

Cartographies of the Soul: Challenges to Esotericism

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Abstract: This paper offers an overview of soul, first in terms of historical models as delineated by five distinct soul theories, then as a phenomenological account of soul as an experiential reality, followed by research in Near-Death Experiences (NDE). Finally, the paper offers a comparison of traditional historical accounts with NDE research in order to draw conclusions about the nature of soul in esoteric theory as seen from a contemporary perspective. What makes esotericism interesting is not its historicity nor the fact that past human beings had unique, unusual, or non-ordinary ideas or experiences, but rather that the gnosis evident in those traditions represents a fundamental human capacity for transformation and spiritual illumination. What makes esotericism meaningful is this capacity that we all have for greater awareness.

Keywords: soul, Near-Death Experiences, out of body, metaphysics, esotericism, phenomenology, ontology, afterlife, mediumship, paranormal

Cartographies de l'âme : les défis de l'ésotérisme

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Résumé

Cet article offre une vue d'ensemble de l'âme, d'abord en termes de modèles historiques tels que définis par cinq différentes théories de l'âme, puis comme un compte rendu phénoménologique de l'âme en tant que réalité expérimentale, suivi par une recherche sur les expériences de mort imminente (EMI). Enfin, l'article propose une comparaison entre les récits historiques traditionnels et la recherche sur les EMI, afin de tirer des conclusions sur la nature de l'âme dans la théorie ésotérique vue d'une perspective contemporaine. Ce qui rend l'ésotérisme intéressant n'est pas son historicité ni le fait que des êtres humains du passé aient eu des idées ou aient vécu des expériences uniques, inhabituelles ou non ordinaires, mais plutôt que la gnose évidente dans ces traditions représente une capacité humaine fondamentale de transformation et d'illumination spirituelle. Ce qui donne un sens à l'ésotérisme, c'est cette capacité que nous avons tous, de pouvoir faire évoluer notre conscience.

Mots clés : âme, mort imminente, sortie du corps, métaphysique, ésotérisme, phénoménologie, ontologie, vie après la mort, médiumnité, paranormal.

Cartografías del Alma: Desafíos al Esoterismo

Lee Irwin, PhD

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una visión general del alma, primero en términos de modelos históricos delineados por cinco teorías diferentes del alma. Después, como un relato fenomenológico del alma como una realidad experiencial, seguido por la investigación en Experiencias Cercanas a la Muerte (ECM). Finalmente, el artículo ofrece una comparación de los relatos históricos tradicionales con la investigación de ECM para sacar conclusiones sobre la naturaleza del alma en la teoría esotérica vista desde una perspectiva contemporánea. Lo que hace interesante al esoterismo no es su historicidad ni el hecho de que los seres humanos en el pasado tuvieran ideas o experiencias únicas, inusuales o no ordinarias, sino que la gnosis evidente en esas tradiciones representa una capacidad humana fundamental para la transformación y la iluminación espiritual. Lo que hace que el esoterismo sea significativo es esta capacidad que todos tenemos para una mayor conciencia.

Palabras clave: alma, cerca de la muerte, fuera del cuerpo, metafísica, esoterismo, fenomenología, ontología, vida después de la muerte, mediumnidad, paranormal

Cartografias da Alma: Desafios ao Esoterismo

Lee Irwin, PhD

Resumo

Este artigo oferece um panorama da alma, primeiro em termos de modelos históricos, delineados por cinco teorias distintas da alma, depois como um relato fenomenológico da alma como uma realidade experiencial, seguido pela pesquisa em Experiências de Quase Morte (EQM). Finalmente, o artigo oferece uma comparação de relatos históricos tradicionais com a pesquisa em EQM, a fim de tirar conclusões sobre a natureza da alma na teoria esotérica, vista de uma perspectiva contemporânea. O que torna o esoterismo interessante não é sua historicidade nem o fato de que os seres humanos do passado tinham ideias ou experiências únicas, inusitadas ou incomuns, mas sim que a gnose evidente nessas tradições representa uma capacidade humana fundamental de transformação e iluminação espiritual. O que torna o esoterismo significativo é essa capacidade que todos nós temos para uma maior consciência.

