

A Tricky Threshold and a New Paradigm: Where Next for Near-Death Studies?

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Abstract: This paper explores a number of key areas within the study of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) in which little or no progress has been made in over four decades of research. Part I isolates several of these areas and proposes that the nature of NDEs themselves has not been fully understood and that they belong to a cluster of related phenomena that resist investigation in previously accepted, 'conventional' ways. Building on these observations, Part II proposes a 'new paradigm' for the study of NDEs. Beginning with the foundational observation that they are quintessentially liminal phenomena, it re-casts the Near-Death Experiencer (NDEr) as a 'Hermetic Voyager' and proposes that understanding the NDE as a 'trickster phenomenon' represents a useful avenue along which more fruitful research might advance in the future.

Key Words: Near-Death Experience, Trickster, Liminal

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The Problem of Progress

This paper falls structurally and thematically into two parts. Part I will proceed from the assertion - which it will also justify – that over four decades of research into Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) has led to little or no progress in the understanding of a significant number of key aspects of such experiences, including, pre-eminently, the question of whether anything actually ‘leaves’ the body during them. In attempting to explain why lack of progress has left such significant gaps in our knowledge, Part II will seek to show that the very nature of NDEs themselves has been a fundamental obstacle to understanding them and that only a fundamental shift in our apprehension of what NDEs are – and consequently how best to study them – will allow research to move forward. As its central concern, Part II will set out a ‘new paradigm’ for the understanding of Near-Death Experiences and it will propose that this paradigm be recognised, explored, and perhaps expanded within future NDE ‘debates’. It will assert that NDEs belong to a cluster of related phenomena that resist investigation in the previously accepted ways in which NDE research has typically proceeded and it will also seek to explain why this might be. It will also suggest avenues along which more fruitful NDE research might advance in the future but it will do this cautiously: not least because of its recognition of the deeply problematical nature of the phenomena with which it has dealt.

Part I: A Tricky Threshold

An Unsettling Agenda

I recognise at the outset that this agenda might well appear deeply unsettling: not least to those who have laboured for decades within the field of ‘Near-Death Studies’ and who might reasonably think themselves entitled to claim that they have made – specifically academic - progress. To them and to those who have followed their work closely I would wish to make it very clear that I am certainly *not* claiming that we have learned *nothing*. On the contrary, in some respects – such as whether or not Near-Death Experiences are reported cross-culturally - we have learned quite a lot. But even a cursory glance at what we now know forty-plus years since Raymond

Moody coined the term 'Near-Death Experience' in 1975 reveals an unsettlingly large number of issues within the field of Near-Death Studies which remain unresolved. There follows a list of four key and still unresolved questions around which significant uncertainty remains and where such lack of progress suggests that a new paradigm might be called for. Taken together they represent what might be called a 'tricky threshold'; representing, as they do, component parts of a wider border to understanding that NDE research has yet to cross.

(i) *Why is it that not all clinically dead and resuscitated persons report Near-Death Experiences?*

The best prospective studies have suggested that approximately 18% of resuscitated persons report some recollection of NDEs of varying degrees of complexity but we have yet to understand what makes these cases different from the other 82% in which no memory of *any* experience is reported (Van Lommel 2007: 142). Could it be because these persons had some kind of experience but simply failed to remember it? This is initially appealing until the fragility of memory in such contexts is considered. Neuroscientists who have studied NDEs intensively have alleged that, given this fact, no recollection by *anybody* should be possible. But 18% of persons in the studies *have* reported such recollections. Thus the puzzle remains; unresolved.

(ii) *Who or what is the 'being of light'?*

The so-called 'being of light' is a typically vivid aspect of many Near Death Experiencers' (NDErs) testimonies and a significant number of NDE studies over the last four decades have sought to examine it and this has led, inevitably, to the question: who or what *is* the light? Could it be that everybody encounters the same light in some sort of 'transcendent realm' but interprets it differently; perhaps in accordance with their own cultural and/or linguistic expectations? This is initially appealing and appears to be philosophically cogent but is itself problematic, particularly given the existence of potential and plausible alternatives. Perhaps, for example, persons from within different traditions encounter beings from within their own traditions; all somehow 'clothed' in light. This, again, is at least potentially appealing, until it is recognised that not all light-encounters described in testimonies suggest that the light embodies any kind of identity. Perhaps, then, the whole experience is constructed by the dying brain, and the light is simply an aspect of this? This is an explanation frequently advanced from within neuroscience but it is one that presupposes that the phenomenon *is* purely a construct of brain processes – albeit highly unusual ones manifesting in extreme circumstances – and here again there is considerable dispute about the precise nature of the mechanisms and processes involved. We certainly remain very far from anything approaching an academic consensus surrounding the issue of what the light actually is. Perhaps it is time for a wholly new approach.

(iii) *Why have 'visions of the future' reported by some Near-Death Experiencers turned out to contain marked inaccuracies?*

By the mid-1980s a number of NDE researchers including Kenneth Ring and Margot Grey had uncovered a significant number of NDE testimonies in which experiencers claimed as part of their experiences to have undergone visions of their own futures and the future of humanity at large: a future in which the whole human race was

convulsed by earthquakes, volcanoes, food shortages, social unrest, disease, climate change and nuclear war, all followed by “a Golden Age in which people would live in love and harmony with each other and all of nature.” (Grey 1985: 133 Ring 1984: 193-219). Nuclear war was widely predicted by the end of the 1980s and when this did not occur sceptics quickly seized on these clearly wrong predictions as evidence that the whole phenomenon was simply hallucinatory or, worse, that fraudulent claims were being made: either by the NDErs themselves or by those who collected, purportedly analysed, and then published their testimonies. Whilst the sceptics’ dismissive approach to these unusual claims is readily understandable, we might well wonder if this was really all there was to it. Perhaps, mistaken as they obviously turned out to be, they were and are telling us something important after all: something that has been entirely overlooked by NDE researchers and sceptics alike. If so, perhaps it is time to revisit these ‘failed prediction’ aspects of NDEs for fresh clues as to what they might be telling us about the phenomenon as a whole.

