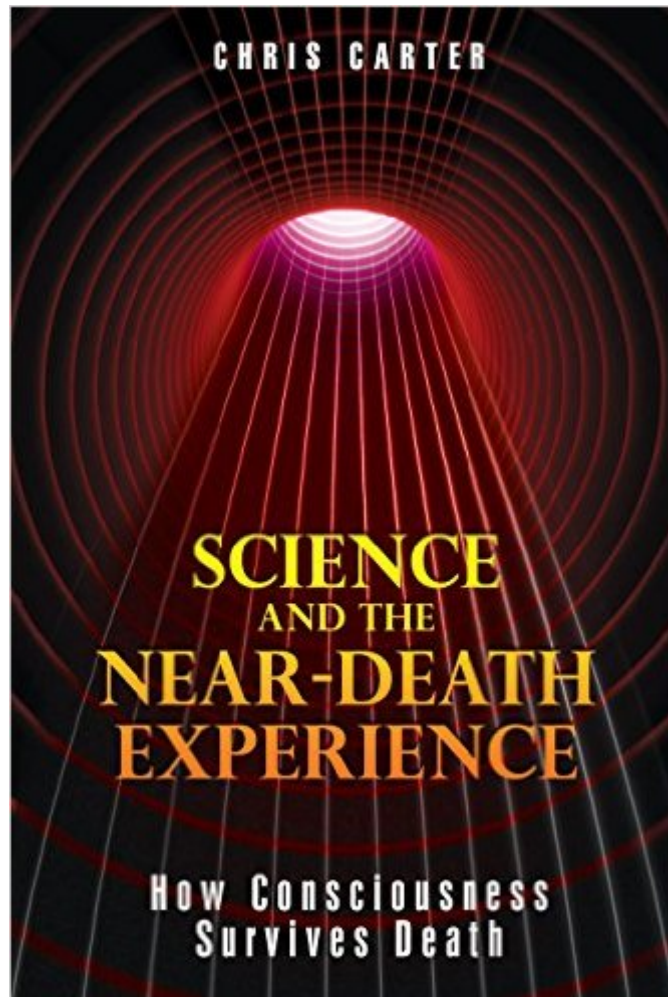


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Science And The Near-Death Experience: How Consciousness Survives Death



Synopsis

The scientific evidence for life after death • Explains why near-death experiences (NDEs) offer evidence of an afterlife and discredits the psychological and physiological explanations for them • Challenges materialist arguments against consciousness surviving death • Examines ancient and modern accounts of NDEs from around the world, including China, India, and many from tribal societies such as the Native American and the Maori

Predating all organized religion, the belief in an afterlife is fundamental to the human experience and dates back at least to the Neanderthals. By the mid-19th century, however, spurred by the progress of science, many people began to question the existence of an afterlife, and the doctrine of materialism--which believes that consciousness is a creation of the brain--began to spread. Now, using scientific evidence, Chris Carter challenges materialist arguments against consciousness surviving death and shows how near-death experiences (NDEs) may truly provide a glimpse of an awaiting afterlife. Using evidence from scientific studies, quantum mechanics, and consciousness research, Carter reveals how consciousness does not depend on the brain and may, in fact, survive the death of our bodies. Examining ancient and modern accounts of NDEs from around the world, including China, India, and tribal societies such as the Native American and the Maori, he explains how NDEs provide evidence of consciousness surviving the death of our bodies. He looks at the many psychological and physiological explanations for NDEs raised by skeptics--such as stress, birth memories, or oxygen starvation--and clearly shows why each of them fails to truly explain the NDE. Exploring the similarities between NDEs and visions experienced during actual death and the intersection of physics and consciousness, Carter uncovers the truth about mind, matter, and life after death.