Palavras-chave: alma, quase morte, fora do corpo, metafísica, esoterismo, fenomenologia, ontologia, vida após a morte, mediunidade, paranormal

Kartographien der Seele: Herausforderungen für die Esoterik

Lee Irwin, PhD

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz bietet einen Überblick über die Seele an. Erst wird besprochen, wie die Seele im Laufe der Geschichte mittels fünf unterschiedenen Seelentheorien dargestellt wurde. Anschließend beschreibt dieser Aufsatz sie als eine erfahrbare Realität in einem phänomenologischen Kontext und berichtet von Nahtoduntersuchungen (NTU). Schließlich

wird eine Gegenüberstellung von traditionellen historischen Darstellungen und NTU angeboten, um daraus Schlüsse über die Natur der Seele, wie sie in den zeitgemäß übersetzten esoterischen Theorien beschrieben ist, zu ziehen. Was die Esoterik interessant macht, ist weder ihre Geschichte noch die Tatsache, dass in der Vergangenheit manche Menschen einzigartige, unübliche oder nicht gewöhnliche Ideen oder Erfahrungen hatten, sondern dass die offensichtliche Gnosis dieser Traditionen Zeuge ist für die fundamentale menschliche Fähigkeit zur Transformation und spirituellen Illumination. Was die Esoterik sinnvoll macht, ist eben das höhere Bewusstseinsvermögen, das uns allen eigen ist.

Schlüsselworte: Seele, Nahtoderfahrung, außerkörperlich, Metaphysik, Esoterik, Phänomenologie, Ontologie, Leben nach dem Tod, Medium, Übersinnlich

Introduction

In discussing the nature of soul, this paper approaches the problem from three specific perspectives. After a few initial observations, this paper presents a brief historical summary of soul concepts based on common theories articulated in Western traditions, as also impacted by specific Asian ideas. The second perspective is on the phenomenologies of soul derived from afterlife encounters and medical research. Here the paper will explore near-death narratives as a primary concern based on a medical context. The final perspective is to explore the degree to which contemporary evidence and empirical research support soul theories in the esoteric context. In conclusion, the paper will offer some thoughts on how the general analysis bears upon the present and future of esoteric studies and on the significance of interdisciplinary studies as they contribute to the general constitution of what we call “esotericism.” In many ways, these thoughts are exploratory rather than conclusive and reflect an increasing interest in the intersection of paranormal research, transpersonal theory, and esoteric studies liberated from a strictly historical framework.

How Evident Is the Soul?

This is the fundamental question, both as an historical idea and as an experiential awareness shaping human behavior and values. Are we ensouled beings? And if we are, is the soul a primary locus for formulating meaningful theories of human identity? Today, it seems that “mind” has overtaken “soul” as a central locus of human identity, made apparent through over seventy years of behavioral, clinical, and philosophical analysis. It seems “soul” has receded into a somewhat archaic notion, one linked with faith traditions (esoteric or not) that make claims that cannot be validated by any viable empirical means. The rhetoric of “mind” has increasingly become a current trope in which ideas of “self” are defined through social-psychological models influenced by cognitive theories and, more recently, by neurological studies reinforced by new technologies of measurement, such as magnetic resonance (as in MRI), positron emission tomography (PET scans), or X-ray radiography. There is a very large database from recent advances in diagnostic medical imaging that is a tremendous empirical resource in which “soul” seems to have no identifiable empirical features. Or perhaps, radiologists and other technical specialists lack an interpretive frame that might allow them to identify soulful aspects as manifest in these imaging records. Further, cognitive models of mind have tended to embrace a materialist attitude in which “consciousness” (the modernist conundrum) is seen as an epiphenomenon of neuro-

biological processes in which mind depends upon body for its origin and existence. This is quite a direct challenge for any metaphysical theory of soul.