(iv) *Why have we been unable to determine beyond reasonable doubt whether anything leaves the body during a Near-Death Experience?*

This is arguably the biggest unanswered question of all within the entire history of ‘Near-Death Studies’ and for this reason will be the one that this paper devotes most attention to. Whilst there have been numerous attempts over the last forty years or so to elicit veridical proof that at or near the point of death something leaves the body during an NDE such proof remains elusive.

Initially, however, it seemed only a matter of time until such proof was forthcoming. Just five years after the publication of Moody’s initial 1975 study *Life After Life* cardiologist Michael Sabom recognised the importance of attempting to check the details reported by NDErs during the out-of-body ‘phases’ of their Near-Death Experiences and he first presented his findings in his 1982 study *Recollections of Death*. Here, he described and analysed a small but potentially highly significant number of cases in which observations made by NDErs whilst apparently apart from their bodies were checked with actual recorded surgical procedures that were carried out upon them. He found impressive correlations, such as when one patient’s description of how ‘my head was covered and the rest of my body was draped with more than one sheet, separate sheets laid in layers’ was compared with the surgeon’s description that the body was ‘draped in the customary sterile fashion.’ Such correlations became even more impressive when he asked a control group of patients who had not had NDEs during their operations to *imagine* what their operations might have looked like. According to Sabom, these invariably contained mistakes such as the incorrect supposition that mouth-to-mouth resuscitation would be applied to patients to clear airways and incorrect estimates of how far their bodies ‘jumped’ from their beds during CPR. By contrast, claimed Sabom, NDErs’ descriptions of their procedures, allegedly garnered from out-of-body observations, contained no such errors (Sabom 1982: 34-5).

Several years later in a second major study of NDEs it was Sabom again who provided details of a case which continues to provoke much discussion and debate. The subject, a thirty-five year old musician named Pam Reynolds, was undergoing a then-new surgical technique nicknamed ‘standstill’ in which her body temperature was lowered to 60 degrees, her heartbeat and respiration deliberately stopped, and

all blood drained from her head. Thus rendered apparently clinically dead, she was then to have a life-threatening basilar artery aneurism removed from her brain. Following the successful procedure, Reynolds claimed that during her operation, at a point subsequently confirmed to be when the surgeon was about to drill through her head with a Midas Rex bone saw, she suddenly heard a sound:

It was a natural D. As I listened to the sound, I felt it was pulling me out of the top of my head. The further out of my body I got, the more clear the tone became. I had the impression it was like a road, a frequency that you go on...I remember seeing several things in the operating room when I was looking down. It was the most aware that I think that I have ever been in my entire life...I was metaphorically sitting on [the lead surgeon's] shoulder. It was not like normal vision. It was brighter and more focussed than normal vision...There was so much in the operating room that I didn't recognize, and so many people (Sabom 1998: 41).

What was particularly striking about this case was the description of the actual saw that the surgeon used to cut into her skull, a device that Reynolds claimed to have had no knowledge of before she identified it during her NDE:

The saw thing that I hated the sound of looked like an electric toothbrush and it had a dent in it, a groove at the top where the saw appeared to go into the handle, but it didn't...And the saw had interchangeable blades, too, but these blades were in what looked like a socket wrench case...I heard the saw crank up. I didn't see them use it on my head, but I think I heard it being used on something. It was humming at a relatively high pitch and then all of a sudden it went Brrrrrr! like that (Sabom 1998: 41).

At first Sabom was baffled by this account and particularly by the description of the surgical implement described in such detail by Reynolds. By his own admission he had to send away for a picture of the saw that was used during the procedure to check if it matched the description given. To his surprise, it did. But how to account for the accuracy of the description provided by a person apparently clinically dead when she claimed to have made her observations? The debate surrounding this case rumbles on, but it is clear that it stands amongst the most remarkable pieces of evidence suggestive of post-mortem survival that the last 40 years or so have produced.

Even more remarkable was a book published by researchers Kenneth Ring and Sharon Cooper at around the same time as Michael Sabom was presenting details of the Pam Reynolds case. Called *Mindsight*, it contained the even more striking claims that during the out-of-body phase of their Near-Death Experiences blind and congenitally blind persons temporarily gained the ability to see, an ability which left them again when they 're-entered' their bodies at the end of their NDEs (Ring and Cooper 1997).

As with the Pam Reynolds case, the cases presented in *Mindsight* sparked debate which is still ongoing. Some critics drew attention, for example, to the problems involved in supposing that congenitally blind persons suddenly given sight could identify what they were seeing. Studies of persons given their sight through conventional operative means have revealed post-operative difficulties that persisted for several years, with subjects simply unable to process the newly-restored impressions that they were suddenly receiving via their eyes. For Ring and Cooper, 'new theories and a new kind of science' are needed to explain their findings as

regards temporary restoration of sight to the blind, but not all critics have been so convinced (Fox 2003: 234).

'Hidden Object' Studies

What might convince critics of such claims? And what might settle the issue once and for all as to whether or not something actually leaves the body during an NDE? One possible avenue of research that has promised to counter the claims of critics of NDE research in the blind and sighted alike has recently taken place in various hospitals and is ongoing. This has involved the locating of objects inside Intensive Care Units visible only from certain vantage points and especially if persons were apart from their bodies and looking down. Located as part of prospective studies – which means, in effect, that everyone admitted to the ICU is interviewed to ascertain if anything happened to them, and not simply those subsequently claiming NDEs – these research endeavours have attracted widespread attention in recent years, although comparable studies go back to the 1980s.

In essence, an experiment is performed. Permission is granted from a hospital, distinctive signs or symbols are prepared, rigorous steps are taken to ensure that only the experimenter knows what and where they are and they are then located in ICUs in places likely to be seen by anybody 'hovering' above their beds and bodies. Everybody treated in the Unit is subsequently interviewed, where part of the questioning involves enquiries into what, if anything, was seen during an episode of apparent clinical death, should one have occurred. As a result of such studies, even if one respondent correctly identifies the sign or symbol, we are moved beyond reliance on mere anecdote and given, instead, firmer grounds upon which to draw the conclusion that at the point of death – or in a situation of life-threatening illness or trauma – something leaves the body with concomitant awareness and subsequent memory of the event.

