

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage Unitarian
Universalist Theology and Spirituality

Copyright © 1993 Thomas W. Christopher, 1224 Elmwood #3E, Evanston IL 60202

Near Death Experiences

Susan Blackmore has looked for explanations of near-death experiences (NDE) ["Near-Death Experiences: In or Out of the Body?" *Skeptical Inquirer*, Fall 1991], which were first investigated by Raymond Moody. Here is her summary of Moody's typical NDE:

"A person hears himself pronounced dead. Then comes a loud buzzing or ringing noise and a long, dark tunnel. He can see his own body from a distance and watch what is happening. Soon he meets others and a 'being of light' who shows him a playback of events from his life and helps him to evaluate it. At some point he gets to a barrier and knows that he has to go back. Even though he feels joy, love, and peace there, he returns to his body and life. Later he tries to tell others; but they don't understand, and he soon gives up. Nevertheless the experience deeply affects him, especially his views about life and death."

She suggests that some of these experiences are directly the result of decreased oxygen supply to nerve cells, which can, strangely, both decrease and increase neural activity. Many nerve pulses are inhibitory; their decrease can cause an increase in other activity. The buzz-

ing can result from decreased inhibitory pulses. The passage through the tunnel comes first from loss of sensory stimulation, then loss of inhibitory signals which will cause cells to fire randomly. Since most nerves correspond to the center of the visual field, the "light" of random firing will spread from the center outwards. It is also known that stimulation of cells in the temporal lobe of the brain produces experiences like reliving past events.

She passes on the suggestions of other researchers that the trauma to the brain causes release of neural transmitters including endorphins, which produce feelings of joy and peace.

For some of the experiences, she proposes this theory: they are the natural result of our mental models of reality. She proposes that we have more than one model of reality available to our minds. One of these models will be chosen at a preconscious level to be experienced as Reality. The model chosen is the one that is most stable.

The model that has ourselves located within our bodies in the physical environment is continually being reinforced by our sensory experiences and so is the most stable and thus experienced as real. When sensory data are cut off, however, other models may be experienced as real.

Reality's an odd box,
Pitted, jagged, crude.
Theories all are even,
Convex, rounded, smooth.
Small ones fit but rattle;
Larger ones protrude.

When we remember ourselves walking into a room, we often see ourselves from a bird's-eye view, looking into the model from above and outside. When people look down upon themselves in a NDE, she suggests, they are fantasizing what is happening from auditory clues (the same as from radio drama) and taking the typical bird's-eye view. (She points out that hearing lasts longer than other senses.)

The sense of *reality* of the near-death experiences comes from the preconscious selection of the models as real, based on their (marginally) greater stability than the personality-within-physical-body model. Indeed, she suggests, the ineffability of some NDEs may come from the selection of a model of reality that doesn't include one-self, which is impossible to explain when all conscious models do include the self.

Those who look to NDEs for intimations of immortality will find little comfort in Blackmore, but she does invoke some religious insights. Blackmore's analysis of Near-Death Experiences tend to confirm the Buddhist view that reality is "illusion" -- though we would say "a model." It does *not*, however, confirm the New Age (or actually, New Thought Movement) idea that we create our reality and can consciously change it by changing our thoughts: the selection of a model of reality is not conscious, but

You may copy material from this viewsletter, but not for direct commercial advantage, in one of two ways: (1) You may copy the viewsletter in its entirety. (2) You may copy only text (but not the art) if you include the copyright notice and state it is "used by permission."

The Ontological Proof

All the proofs of God's existence have flaws in them. The *ontological* proof of God's existence is based on muddled use of language. In the ontological proof, we *define* God to be a perfect being, and proceed as follows:

- (1) Since existing is more perfect than not existing, anything perfect must exist.
 - (2) God is a perfect being.
- Therefore,
- (3) God exists.

We could quibble that, if everyday experience is any indication, nothing that exists is perfect and then redo the rest of the syllogism, but for the sake of the argument, let's accept (1).

Question: is the God referred to in (2) and (3) the Christian God? If so, it is a proper noun, and it can't be defined; its meaning is what it is the name of. You cannot assert God is perfect by definition, you must examine the Christian God and see if He is (assuming you can find Him). So, let "God" be a common noun. Now we should rewrite the syllogism more clearly:

- (4) Every perfect thing exists.
 - (5) A god is a perfect being.
- Therefore,
- (6) A god exists.

Here, strangely, the problem is what we mean by the indefinite article "a." In (5) it is used as a *universal quantifier*, meaning "every one of the zero or more." In (6) we intend it as an *existential quantifier*, meaning "one or more." Writing this out gives:

- (7) Every perfect thing exists.
 - (8) Every one of the zero or more gods is perfect.
- Therefore,
- (9) One or more gods exist.

Alas, logic does not permit going from (7) and (8) to (9).

The major problem with all such

proofs, however, is that they assume that God is a precisely defined concept, hence susceptible to logical proof, and that logic innately deals with the real world. Both are false. Any precisely defined concept of God is certain to be too limited for what we would wish to mean by God. Moreover, ever since the discovery of non-Euclidian geometries and abstract algebras, it has been clear that proofs deal only with symbol systems and cannot be assumed innately to model the real world.

Abhidharma

There are two kinds of Buddhist Abhidharma meditation corresponding to steps seven and eight of the eightfold path: right mindfulness and right absorption.

In right absorption, the Buddhist calms all thoughts and experiences directly the emptiness beneath consciousness.

In right mindfulness, the Buddhist calms him or herself with breathing exercises and contemplates life and experience. The breathing calms the Buddhist so that reality can be faced clearly and without anxiety.

Imagine a Buddhist in one of the Abhidharma meditations. She sits quietly, breaths slowly and deeply, she calms herself. Then she imagines herself aging: the wrinkling of her skin, the sagging of her flesh, the loss of teeth, the greying of hair, the loss of attractiveness. She envisions herself dead. She sees her corpse, bloating, turning purple, the flesh rotting from the bones. She sees the bones wear away.

She sees the earth itself burned away as the dying sun expands. The Universe itself she sees expanding and growing colder. She imagines the protons themselves are imper-

manent, and even the frozen chunks of matter eventually evaporate.

There is nothing left but the void.

She feels herself identifying not with her physical body and not with the things she builds, but with the void. And behind the half-smile she has placed upon her lips, she knows that this is but a step. It is better not to become attached to the void either.

For Reflection

Examine this summary of the messages conveyed by channelers [James E. Alcock, "Channeling: Brief History and Contemporary Context," *Skeptical Inquirer*, Summer, 1989].

"What do these eternal entities have to tell us now that they can so readily communicate with this world? Their basic message, which reflects well-established themes found in occult literature, is that we are spiritual and immortal beings in a universe that is essentially spiritual. We move through a series of embodied and disembodied lives until we eventually unite with God, and indeed, within each of us is some form of projection of God. By learning to contact that part of God within us, we can harness a force that will allow us to surmount our problems and find happiness and success. We create our own realities; and so if we want to be happy, we simply need to create a happy reality. There is no need for us to follow a guru, for we are gods, each one of us."

Plutarch wrote that the difference between a friend and a flatterer is that when you are wrong, a friend will tell you. Given this summary of their message, to what extent are the channelers friends and to what extent flatterers?