Thus, at first glance, the response to the question “How evident is the soul?” is “not very evident” or possibly, “not at all evident” in current cognitive, material, or strictly neuro-physical theories of mind.¹ However, the task of this paper is not to critique contemporary theories of mind but to explore the question of soul as a meaningful locus of human identity in contrast to these more material theories. We might also ask, to what degree are we, as self-aware individuals, able to identify subjectively the actual nature of soul? Self-consciousness is one thing, but “soul consciousness,” I would argue, is quite a different perspective. The difficulty lies in the context emphasized for any definition or description of soul. In a historical sense, general concepts of soul have been primarily linked to theories of afterlife or post-mortem existence.² It is striking that the context of the lived-world is not the characteristic feature by which models of soul have been constructed.

Further, this post-mortem connection is visible in the daily life context through “afterlife encounters” (AE) – ghosts, apparitions, and other forms of encounter directly experienced by living individuals as presenting the soulful dead. It is fascinating that the construction of soul theories may rest more in afterlife encounters than in any lived context apart from those encounters. What this implies for soul theory is a post-mortem intersubjective context, that soul is not primarily based in direct self-observation but is epitomized through encounters, interactions, and relatedness to those believed to have died and yet, to have also maintained a viable form of communication with the living. What “states of mind” are most significant for these interactions or encounters? Not the usual waking state, but usually some non-ordinary state: dreams, visionary encounters, hypnopompia (when waking up), hypnagogia (when falling into sleep), and specific altered states in which paranormal perceptions are more operative and impactful. Also, certain environments seem to stimulate this awareness through subtle “occult” influences – haunted houses, graveyards, burial grounds, sacred spaces for mortuary rites, tombs and crypts, or periodic celebrations of the dead, highlighted by ritual calendars and sacred times. All of these suggest an implied domain of soul encounter that is present but less visible in the waking context and which seems to require variable, non-ordinary states of mind to perceive.

Unlike theories of mind that would reduce mental and emotive awareness to a strictly subjective set of qualia, it is perhaps more relevant to consider soul consciousness as a subtle interactive perceptual capacity through which self-awareness is mediated via our relationships with those who have died. We might say, every soul has a mind, but mind in this sense is not soul, whereas soul, in part, defines our subtle identity in relationship to others with whom we interact, in whatever context those interactions take place – mentally, emotionally, physically, sexually, aesthetically, or artistically. A soulful relationship might be described as one developed through intimacy, sharing, and resonance facilitated by subtle psychic interactions. Perhaps it is a “subjective fallacy” to imagine soul in a strictly personal, isolated self-sense. Soul, as a vehicle of intersubjective identity, may support a special type of non-ordinary perception or subtle awareness that extends into the transphysical and even to the transpersonal through our relations to post-mortem others. Certainly, mediums and psychics epitomize the interactive qualia that support theories of soul life beyond the body, where ensouled minds are still active, lucid, and communicative. Spirit communication with the dead is a worldwide phenomenon and communicative

practices support interactive, intersubjective paradigms of soul life. Thus, soul is not in most traditions, isolated, purely subjective, or radically autonomous; rather, soul seems to be a means by which relatedness and exchange are maintained even after the death of the body.

To these general observations, one could also add the import of personal experience found in “out-of-body” (or OBE) narratives that clearly articulate a human capacity for “soul projection” that might be fundamental for defining soul capacities and yet, not as a normative base for those theories. OBE is non-normative because the ability to instigate any form of soul projection is usually considered a rare ability (as among shamans or highly adept yogis or advanced esotericists) and not a common ground of normative experience – with the exception, perhaps, of lucid flying dreams which best imitate OBE phenomena or, as I will demonstrate, as a result of medical and other types of crises. Dreams of afterlife encounters are far more common and normative; nevertheless, OBE offers the best context for a phenomenology of soul as distinct from any epiphenomenal theories of mind which offer no adequate explanation for OBE phenomena. However, it is interesting to note that OBE phenomena almost always include interactions with others, etheric or material, and therefore might also support a more intersubjective theory of soul. And of course, we must include in the phenomenological account, visionary encounters with a host of diverse beings who tend to simulate an etheric or non-physical body, be they angels, spirits guides, or stranger entities of a transphysical type.