Dutch and British Studies

Between 1998 and 2002 a large-scale prospective study of Near-Death Experiences was conducted at ten Dutch hospitals by a team of researchers led by cardiologist Pim van Lommel. At one hospital – in Arnhem – the top cover of the surgical lamp in the ICU was decorated with a hidden sign, invisible from ground level but clearly visible to anybody hovering near the ceiling. The sign – a cross, circle or square on a red, yellow, or blue background – was known by none of the attendant doctors or nurses. Despite the four year study producing some very startling NDEs, including one that provided strong anecdotal evidence of a veridical observation on a par with that of Pam Reynolds discussed above, not one patient correctly identified a hidden symbol. Van Lommel was forced to admit:

Unfortunately, no patients who were resuscitated in this room ever reported an out-of-body experience with perception. Because people are resuscitated everywhere – on the street, in the ambulance, in a CCU room, on the ward – we had estimated the chances of a hit to be relatively low. Still, one verified out-of-body experience would have been sufficient (Van Lommel 2010: 139).

A few years after Van Lommel's attempt, a British ICU nurse, Penny Sartori, received permission to undertake a five-year project to investigate the incidence and detail of NDEs in the unit where she worked. Like Van Lommel, Sartori wanted to determine if any component of any claimed NDE reported during the research was

veridical, and she attempted to do this by mounting symbols onto Day-Glo paper which were then laminated and placed on top of the cardiac monitor at each patient's bedside. As the monitors were approximately seven feet off the ground it would only be possible to identify the distinctive symbols from above, in an out-of-body state, and to ensure they were invisible from the ground Sartori constructed 'ridges' to be placed around each one. Initially, she encountered unexpected difficulties with the research, with nursing colleagues climbing up to view the symbols out of curiosity. Having overcome these initial hurdles, Sartori was then faced with the additional problem of a lack of NDEs. After the first year of the study she had interviewed a total of 243 patients with only two reporting an NDE and two reporting an OBE. There was, however, a much higher incidence of NDEs in her much smaller sample of cardiac arrest survivors (39) and putting these together with claims of NDEs from persons with different medical conditions she ended up with 15 NDEs and eight OBEs after five years.

As with Van Lommel, however, no patient correctly identified a symbol. Attempting to account for this, Sartori remarked:

Some of the patients did not rise high enough out of their body, some moved to positions in the room opposite to where the symbols were situated and two of the patients were so concerned with what was going on around their body that they were not looking on top of cardiac monitors for hidden symbols! One patient was so convinced of his experience that he remarked that if he knew there was a hidden symbol he would have looked at it and told me what it was (Sartori 2014: 133).

The recent studies of Sartori and Van Lommel take their place alongside other, similar, studies, in which experimental attempts to derive veridical NDE observations have similarly failed to provide the evidence that would settle the matter of whether anything leaves the body during an NDE once and for all. These have failed, it has been claimed, either because nobody during the study was able to correctly identify the hidden symbols, or because nobody within the course of the study reported an NDE with the out-of-body component. As things currently stand, therefore, not a single correct observation of a hidden sign or symbol has been reported by anybody during an NDE within any experiment conducted as part of any prospective study. We are left, therefore, with the anecdotal evidence as provided by Sabom, Ring, and others as our best evidence for supposing that something really does leave the body during these experiences.

Hits and Misses

Yet there are problems with this anecdotal evidence as well, and one remark made by Penny Sartori is of particular note at this point. Writing of her experiment to find veridical evidence of out-of-body perceptions during NDEs, she notes that one patient who reported an NDE in which she accurately described events that occurred in the operating theatre – but not any of the symbols – made *incorrect* observations also: specifically, of a piece of jewellery pinned to her hospital gown. This was simply incorrect, Sartori asserts, as no jewellery is allowed into any operating room and strict checks are undertaken to ensure that this instruction is complied with. She suggests that the drugs given to this patient might have led to this misperception, which might therefore have simply been hallucinated by the patient (Sartori 2014: 133-4). Readers generally unfamiliar with the literature on NDEs might be forgiven for not realising that this incorrect description of events given within NDEs'

testimonies is actually rather common. In focussing on what they get right, discussion often omits to include what they get wrong.

In research that has drawn much discussion and debate – not least in the pages of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (JN-DS) - Keith Augustine has made much of these incorrect observations and he cites several testimonies similar to that presented by Sartori and already considered, above. One involved a case collected during the 'Evergreen Study' conducted at Evergreen State College in Washington and concerned a woman who had a ruptured Fallopian tube. Describing her observations whilst apparently apart from her physical body she described how:

I saw this little table over the operating table. You know, those little round trays like in a dental office where they have their instruments and all? I saw a little tray like that with a letter on it addressed (from a relative by marriage she had not met) (Augustine 2003: 2).

Remarking that there was, in fact, neither a letter nor such a round table in the operating room, Augustine concludes that this is further evidence that the experience was hallucinated and that audible 'cues' in the operating theatre provided the input from which the hallucinated scenario was constructed. Another case that Augustine cites is taken from the research of Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick and involved an NDE that occurred during World War Two when a soldier was attacked by aerial bombers. In this instance, despite seeing himself on the ground from a clear vantage point apparently above his physical body he completely failed to observe two Sudanese persons who were plainly lying beside him in what should have been full view to anyone 'hovering' above. Only when back in his normal physical surroundings did he see them and it was at this point that he also realised that a Bren gunner who had been beside him had disappeared: something else that he had failed to register whilst apparently out-of-body. Augustine has made much of these and other cases he has collected in which persons make observations whilst outside of themselves which later turn out to be wrong, and this has, for him, helped to build a case for seeing NDEs as essentially hallucinatory (Augustine 2003:2).

Augustine's sceptical view is understandable. Yet it fails to explain what the anecdotal evidence examined above at least *implies*: that for all the things they may get wrong NDErs also make at least some observations that appear to be remarkably correct. How, then, might we account for this curious combination of 'hits' and 'misses'?

Important to note at this point is that this 'mix' is very reminiscent of what is frequently reported in parapsychological literature generally. Mediums, for example, often deliver readings in which apparently – and at times startlingly – correct information about sitters is mixed with rather basic errors. Whilst sceptics simply explain this away in terms of simple fraud or by 'cold readings' of individuals by the mediums it is hard to invoke this explanation in the case of NDEs. It seems that any attempt to solve this as yet unexplained puzzle must take the form of some kind of new paradigm which at the very least makes sense of this curious mix of both the 'hits' and the 'misses'. Perhaps, in turn, such a paradigm might even enable us to make progress in some of the other areas within the study of NDEs where, hitherto, progress has not been forthcoming. The remainder of this paper will be taken up with an attempt to produce such a paradigm: one which might offer answers to some of the as-yet unanswered questions that we have so far considered.