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Customer Reviews

After reading Carter's masterfulÂ Science and Psychic Phenomena: The Fall of the House of Skeptics, I eagerly awaited the second book in his three-book series. Science and the Near-Death Experience builds a powerful and compelling case that the mind is not dependent on the brain and can exist independently of the brain. To build this case, Carter postpones discussion of near-death experiences (NDEs) and survival of death until after he has spent the first 100 pages discussing the fundamental question underlying these issues: Does consciousness exist independently of the brain? After an eye-opening, extremely lucid tour of neuroscience, quantum physics, memory storage, and theories of life (what animates and organizes living organisms), he concludes that empirical evidence and the known laws of science fully permit the filter theory. This says that the brain doesn't produce consciousness, but rather acts as a filter that allows through, as Aldous Huxley put it, only "a measly trickle" of consciousness. He then moves on to Part II: The Near-Death Experience. In my view, the strongest part of the book consists of several chapters in this part that explore and refute the proposed psychological, physiological, and pharmacological explanations of NDEs. These chapters are a real tour de force. He examines each of a dozen proposed explanations in detail, finding in each case that the phenomenon that supposedly explains NDEs (e.g., dissociated states, oxygen starvation, ketamine) is simply not a good match for the actual characteristics of NDEs. I particularly like how he dispatched Michael Persinger and his "God Helmet" and Susan Blackmore and her contrived, patchwork "dying brain" theory. By the time he is done, all of the proposed alternative explanations look so weak and flimsy that they appear to really rest on the underlying confidence that a materialist explanation simply must be true. Then come chapters on NDEs that contain veridical perceptions from an out-of-body perspective and NDEs in which those born blind experience sight. These appear to be direct refutations of the mind's dependence on the brain (drawing on Karl Popper's idea that science advances by refutations). In the end, the common equation of science with materialism comes out looking like an ideology, like its own kind of dogmatic faith. This deserves to become a landmark book in the survival debate. Carter has a real gift for presenting complex, technical issues in simple, layman's terms. And he has an even more impressive gift of total fearlessness in the face of prevailing dogma. He never flinches, yet he meets this dogma, which depends so heavily on ridicule, without ridicule of his own. His arguments have the feel of a Zen swordsman, dispassionate but deadly accurate. I am simply

glad that Carter is out there writing. His book shows that those who believe in survival do not have to apologize, be timid, or take refuge in the mystery of "faith." On strictly scientific grounds, they are in the stronger position. With more books like this one, our society may start slowly waking up to that fact, with all its immense implications.

CARTER HITS (ANOTHER) HOME RUN! Chris Carter is a man with a mission. An Oxford-trained philosopher who is firmly grounded in the physical sciences, he is well equipped for the task he has set himself -- to examine, in the course of three books, the evidence surrounding parapsychology and related subjects. This field, also called psi, rests on the premise that information may be acquired from, and may be inserted into, the environment without mediation by the physical senses. Many individuals have risen to the defense of parapsychology, but few have done so with the meticulous, full-throated enthusiasm that is Carter's m  tier. The first book in his trilogy, *Science and Psychic Phenomena: the Fall of the House of Skeptics*, established his credentials as a Rambo-like, one-man wrecking crew for the wearisome, perennial, often flimsy arguments of so-called skeptics -- "so-called" because their tactics often depart from healthy, open-minded skepticism, which is an invaluable factor in science; and because their objections frequently embody not skepticism but distortion, dissembling, bigotry, prejudice, and pseudoscientific dogmatism. As one such scientist sneered, "This [psi] is the sort of thing I would not believe in even if it existed." And as psi denouncer Ray Hyman, a psychologist, concedes, "The level of the debate [about psi] during the past 130 years has been an embarrassment for anyone who would like to believe that scholars and scientists adhere to standards of rationality and fair play." *Science and the Near-Death Experience: How Consciousness Survives Death*, the second book in Carter's trilogy, examines evidence suggesting that some aspect of human consciousness may survive the death of the physical body. Carter's focus is on the near-death experience, described in recent years by psychologists Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, and Erlendur Haraldsson; psychiatrists Bruce Greyson and Peter Fenwick, radiation oncologist Jeffrey Long, cardiologists Michael Sabom and Pim van Lommel, pediatrician Melvin Morse; researcher Karlis Osis, and others. Surveys reveal that around 13 million Americans have experienced near-death experiences, not including children. The essential components of the near-death experience are remarkably consistent in western cultures. They include a sense of peace and joy, an out-of-body sensation, entering a tunnel or darkness, encountering a light, meeting deceased individuals or guides, a life review, and encountering an unearthly realm. These features may be experienced in whole or part. On regaining consciousness and returning to daily life, NDEers typically experience a major shift in values, worldview, and a