Historical Reflections

The history of soul theories in Western traditions is long and complex, and this paper gives only a brief synopsis as an overview. The actual theories of soul, apart from the specific cartographies that map those theories, are relatively few. Heuristically, there are five basic theories, described in historical sequence. In all these cases, we might posit a very simple definition of soul as “a post-mortem identity with cognitive and intentional functions.” In short, “soul” may be characterized as a continuity of identity carried over from embodied life to post-mortem life that retains some degree of cognitive function (such as thoughts, feelings, and memories) as well as demonstrating a capacity for action and response. Here we might recognize the distinction in paranormal research between a “ghost” and an “apparition” in which the ghost is a repetitive, non-responsive entity usually identified with a specific place, and an apparition is a responsive, non-repetitive, interactive, and creative agent.³ From the perspective of soul theory, creative, or at least responsive agency with lucid cognitive functions, is a typical descriptor of an afterlife encounter. For example, an entity that interacts, responds to a question, or makes an inquiry would be an apparition, whereas a ghost would simply repeat an action and not be interactive.

First, the most ancient soul theory, which interestingly is strongly intersubjective, is based on the belief that the dead remain in the afterlife as long as they are remembered in the rites and thoughts of the living. For example, Confucian spirit tablets or effigies in the home, each of which represents a departed relative, symbolize the presence of a post-mortem individual as interactive with family members until he or she is no longer remembered by a current generation. The old spirit tablets are removed and sent to a Confucian ancestral hall, though on special occasions older spirit tablets can be solicited, particularly those of clan leaders and other outstanding persons.⁴ Similar ideas of the gradually fading away of ancestral souls can be found among the ancient traditions of Mesopotamia, the early Greek

conception of Hades, the early Jewish theory of Sheol, and the ancient Indian Vedic tradition of the *Pretaloka* or the “realm of the ancestors.” A counterpoint belief is found in the Egyptian theory of afterlife in which the *Ka* (or spirit-soul) sought “transfiguration” in order to ascend with the boat of the Sun God Re after a positive judgment in the Hall of Osiris. However, those who were judged as faulty might be consumed and devoured (their *Ka* extinguished) by the Crocodile/Lion/Hippo goddess Ammut.⁵ The theory then is that soul life is dependent on relationships with the living through memory and ritual or on the will of the Divine. In this theory there is one life, one death, and one conditional, non-immortal, transitive afterlife.

The second theory is based on a cyclical notion of death and rebirth, in which an individual survives through multiple lives, usually lived in a lineal fashion, but also possibly in multiple, simultaneous incarnations. This reincarnation theory is very old and in Western tradition begins with the Orphic teachings, as inscribed on the Orphic gold-leaf tablets, and passes through Pythagoras to Empedocles to Socrates and Plato who, over the course of his writings, develops the classic theory of *metempsychosis* (or “soul migration”).⁶ Many Western esoteric texts on reincarnation theory cite Plato as a primary source for their theories.⁷ The basic theory is that a post-mortem soul undergoes a transformative process in which the soul passes through various stages, sometimes quite lengthy in duration, to then take on another physical body, usually human but possibly in animal form. Similar theories are also articulated in ancient India in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, which of course spread with Buddhist missionization to Tibet, China, Japan, Europe, and America. Perhaps it is less well-known that rebirth theories are pervasive in most indigenous traditions around the world, including African, Australian, and Native American theories in which children are identified as former departed individuals and given status and recognition in terms of their specific past lives, something that is also similar to the Tulku tradition among Tibetan Buddhists. These indigenous traditions also honor the dead because not all souls necessarily reincarnate.⁸

In terms of diversity of traditions, the reincarnation model of soul reflects the most complex theory of post-mortem life with many variations and many highly idiosyncratic theories, such as those held by members of various esoteric groups from the Cathars, Bogomils, and early esoteric Christians, to the Kabbalists, Rosicrucians, Masons, Theosophists, and Spiritualists as well as in more contemporary esoteric groups. The theory is also evident in the works of many American esotericists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Cayce, Homer Curtiss, Elizabeth Claire Prophet, L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology), Paul Twitchell (Eckankar), Jane Roberts (in the Seth material), Robert Monroe, or Michael Newton. Many more could be named. While these theories intersect and reinforce each other, they also diverge, and in some cases, contradict each other. Overall, there are a few primary claims that are shared: after death the surviving identity is subject to conditions that reflect the thoughts, words, actions, and relationships of the former life; the surviving entity is capable of choice and decision making; afterlife conditions are such that awareness of those conditions is relative to the degree of self-conscious awareness attained before and during death; other entities are encountered that may assist or, in some rare cases mislead, the surviving individual; some individuals may be able to attain a vision of the higher domains of consciousness; and in some rare cases, the surviving entity may not reincarnate but journey on to other worlds and domains or incarnate in a non-human world or some specific plane above the physical. The question of the “immortality” of the soul is variable; for some traditions there is no end to