Part II: A New Paradigm

Hermetic Voyaging

Whatever else NDEs might be, they are quintessentially *liminal* phenomena. They are 'betwixt and between' experiences; occurring, as they do, at the boundary of life and death. This at least suggests that there might be some utility in exploring whether any existing explorations of liminality might themselves shed some light on NDEs. In fact, one of these - Karl Kerényi's notion of 'Hermetic Voyaging' - is particularly useful, as we will now see. For Kerényi, whereas ordinary travelling is a matter of travelling physically in space and time from one point to another, a Hermetic Voyager has entered a boundary zone; a liminal space between other states including – but not confined to - states of *experience*. Carrying over Kerényi's notion, then, we might usefully re-cast the Near-Death Experiencer as a 'Hermetic Voyager' (Combs and Holland 1996: 83). Note, again: this is *not* physical movement. The NDEr is not going 'up' or 'away' as s/he travels. S/he is not going to some other 'vantage point' in space and/or time. The NDEr is entering a boundary zone of a different kind.

Seen in this way, the NDEr is in a situation analogous to that of a shamanic initiate or somebody embarking on a vision quest, and whilst there is nothing new in making this particular link, unpacking the etymology of the term 'Hermetic Voyager' itself yields some interesting results. As is well-known, a herm was a boundary-marker – typically a stone marker of various degrees of elaboration - and herms from antiquity are well-represented in archaeological finds. Etymologically, 'herm' is close to Hermes, and for obvious reasons, for Hermes was the boundary-crossing god of Greek mythology. So NDErs are boundary-crossers, and so, mythologically at least, is Hermes. In fact, the association is a doubly useful one because traditionally Hermes has also been known for his function as a *psychopomp*: the one who escorts the souls of the newly-dead to the next life. To pull him out of mythology and to 'concretize' him for a moment, we would expect them to 'journey' together: Hermes and the NDEr-seen-as-Hermetic Voyager. In fact, for Lewis Hyde, who has written extensively on this character as he is found both within mythology and elsewhere, Hermes does more than typically cross boundaries: he *creates* them also. Hyde writes: "[T]he boundary is where he will be found – sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms" (Hyde 1998: 8). For sure, the liminal 'space' between life and death is not the only such space that Hermes occupies. He is, rather, in "continual transit, marginal and liminal" (Hyde 1998: 7-8). Thus we find him at religious borders, at linguistic 'borders' – hence the term 'hermeneutics' – and at the border between the 'clean' and the 'unclean', the sacred and the profane, and the 'inner' and the 'outer'.

To seek to view the NDE in this way feels akin to throwing a pebble into the water – itself an exercise in boundary breaking and transition triggering – in order to see where the ripples go. As they spread outwards, what else do they touch, and what do they allow *us* to touch? The question is not easy to answer, because Hermes is a slippery figure to grasp. Hynes calls him "messy and metaphysically ambiguous";

precisely because he subverts the existing order so much (Hynes and Doty 1993: 21). But as the ripples move out they touch other characteristics of Hermes also: for this slippery, subversive, border-crossing, messy, paradoxical and ambiguous psychopomp is also traditionally – and, perhaps, unsurprisingly – seen as a *trickster*.

Trickster figures are found globally and cross-culturally. So, for example, Wakdjunkaga is the trickster of the Winnebago, Eshu-Elegba is the trickster god of the West African Yoruba, and Mercurius – described by Jung as “an evasive trickster” – is another example of the ‘type’, frequently found in association with alchemy (Hansen 2001: 42). Hermes, however, is the trickster *par excellence*, and the Homeric Hymn to Hermes provides a brilliant description of his characteristics. Devious, glib, cunning, subverting, lying and thieving almost from the moment he was born, he invents the lyre and steals his brother, Apollo’s, cattle, cleverly disguising both his own tracks and those of the animals. Tracked down by a furious Apollo, a confrontation ensues. Hermes, obviously guilty, nonetheless denies the crime – “I declare that I myself am not guilty, nor did I see anyone else stealing your cows, whatever cows are” – whilst his eyes twinkle and he wriggles his eyebrows up and down (Cashford 2003: 69). Apollo calls him a rogue and a trickster and picks him up, whereupon Hermes “let[s] off an omen, an insolent servant of the belly” and, in addition, sneezes in his face (Cashford 2003: 69-70). Finally reconciled with his brother by their father Zeus, things nonetheless turn out well for Hermes, who receives, from Apollo, a shining whip, cattle herds, a golden staff and a gift of prophesy. Comparing trickster *motifs* across cultures, George Hansen summarises them as including a propensity to engage in deceit, a concern to disrupt and violate taboos, uninhibited sexuality, possession of magical properties allowing contact with supernatural beings, and the tendency for tricksters to appear in marginal and liminal places where they cross boundaries and help others to do so: reminding us once again that Hermes has traditionally been seen as a psychopomp (Hansen 2001: 40-2).

Psi Hides

Keith Augustine’s paper, already alluded to at the end of Part I, in which he provided detail of incorrect observations by NDErs, provoked a flurry of discussions and counter-claims in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* several years ago. Responding to his piece, NDE researcher Bruce Greyson tentatively suggested that the ongoing failure by researchers to uncover veridical proof that during NDEs something actually leaves the physical body was itself suggestive of the fact that NDEs have “an inherent ‘trickster’ quality...that teases us with anecdotal evidence but hides from the light of controlled scientific research.” This might have prompted research along a potentially fruitful path but Greyson pulled back from fully embarking on it, asserting instead that “as intriguing as the trickster hypothesis may be to anthropologists, it is a dead-end for neuroscientists” and leaving it at that (Greyson 2007: 242-3). And here the situation remains. Might we, then, re-open the investigation into the NDE’s ‘trickster’ qualities in ways that have yet to be fully and properly explored? And might this, in turn, reinvigorate progress in our understanding of those as-yet unexplained aspects of NDEs as set out in Part I?