sense of serenity and peace. The fear of death generally disappears, and life takes on a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. Why does Carter focus on NDEs following his initial book defending parapsychology? The reason is straightforward. Materialistic scientists reject psi because they deny that consciousness can operate outside the cranium, the body, and the present. All information, they maintain, must be mediated through the physical senses. Any evidence that consciousness can function independently of the physical brain is denied. NDEs pose a stern challenge to this view, because they suggest that when the brain is profoundly malfunctioning near the moment of death, cognizance and clarity actually increase and mental activity becomes more acute and refined. If consciousness is totally dependent on the brain, as materialists contend, this should not be possible. Carter cites Kelly et al, who describe this challenge to materialism in stark terms: "The central challenge of NDEs lies in asking how these complex states of consciousness, including vivid mentation, sensory perception, and memory, can occur under conditions in which current neurophysiological models of the production of mind by brain deem such states impossible. This conflict between current neuroscientific orthodoxy and the occurrence of NDEs under conditions of general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest is head-on, profound, and inescapable. In our opinion, no future scientific or philosophic discussion of the mind-brain problem can be fully responsible intellectually, without taking these challenging data into account." A book on NDEs, therefore, is a natural follow-up to Carter's initial book on parapsychology. Carter begins by examining the strongest arguments against the existence of an afterlife -- the conventional belief within science that consciousness cannot exist apart from the biological brain. He endorses the views of philosophers Ferdinand Schiller, Henri Bergson, and William James that the brain does not produce consciousness, but canalizes, confines, and limits the mind. The brain does so, these observers suggest, by restricting its focus of attention and by excluding factors irrelevant for the organism's survival and reproduction. Thus, Carter asserts, the brain exercises a permissive and a transmissive function for consciousness, but not a productive function, much like a television set modifies and transmits external signals, but does not make them. During the NDE experience, these constraints on consciousness are somehow loosened, and a fuller comprehension of reality becomes possible. As astronomer David Darling puts it, we are conscious not because of our brain, but in spite of it. Carter cites the view of Aldous Huxley who, in his book *The Doors of Perception*, elaborated on this view. Huxley famously described the brain as a "reducing valve" that screens out perceptions, memories, and thoughts that are not essential for survival and procreation. "According to such a theory," he said, "each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business at all costs is to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be

funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us stay alive on the surface of this particular planet." Carter selects the writings of the anti-psi philosopher Paul Edwards to illustrate the logical deficiencies of the materialist position. In so doing, Carter refers to the observations of neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, who said, after a lifetime of investigating the brain, "[T]he mind seems to act independently of the brain in the same sense that a programmer acts independently of his computer....In the end I conclude that there is no good evidence...that the brain alone can carry out the work that the mind does." Carter recruits the similar opinion of Nobel neurophysiologist Sir John Eccles. Carter concludes that Edwards' materialistic stance is "dogmatic prejudice against an empirical possibility that does not coincide with his materialistic faith." As Carter leads the reader through the contentions of the materialists, it becomes obvious that theirs is indeed a faith-based belief system. There is simply no direct evidence that anything material is capable of generating consciousness. As Rutgers University philosopher Jerry A. Fodor says, "Nobody has the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious. Nobody even knows what it would be like to have the slightest idea about how anything material could be conscious. So much for the philosophy of consciousness." And as the theoretical biologist and complex-systems theorist Stuart Kauffman puts it, "Nobody has the faintest idea what consciousness is.... I don't have any idea. Nor does anybody else, including the philosophers of mind." Nobel neurophysiologist Roger Sperry took a similar position, saying, "Those centermost processes of the brain with which consciousness is presumably associated are simply not understood. They are so far beyond our comprehension at present that no one I know of has been able even to imagine their nature." From modern physics, Nobelist Eugene Wigner agreed: "We have at present not even the vaguest idea how to connect the physio-chemical processes with the state of mind." And as contemporary physicist Nick Herbert states, "Science's biggest mystery is the nature of consciousness. It is not that we possess bad or imperfect theories of human awareness; we simply have no such theories at all. About all we know about consciousness is that it has something to do with the head, rather than the foot." In spite of caveats such as these, materialistic skeptics remain wedded to the notion that the brain makes mind, like the liver makes bile, and that anyone who dissents is a traitor to science. But as Carter demonstrates, it is, alas, much more likely the other way 'round. An alternative to the materialistic conviction that the brain makes consciousness is the concept that consciousness is fundamental, neither derived from, nor reducible to, anything more basic. Thus the philosopher and cognitive scientist Donald Hoffman, of the University of California-Irvine, states, "I believe that consciousness and its contents are all that exists. Space-time, matter, and fields never were the fundamental