the possible number of future lives; for others, lives are limited to an explicit number; and for some, it is possible for the soul to undergo complete dissolution. For some, reincarnation is eschatological and terminates in some form of final judgment. The origin of soul in these theories is highly variable and not a central topic of concern.⁹

The third theory of soul is the most prevalent but also less developed psychologically than the reincarnation model. In this theory, associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is one life, one soul, and one afterlife based on rewards and punishments (or judgment) as explicitly described in theological writing on afterlife or on heaven and hell. The afterlife is partitioned into domains of reward and punishment, usually in multiple levels ascending and descending, describing a hierarchical afterlife that images or reduplicates in some fashion the hierarchical structures of incarnate social life. The soul in this model is preconceived as immortal, eternal, and capable of infinite duration in the afterlife state. Afterlife conditions are eschatological and often phased in the following pattern: death, life in between death and resurrection, resurrection, judgment, and reward or punishment. Also, this model introduces a highly debated concept of the resurrection body – is it physical or spiritual?¹⁰ Catholic theology (and normative Judaism and Islam) subscribes to a physical resurrection, while some Protestants hold to a spiritual resurrection – though one might ask what kind of body is it that might be immortal and eternal? This soul theory might be embedded in an incarnational consequence by which the “sleeping dead” are awakened to a resurrection body of some type that is more than soul and perhaps more than simply physical.

In this model, judgment is not based on psychological effects or past intentions shaping a future consequence as in reincarnation but determined by strict adherence to religious principles and moral mandates. Authority is invested in extra-human agencies, be they angelic, demonic, or holy (as in manifestations of Christ or Mary or Saints) where afterlife existence of the soul is profoundly determined by an all-knowing and omniscient Divinity. The phased life of the post-mortem individual after death and before resurrection is debated: for some, the soul sleeps and is unconscious until resurrection; for others, the soul is aware of life in the grave (as in Islam known as *Barzakh*) where comfort or loss of comfort is determined in a prejudgment based on conformity of the individual to religious tenets. For some Christians prejudgment is followed by a post-resurrection judgment which intensifies the conditions of the judged soul (as discussed by Calvin).¹¹

In relationship to the living, prayers and good intentions may in some ways assist the post-mortem soul, whatever its condition, and post-mortem souls may impact and influence the living. Death does not guarantee closure, even in the strictest interpretation, insofar as living individuals have afterlife encounters with the dead, which they do in abundance be they Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. In reincarnation theory, this is not a problem as the post-mortem individual is a conscious agent with creative, interactive capacities. However, in the one-life, one-death, one-judgment model, there is a chasm between the living and the dead as the dead are under the supervision of extra-human agencies (and the Divine). Living individuals are normatively prohibited from contacting the dead. The concept of necromancy, and all its negative occult associations, is often inscribed as a forbidden practice (which includes mediumship) by all three religions because such contact violates a divine sanction that only the Divine or divine agencies have control of the post-mortem individual soul.¹²

A fourth model is the “constructivist model” of soul and while this model has resonance with some older models, it has become more common in popular, contemporary thinking. In this model, the soul is non-eternal and nothing more than a concatenation of psychic attributes bound together by conditional habits and associations but, nevertheless, is capable of surviving death and sustaining some degree of self-awareness. The fate of this entity after death remains uncertain: in some models it may simply sustain itself for an indeterminate period; in other models it may reach a higher stage of integration and enlightenment; in yet other models, it may dissipate and collapse through an exhaustion of its intrinsic motive powers. Perhaps it can reincarnate, perhaps not. In more complex models, it may form a “psychon” as a post-mortem identity made up of thoughts, images, and sensory impressions carried by the psychon into a post-mortem network of idea-experiences as part of a shared psychic field accessible to other living minds as a “donor personality.” Is this a soul? The “donor personality” is more like a psychic impression left in a collective network consciousness, not as an archetype, but as a vivid psychic content or “extracerebral memory” created by a once living individual whose psychon pattern (a minimal unit of psychic energy or particle of consciousness) remains accessible to similarly disposed living individuals.¹³