One possible starting-point might be to acknowledge that the elusive, ‘trickster’ aspect of NDEs is mirrored elsewhere in the study of paranormal claims generally and to try and draw some conclusions from this. Where Greyson, above, speaks of the elusive, ‘hiding’ aspects to the NDE, many other researchers have concurred in

writing of their own experiences of potentially related phenomena. So, for example, failure to elicit reliable, replicable, experimental confirmation that at the point of death something leaves the body – as has been the case in the research of van Lommel and Sartori, cited in Part I – would be of little or no surprise to a large number of researchers who have similarly failed to elicit reliable, replicable, experimental confirmation of a range of paranormal claims, including such things as ESP, telekinesis, precognition, and the ability to ‘remote view’ objects at a distance (itself very akin to what some NDErs have claimed to be able to do whilst in the ‘out-of-body’ phase of their experiences). These phenomena – and many others – fit under a heading currently referred to as ‘psi’, and, according to many researchers who have conducted research in these fields, psi ‘hides’ and has what James McClenon calls an “elusive quality” (McClenon 1994: 246). Indeed, McClenon has been joined by a host of other researchers in making this claim, prompting him to make the interesting assertion that “Almost all of the American, British, Chinese and Japanese psychical researchers I interviewed between 1978 and 1986 noted various elusive features” (McClenon 1994: 203).

This is by no means to suggest that there have been no studies or research programmes that have been successful in detecting phenomena such as ESP¹. It is widely acknowledged, however, that successful results are at best sporadic, forcing George Hansen – who worked in parapsychology laboratories for eight years, including three years at the J.B Rhine Institute for Parapsychology in Durham, North Carolina - to conclude that “psi doesn’t happen all the time” and is, in fact, “rather rare” (Hansen 2001: 309). McClenon draws additional attention to the fact that such phenomena seem inhibited by experimental attempts to ‘capture’ them, writing that they “have an elusive quality [which] cannot withstand close scrutiny”, and that as a result they “elicit scepticism as well as faith” (McClenon 1994: 10). Like Hansen, he bases this assertion on both laboratory and field experiments and gives some detailed information on his own participation in the latter as justification for this. More recently, this recognition of the elusive and ambiguous nature of certain types of psi and psi-related phenomena has been made by Jeffrey Kripal².

One response to all of this might be to say that those claiming psi-related abilities are simply frauds unable to reproduce the phenomena under controlled conditions. After all, as we have already had cause to note, most researchers are in agreement that analytical sophistication and tight protocols within things like ESP experiments tend to *reduce* the positive results that might otherwise be expected. McClenon remarks that such sophistication seems to reduce paranormal results whilst ‘loose’ demonstrations elicit psi more frequently: such as when laboratory equipment breaks down or where procedural mistakes are made. Sir Alister Hardy’s own failed attempt

¹ On the contrary, there have been several. George Hansen, for example, points to “a number of successful experiments” at a number of “successful centres” including J.B Rhine’s laboratory both at Duke University and the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, research conducted at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, and work done by the Psychophysical Research Laboratories together with government-sponsored programmes which have allegedly detected psi and psi-related phenomena such as remote viewing. On this, see Hansen 2001: 194-9.

² As part of his plea and programme for a new paradigm for the understanding of a range of psi and psi-related phenomena in Strieber, W. and J. Kripal *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained*, New York, Tarcher/Penguin, 2016.

to elicit experimental proof of ESP during his carefully-devised and tightly-controlled 1967 Caxton Hall experiments gives support to this view (Hardy and Harvie 1973:). And it has to be admitted that, historically, the whole area has been rife with fraud: on the part of both those claiming paranormal powers and on the part of some researchers claiming remarkable and 'above chance' results too.

However, we cannot easily apply these criticisms to NDEs, where no actual powers or abilities are being claimed *per se*, and where experimental confirmation of NDEs' out-of-body observations has yet to be forthcoming from *any* researcher. Of course, within this context, *other* explanations might be given for why, say, van Lommel's and Sartori's experiments yielded no veridical proof of out-of-body observations. We have already seen how audible 'cues' within intensive care units have been invoked as explanations of *both* correct *and* incorrect observations on the part of NDEs . Fallibility of their recall of what happened during their life-threatening episodes has also been invoked. But in the light of what Part II of this paper has so far been uncovering, another possibility presents itself. This is that *NDEs share the same elusive and 'tricksterish' quality that psi phenomena display as regards their failure to embody or provide absolute 'proof' of non-physical reality or realities*. We might even go further and say that the same 'mechanism' that provides 'tantalising' evidence but – somehow - precludes the finding of absolute proof within psi contexts might be at work within the NDE context also. This is yet to be fully explored. But as we have already had cause to note, it is clear that psi 'hides'; and also, it would seem, does that one, single, experimentally verified case that would provide proof that during NDEs something leaves the physical body. Had they been aware of the elusive nature of proof within psi-related contexts – and the closeness of their own endeavours to these - van Lommel, Sartori and others engaged in 'hidden object' experiments with NDEs might not have found it quite so noteworthy that their own research failed to yield the results that they were presumably seeking. In fact, it may even be speculated that the very sophistication of the experiments they devised precluded the production of the results they were looking for. For this, too, is strongly indicated from within experimental research designed to detect the existence of psi.

The NDE as a 'Trickster Phenomenon'

Part II of this paper has led at this point to an interesting 'cluster' of observations. They are related and worth briefly summarising before we proceed. Firstly, re-casting the NDEr as a 'Hermetic Voyager' creates a new context for understanding NDEs. Specifically, it allows us to explore the phenomenon afresh as a liminal phenomenon: with all that this implies. Once we locate NDEs within this context we recognise that there is an inherent instability and unpredictability within such 'places'. Here, for example, we find the trickster, variously represented within cultures and mythologies cross-culturally but combined – indeed, fulfilling the same function as – the psychopomp within mythologies such as those to do with Hermes the boundary-crosser. Recognition that there may be 'trickster elements' within NDEs and NDE testimonies helps to explain a lot. It explains, for example, certain 'hiding', 'elusive' and 'irrational' aspects of them, and thus helps to underline their similarity to psi phenomena generally. It also helps explain the curious mix of 'hits' and 'misses' within some well-known NDE testimonies. In addition, it goes a considerable way towards helping explain why experimental confirmation of out-of-body aspects of NDEs' testimonies is still to be forthcoming: despite over four decades of research.