denizens of the universe but have always been, from their beginning, among the humbler contents of consciousness, dependent on it for their very being. ...If this is right, if consciousness is fundamental, then we should not be surprised that, despite centuries of effort by the most brilliant of minds, there is as yet no physicalist theory of consciousness, no theory that explains how mindless matter or energy or fields could be, or cause, conscious experience." As Carter shows, the so-called skeptics deride the possibility that consciousness is fundamental as "absurd," which is Edwards' verdict. Yet where does the absurdity lie? No experiment has ever demonstrated the genesis of consciousness from matter. One might as well believe that rabbits emerge from magicians' hats. Yet this vaporous possibility, this neuromythology, has enchanted generations of gullible scientists, in spite of the fact that there is not a shred of direct evidence to support it. Carter takes the reader on a tour of quantum physics in order to contrast the role of consciousness in modern physical theory with its place in classical, mechanical physics. This chapter is exceptional in its sparkling clarity. He concludes that a quantum-mechanical model of the mind can explain several phenomena that are inexplicable by materialism, including the placebo effect, cognitive behavioral therapy, psychic abilities (psi), and NDEs. One of the most striking features of the NDE is the life review, in which detailed memories are recalled. This often occurs when the brain is functionally disabled, raising the possibility that memories may not be stored inside the brain. Carter examines this issue in detail, including the profound difficulty of scientists in pinpointing a specific site for memories in the brain. He invokes the view of British biologist Rupert Sheldrake: "There may be a ridiculously simple reason for these recurrent failures to find memory traces in brains: They may not exist. A search inside your TV set for traces of the programs you watched last week would be doomed to failure for the same reason: The set tunes in to TV transmissions but does not store them....But what about the fact that memories can be lost as a result of brain damage?...Think again of the TV analogy. Damage to some parts of the circuitry can lead to loss or distortion of the picture; damage to other parts can make the set lose the ability to produce sound; damage to the tuning circuit can lead to loss of the ability to receive one or more channels. But this does not prove that the pictures, sounds, and entire programs are stored inside the damaged components." Neither, says Carter, does damage to the brain with resultant memory loss prove that memories are stored in the brain. This view opens the door for the possibility of the survival of some aspect of consciousness following bodily death, and perhaps for the validity of NDEs as well. Again, Sheldrake:"[I]f the conscious self is not identical with the function of the brain, but rather interacts with the brain...then it is possible that the conscious self could continue...even after the death of the brain, and retain the ability to tune in to its own past states. Both the self and its memories could survive the death of the body."

Carter meets the perennial psychological and physiological objections to NDEs head-on. One of the most frequent is that these experiences are merely fantasy and wishful thinking. This hypothesis, says Carter, is simply not supported by the empirical data. Individuals sometimes report near-death experiences that actually conflict with their religious and personal expectations of death. There is no correlation between the occurrence of NDEs and the strength of religious belief, which would not be the case if NDEs were a result of fantasy and wishful thinking carried over from religious conviction. Moreover, people who have never heard of NDEs describe the same kinds of experiences as those who are familiar with these reports. And children too young to have received cultural and religious training about death report NDEs similar to those of adults. Thus, clinical psychiatrist and NDE researcher Bruce Greyson emphatically concludes, "There is absolutely no evidence that NDEers are fantasy-prone individuals." Skeptics often claim NDEs are evidence of dissociation and depersonalization, a defense mechanism employed in moments of great psychological stress. In such situations, a person may "check out" of their identification with the self in order to escape the threat they face. Yet this criticism of NDEs does not work, because people return from NDEs with reports that their sense of self was, and remains, fully intact. Carter systematically shreds other psychological hypotheses for NDEs -- that they are imaginative reconstructions, semiconscious perceptions, and memories of the birth process. What about physiological "explanations" of NDEs? One of the most frequent involves endorphins, the body's endogenous painkillers. Although endorphins might simulate the first stage of NDEs, which involves a sense of serenity and peace, the long duration of endorphin analgesia is at variance with the short duration of pain relief in NDEs, which disappears when the experience is over. Moreover, endorphins are not potent hallucinogens, and therefore could not account for the richly detailed visions, encounters, and life reviews of the NDE. Oxygen starvation? Confusion and disorientation occur during severe anoxia, which is wholly unlike the highly structured, visually detailed narratives of an NDE. Moreover, in one study NDEers had higher oxygen levels than patients in a control group who did not have an NDE experience. Temporal lobe seizures are often hypothesized as the basis for NDEs. Drawing on the brain stimulation studies of neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, Carter dismisses this "explanation" as inconsistent with empirical data: more neuromythology. Penfield's studies showed that electrical stimulation of the temporal lobe resulted in hallucinations that were made up from the patient's past, and which were not particularly important. These hallucinations simply do not resemble the content of the NDE experience -- "seeing God," encountering deceased friends and relatives, having a panoramic life review, experiencing a sense of peace and serenity, and so on. Carter reviews the research of cognitive neuroscientist Michael Persinger, who has championed the hypothesis of

