I cannot be as critical about these discussions as I can about much of the rest of the book, because I know far less about physics than about NDEs, and no references to research supporting these speculations were provided.) The shortcomings of the book, however, far outweigh its merits. I can therefore recommend it only to people who already know a great deal about NDEs and can recognize that many of the ideas presented here as facts are not, but who are looking for stimuli for their own speculative musings about NDEs, consciousness, or death.

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