To this point has our 'new paradigm' led. Where might it take us from here?

The God with Many Faces

As Part I made clear, the lack of proof that at or near the point of death something leaves the body is not the only area where progress in our understanding of NDEs is lacking. One other area concerns the identity of the so-called 'being of light' that many NDErs encounter at a pivotal part of their experiences. It has long been acknowledged that not everybody identifies the light in the same way. Back at the very beginning of research into NDEs, for example, Raymond Moody wrote that:

[W]hile the...description of the being of light is utterly invariable, the identification of the being varies from individual to individual and seems to be largely a function of the religious background, training, or beliefs of the person involved. Thus, most of those who are Christians in training or belief identify the light as Christ and sometimes draw Biblical parallels in support of their interpretation. A Jewish man and woman identified the light as an 'angel'. It was clear, though, in both cases that the subjects did not mean to imply that the being had wings, played a harp, or even had a human shape or appearance. There was only the light (Moody 1975: 59).

This is an odd and rather loose set of assertions. How, for example, can any description be said to be "utterly invariable" when the identification of the being varies so widely? Is not identification part and parcel of what is being described? Later, Moody would return to bring a little more clarity to his position, stating that "though the description of the being of light is invariable, the identity ascribed to it changes, apparently as a function of the religious background of the individual (Moody 1975: 140). *Implied*, here, is that some sort of 'common core' to the light-encounter exists but one which is, somehow, interpretatively 'clothed' in accordance with the individual's religious background. It is odd why this conclusion – shared by very many subsequent NDE researchers – can be stated so boldly. For one thing, there is no attempt to suggest the mechanism by which the core comes to be 'cloaked' in this way. Is it some sort of projection? A product of language? A post-experiential interpretive re-casting of the experience as part of any subsequent attempt(s) to narrate it within testimony? We are not told. Further, there is no consideration of alternative ways of accounting for the multiple identifications. Within the philosophy of religion, for example, constructivists such as Steven Katz, George Lindbeck and Don Cupitt would wish to contest the view that any sort of 'core' is possible and would, instead, view the entire experience as a product of language-created expectation. How does Moody know whether any such position is less desirable than his own? We do not know because alternative positions are simply not explored, and whilst 'complex hallucination' might be the 'fallback position' of sceptical neuroscientists keen to explain the whole experience in terms of brain processes still poorly or incompletely understood, the new paradigm being proposed in this paper suggests an intriguing alternative.

In his study of tricksters Lewis Hyde deploys the word *polytropic* to describe a chief trickster characteristic. This word can lend itself to many aspects of such characters. It may, for example, be translated as 'wily' or 'much travelled'. But there is another sense in which it serves as a useful descriptor for tricksters generally, and this is well summed-up by Hyde, again, when he writes that the trickster can "encrypt his own image, distort it, cover it up", and that the trickster is, essentially, a shape-shifter (Hyde 1998: 51). In similar vein, William J. Hynes writes that "The trickster is the master of metamorphosis" and that "As shape-shifter, the trickster can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception...Relatively major shape-

shifting may involve the alteration of the physical form of the trickster's body" (Hynes and Doty 1993: 36-7). Hyde and Hynes make these assertions on the basis of a detailed and comprehensive overview of trickster characteristics within a range of cultures and contexts. Hynes, for example, cites 'Shape Shifter' as one of a number of trickster 'features' within what he calls a 'heuristic guide' to them. As examples to justify his position he cites Hermes' changing his form to that of mist in order to slip through a keyhole to protest his innocence to Apollo, the Navaho Coyote who shifts his form to that of a dish and a tree in order to capture food and birds respectively, and the Winnebago trickster who shape shifts between numerous animal shapes and changes from human male to female in order to deceive a chief's son into marriage (Hynes and Doty 1993: 37). For Hyde, the shape shifting nature of tricksters raises the intriguing question of whether behind his³ many 'masks' there is an actual 'original' face at all. He poses the question thus: "If the Norse trickster, Loki, can appear as a bird, a flea, a horse, and a fire, then who is the real Loki? If Raven can shed his raven cloak and become a cedar leaf, who is the real Raven? It is our habit to imagine a true self behind the shifting images, but it is sometimes difficult to know if that self is really there, or just the product of our imaginings" (Hyde 1998: 53). Later, he asserts that even attempts to discern the trickster's ends or purposes is of no help in establishing his 'real' face (Hyde 1998: 54).

Recognising the shape-shifting nature of the trickster feeds usefully into this paper's 'new paradigm' attempt to explore the NDE as a trickster phenomenon. Firstly, it suggests a genuine alternative to the 'cloaked core' hypothesis much favoured by many NDE researchers by asserting that the multiple identification of the light by NDErs is a result of the inherently shape-shifting nature of this aspect of their experience. It should be noted at this point that the argument being advanced is *not* simply that the 'being of light' is the trickster 'part' of the experience. Instead, what is being proposed is that the *whole* phenomenon, including out-of-body 'observations' and the encounter with the being of light – together with other elements of the NDE, as we shall see – is some sort of trickster episode. We will return to this shortly. Secondly, we are returned again to something that we have already had cause to note: NDEs have a deceiving, tricksterish quality to them. All is not as it seems. Attempts to explore them objectively as scientists may wish to study them may once again fail because of their slippery, shifting, amorphous nature. The NDE is once again akin to psi phenomena in this respect. Something very odd is occurring: something, perhaps, that is best characterised in terms of the actions of a *being* or the activation of an archetype, as problematic as these options may be to express or to comprehend.