temporal lobe dysfunction as the underlying mechanism of out-of-body experiences, and finds it wanting. Carter suggests that Persinger makes claims that are unjustified by his data, and asserts that his research was dealt a serious blow when a Swedish team was unable to replicate his findings, using equipment borrowed from his lab. Carter believes that, while temporal lobe seizures may produce feelings of fear, loneliness, and sadness, these bear no resemblance to the peace, joy and other typical features of the NDE. One of the most striking features of the debate over NDEs and psi in general is the vehemence of the critics toward these phenomena. Why the passion, which sometimes takes the form of insult and ad hominem attacks? The reason, I suggest, is that the entire materialistic paradigm regarding the nature of consciousness is at stake. If materialists were to concede that a single NDE is valid, the materialistic foundation for the mind-brain relationship would be in peril. The skeptics realize this, of course, and that is why they pursue a scorched-earth strategy of total denial of evidence such as Carter and others have richly documented. Their denial must be total, for if they conceded a single exception, this would constitute an acknowledgment that consciousness can manifest beyond the bounds of the brain and body, and their fiercely defended materialistic view of consciousness would collapse. In his excellent foreword to *Science and the Near-Death Experience*, philosopher Neal Grossman describes another reason behind the militant refusal to accept NDEs: "There is a message hidden in all this [NDE] research, and it is a message that successful academics do not wish to hear. The message is universal love. Every near-death experiencer is convinced that the purpose of life is to grow in our ability to give and receive love. And NDE researchers...have come to this same conclusion, but academic life is the opposite of loving. Both science and academia are organized around the same principles that structure the corporate world: success in one's career depends a little on talent, but mostly on competition, self-promotion, and so forth, that is, on personality traits that have little to do with curiosity, intelligence, or intellectual honesty, to say nothing of love. Those who have been most successful at this -- the ones who control the journals, decide who gets funding, decide who gets tenure -- hold power in science and academia because of personality qualities that are opposed to the message of universal love. They believe, and need to believe, that the purpose of life is to 'win,' to be successful and influential in their field of study. Many academics would be horrified to learn what all near-death experiencers have learned. A successful life is not measured by fame, prestige, wealth, or number of publications; it is measured by how we treat one another, by our ability to live according to the golden rule, and by growth in our ability to feel compassion for others....One of the reasons this research is resisted with exceptional fierceness is because the message of this research -- the message of universal love -- is threatening to the power structures that govern science and

academia." Carter's conclusion is fully warranted: "[S]urvival is both a theoretical and an empirical possibility. The statement that consciousness may survive the death of the brain is not self-contradictory, nor is it in conflict with any of the laws or facts of science as currently understood." And, "Throughout this book, we have seen that there is not a single good reason to doubt that these [NDE] experiences are in fact what they appear to be. If that is so, then the NDE is a sudden thrust into another world." Science and the Near-Death Experience is more than a splendid refutation of the overreaching of the pseudo-skeptics. It is a restoration of consciousness to the soul-like place it has occupied for most of our species' existence. The importance of this contribution can hardly be exaggerated. As Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in 1876, "Neither a person nor a nation can live without some higher idea. And there is only one higher idea on earth, and it is the idea of the immortality of the human soul, for all other 'higher' ideas of life by which humans might live derive from that idea alone." Novelist George Orwell agreed, saying, "The major problem of our time is the decay of belief in personal immortality." Psychologist C. G. Jung took the same view: "The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life." Throughout history, the fear of death and the terror of annihilation have caused more suffering for human beings than all the physical diseases combined. Chris Carter's bold book is an effective therapy for this most dreadful of all maladies.~ Larry Dossey, MD
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