Defective Divination

That the NDE can be usefully interpreted as a liminal, trickster, phenomenon may shed light on another unanswered question outlined in Part I: the problem of the number of failed and incorrect prophesies made by NDErs and collected by researchers such as Kenneth Ring and Margot Grey during their research in the 1980s. As Part I of this paper noted, Ring and Grey presented at around this time a number of experiences in which NDErs claimed to have been given visions of the future during their experiences which subsequently turned out to be false. What should be noted at this point, however – and this may come as no surprise, given

³ I write 'he' because tricksters are almost invariably male.

what Part II has been uncovering – is that some NDErs claimed prophesies of future events received during their NDEs that later turned out to be *true*. To be sure, these did not concern global events. They did, however, involve ‘visions’ of NDErs future *personal* circumstances which later turned out to be uncannily accurate. For example: one NDEr whose experience took place during childbirth claimed to have been shown by ‘beings’ a vision in which she correctly saw how her family would look twenty two years later together with the town in which she would later live. Another respondent whose experience took place when he was a ten year old boy was ‘shown’ in another vision a correct prediction of what age he would be when he married, the number of children he would have, and a kind of forced air heater that did not exist in England at the time of his NDE but which he later turned out to own in his house. We are returned yet again to the odd combination of hits and misses which we have already discussed, which becomes all the more interesting when it is noted that some of the visions of personal future circumstances themselves contained *inaccuracies*. The ten year-old boy’s vision, for example, whilst correctly revealing the number of children he would later have, included the detail that he would have a boy and a girl, when in reality both of his children turned out to be girls (Ring 1984: 184-7).

Does the ‘trickster hypothesis’ help to shed any light on this by-now familiar combination of things both right and wrong? It is interesting in this regard to note that at the end of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes Apollo gives to Hermes, amongst other things, a kind of minor ‘oracle’: the ‘Bee Maidens’. What is particularly striking about this divinatory gift is its defective and sometimes deceiving nature. As Apollo says to Hermes in one of the Hymn’s climactic passages: “From their home [the Bee Maidens] fly, now here, now there, feeding on honeycomb and bringing all things to pass. And when they have eaten of the golden honey they are inspired and want to speak the truth graciously. But if they are deprived of the sweet food of the gods they tell you lies, swarming to and fro among one another. These, then, I give you. Inquire of them sincerely and delight your heart” (Cashford 2003: 83-4).

This passage is fascinating on a number of levels. For one thing, it suggests that the writer was aware of the combination of hits and misses in the information given by this oracle: and, perhaps, by oracles generally. For another, it underscores an important observation: the association of bees with oracles. However might this have come about? Any attempt to answer this question would take us well beyond the scope of this paper but one thing is of note, here, and that is the well-established – but little known - association of *buzzing* with oracles, altered states, and Near-Death Experiences. As is well known, for example, NDEs often commence with a buzzing sound. Moody himself isolated this characteristic early on and included it in his earliest NDE model in *Life After Life*, writing:

In many cases, various unusual auditory sensations are reported to occur at or near death. Sometimes these are extremely unpleasant. A man who “died” for twenty minutes during an abdominal operation describes “a really bad buzzing noise coming from inside my head. It made me very uncomfortable...I’ll never forget that noise.” Another woman tells how as she lost consciousness she heard “a loud ringing. It could be described as a buzzing. And I was in a sort of whirling state” (Moody 1975: 29-30).

That a buzzing is not the only noise that NDErs hear is clear from the literature. But a specifically buzzing noise is very frequently reported, and it is worth recalling at this

point Pam Reynolds' celebrated NDE case already discussed in Part I. It seems clear from her testimony that she associated the "humming at a relatively high pitch" with the Midas Rex bone saw that was used on her as part of her operation. Elsewhere in her testimony, however, the association is less clear. For example, she also stated that "I felt it was pulling me out of the top of my head. The further out of my body I got, the more clear the tone became. I had the impression it was like a road, a frequency that you go on..." (Sabom 1998: 41). That the sound marked the commencement of her experience overall seems clear from her testimony. What if it was not the bone saw that was the source of the noise but something *else*? It would certainly link her account with those of many other NDErs as well as a large number of other – perhaps related – boundary phenomena in which buzzing is heard. Terence and Dennis McKenna have reported it as occurring at the onset of a 'magic mushroom' trip, Rick Strassman has reported it as one of a series of 'entrance sounds' marking the onset of an altered state of consciousness triggered by dimethyltryptamine, anthropologist Michael Harner has reported it at the onset of a shamanic journey made with the help of ayahuasca, and a buzzing noise is also frequently reported as part of a range of other experiences, including kundalini 'awakenings', UFO encounters and Marian apparitions. In this latter regard, a testimony extract relating to a series of Marian apparitions includes the claim that "We would follow [the visionaries] and kneel in the middle of the field. Lucia would raise her hands and say, "You bade me come here, what do you wish of me?" And then could be heard a buzzing that seemed to be that of a bee." Of the 'sleeping' kundalini it is written that "her sweet murmur is like an indistinct hum of swarms of love-mad bees."⁴ At the very least this cluster of observations reminds us again that the NDE is best studied not as an isolated phenomenon but within the context of other oracular, 'boundary', experiences generally. And seen in this way, it is once again seen to have many features in common with them.

Conclusion

Part II of this paper has outlined a radically new approach to NDEs as part of its programme to answer the questions that Part I raised. It has proposed that viewing the NDE as a 'trickster phenomenon' can and does yield genuine insight into a number of hitherto unresolved NDE-related issues, including the curious mix of 'hits' and 'misses' within NDE testimonies and the inability of 'hidden object' research programmes to yield results proving that NDErs can accurately 'remote view' their surroundings during the 'out-of-body' phases of their experiences. It has also proposed that approaching the NDE in this way can help explain the shape-shifting nature of key NDE features such as the being of light and can also help researchers to approach the curious matter of the 'failed prophecies' disclosed to some NDErs during their experiences and uncovered by Ring, Grey and others. Part II's 'new paradigm' has also suggested that the onset of the NDE – which for many has included a curious buzzing – locates it as an 'oracular' phenomenon comparable to other such phenomena within a range of other contexts. But, like these, it is a defective and at times deceiving oracle, containing 'perceptions' both correct and incorrect, and redolent of that divinatory gift of Bee Maidens given by Apollo to Hermes in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. This observation returns us, yet again, to

⁴ On this, see Taylor, G. 2007. *Her Sweet Murmur*. <http://www.dailygrail.com/Essays/2010/4/Her-Sweet> Murmur (Accessed 1/6/16).

the curious similarity of the NDE to a range of other psi-related phenomena which are elusive, unpredictable, unstable, frequently unquantifiable and often deceiving: a claim with which Part II both started and finished.

Occurring in a liminal space and thus sharing a fundamental characteristic with tricksters and trickster-events generally, the NDE-viewed-as-a-trickster-phenomenon, in turn, raises profound questions to do with the nature of the reality encountered in these zones, and, by extension, the nature of reality encountered in *all* zones: liminal and non-liminal alike. In particular, it invites reflection on the question of what, exactly, the trickster, *is*. Is it possible, for example, that a character well-known to folklore and anthropology can 'step off' a page or out of an oral tradition and into actual experienced reality, in order to shape – even, perhaps, to *create* – the experiences of persons at or near the point of death? Whilst these questions take us way beyond the scope of this paper, it will at least be necessary to suggest some ways in which future research might answer them. This, in turn, might at the very least suggest new directions in which future NDE research within the context of this paper's proposed 'new paradigm' might proceed. To these final tasks we now turn.

'Unmasking' the Trickster

Comprehending who or what tricksters actually *are* has bedevilled trickster research in recent years, compounding any attempt to account for or to explain the precise nature of the relationship between the trickster on the one hand and psi and the NDE on the other. Mac Linscott Ricketts, for example, has described comprehension of the trickster figure as "one of [our] most perplexing problems" (Hynes and Doty 1993: 13). George Hansen has suggested that the trickster best be seen as an archetypal "personification of a constellation of abstract qualities that can appear in a variety of circumstances", particularly those characterised by liminality and anti-structure. He notes, further, that the "trickster archetype" is usually personified, and that individuals, small groups, larger social movements and even entire cultures can embody this constellation; noting, too, that the more of the properties that come together, the more the "archetype strengthens" (Hansen 2001: 28; 36). Seen in this way, the NDEr might be viewed as one in whom the trickster archetype has been 'activated', or one for whom the archetype's effects are experienced particularly strongly and vividly. But, unfortunately, Hansen provides little elaboration on how he is using 'archetype' in his definition, which muddies it considerably, making it difficult to grasp what, exactly, he is asserting. In addition, his is by no means the only definition of 'trickster'.

Elsewhere, for example, the trickster is confined to the realm of anthropology, mythology and folklore and treated correspondingly: as, for example, a 'tension-releasing' mechanism reinforcing the need for order (and/or showing the fragility of social and/or cultural order) or a primitive manifestation of something like a 'culture hero' (Hynes and Doty 1993: 13-32). In addition, we also have to at least reckon with the possibility - bizarre as it might be - that the trickster is an *actual* being, whose activities are particularly marked within just those liminal zones as are 'traversed' by the NDEr in his or her 'Hermetic Voyage' between life and death. The question of identity is clearly one for future research to explore, but it will inevitably be one that is compounded and made difficult by the trickster's own elusive, paradoxical, ambiguous and shape-shifting nature.

There is also the additional question of the relationship of the trickster to the NDE itself. To take just one aspect of this question: is the NDE, somehow, *shaped* or *created* by some sort of trickster ‘mechanism’ or being, or is the NDE *itself* the trickster; whether as an ‘activated archetype’ or as something else? In this vein, it will be recalled that Part II ‘stepped back’ from attempting to assert that any one feature within the NDE – such as the being of light – represented the appearing of the trickster within a wider scenario. One reason for this caution is the fact that the being is not the only aspect of the NDE to shift its shape. As is well-known in the literature, for example, the passage of darkness through which NDErs often travel *en route* to the light is also polytropic, being variously described as ‘space’, ‘outer space’, a ‘tunnel’, a ‘cave’, a ‘well’, a ‘valley’ and a ‘cylinder’, amongst many other descriptors (Fox 2003: 136-7).

On Forgetting

We have yet to consider one, final, question, raised in Part I. This is the question of why only a relatively small percentage of NDErs – 18% according to current ‘best’ research - recall their NDEs. If the NDE is some kind of ‘activated’ brain process, measurable – or, at least, comprehensible - by neuroscience, then presumably everybody at or near the point of death should undergo such an experience. However, as we have seen, this is not the case. Further, such an ‘explanation’ fails to take into account the fact that very many persons report NDEs and NDE-like episodes involving tunnels, lights, out-of-body experiences and so on when they are nowhere near death at all. This, in turn, raises questions as to whether the NDE is providing proof that the onset of death marks the ‘release’ of the soul, given that experiences involving alleged ‘soul journeyings’ occur when the onset of the dying process has not occurred. So we are left with the inadequacy of both explanations – that of neuroscience, and that of the ‘soul escaping’ hypothesis – to account for yet another set of key NDE features.

This suggests, as the rest of this paper has, that a whole new paradigm for the understanding of NDEs might be called for. And at this point it is interesting to note that Hynes makes clear in his heuristic guide to tricksters that the ability to make others forget is another trickster characteristic. In the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, for example, Hermes puts the dogs that guard Apollo’s cattle to sleep in order to enable him to steal them. Hynes notes that the greek for ‘stupour’ is lethargon, a combination of lethe (‘forgetfulness’) and argon (‘lazy’, or ‘slow’), asserting that “When Hermes is ordering the world on his own terms, he takes the watchdogs of the mind – acute, open-eyed, up all night – and numbs them with forgetfulness” (Hynes and Doty 1993: 78). Perhaps this observation helps explain why not all NDErs remember their experiences; returning us, as it does, to a recognition of the number of other trickster characteristics that are embedded in NDE claims. At the very least it adds to an expanding picture: one which Part II of this paper has sought to uncover.

But an even bigger picture may yet to be uncovered. So many of the research endeavours carried out since Raymond Moody coined the term ‘Near-Death Experience’ in 1975 have fallen into one of two camps: either that which has sought to demonstrate that NDEs might be yet another puzzle that neuroscience is well-placed to solve or that NDEs might be ‘proving’ some sort of body-soul dualism. Whilst the voices of those advancing these ‘rival’ contentions have not exclusively dominated the discourse, they have spoken loudly and have been very frequently

heard. The contention being made at the end of this conclusion is that this decades-old conversation might usefully and productively be joined by another voice; one worthy of being admitted to the debate. It will be for future researchers to determine if this admittance should be granted and the implications of its admittance explored further, or whether the old debates that have dominated the last four decades of NDE research are to be endlessly re-echoed in the coming decades as well.

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