This model is often related to a “group soul” concept in which the synthetic mental-emotive contents of an individual become, after death, aligned with a transphysical network linked with deceased family members and friends which results in a kind of transphysical blueprint that is read or engaged psychically by a receptive living individual, particularly a sensitive child, who is related to that network. This pattern then becomes an active psychic influence in the formative development of the living individual. This theory rests upon a soul-like idea of a metaconsciousness whose contents reflect actual synthetic formations based on the life-world and mental awareness of living individuals who at death leave a trace identity. This is perhaps similar to Carl Jung’s “collective unconscious” though differentiated not by collective patterns but substantiated by specific, individuated personality formations. These formations (or blueprints) then form intersubjective group associations reflecting specific, shared values, beliefs, and attitudes (a group soul-mind as it were). A living individual might sensitively attune to select aspects of the transphysical group formations and psychically receive what might be interpreted as mediumistic or channeled information but which is, in this theory, a personal resonance with large-scale psychic identity complexes sustained by post-mortem energies as yet unrecognized and incomprehensible to rational science.

The fifth model of soul builds on this constructivist paradigm and yet mediates a more perennialist perspective. In this model the soul is a vehicle whose purpose and significance is to lead individual consciousness to a profound transformation that is possibly *transpsychic* in nature, that is, a fully transpersonal model. To put it simply, the soul becomes a medium for attaining degrees of consciousness that no longer require a soul for such a realization. In some ways this is reminiscent of past enlightenment models but in a more current sense, this is a transhuman model. What exactly might the purpose of soul be in such a model? If we take a holistic view, one based on a full assessment of human capacities, including the most profound and supernormal abilities, then the soul may be a transitory entity whose purpose is the realization of latent abilities in order to form a higher consciousness that may no longer require a soul-body for its realization. This is not enlightenment in the traditional

sense, as a soul-surpassing realization of spiritual potential, but rather an emergence of transpersonal identities whose nature is something more than soulful.

By way of analogy, we might differentiate between a soul body and an angelic body, or an ordinary afterlife consciousness and a post-mortem identity no longer restricted to cycles of life and death. Such a metaphor suggests a transhuman possibility, that psychic life is profoundly capable of identity formations beyond the ordinary conceptions of soul, in which soul becomes a necessary though transient means, like the body, for the realization of the transhuman possibility. If the body can sustain soul and yet pass away, might it not be possible that soul too can sustain even higher forms of identity and then also, pass away, giving birth to these new transhuman forms? This model, which is very contemporary, supersedes the older enlightenment models which dismiss both body and soul for some form of ultimate transcendent being (a perennialist ideal). The transhuman model, however, suggests an evolutionary and intermediary potential for soul through which the post-mortem condition no longer determines the nature of identity, and like the caterpillar turning into the butterfly, the soul itself may be a vehicle for the realization of new identity forms in which “death” is no longer a relevant concern. Does this suggest immortality in a transhuman form? Not necessarily. A transhuman form as expression of creative agency might well hold the capacity for termination, absorption, radical change, and possible non-existence – a kind of radical freedom to become or not become. Rather than a leap to enlightenment, beyond all vehicles, in this model we see a distant horizon of becoming through multiple vehicles (including soul) in which creative freedom is shaped by imaginal and visionary possibility and not predetermined by any form of substance dualism, or evolutionary materialism. In this model, the core idea is unanticipated oracular possibility no longer constrained by the dialectic between form or formlessness and now open to emergent, self-surpassing discovery and a wholly new manifestation of becoming.¹⁴

Phenomenologies of Soul

Having given a brief survey of soul models in a mostly Western context, the analysis now turns to a brief review of the second perspective, the descriptions of soul and its cognitive and spiritual capacities. In many ways, the phenomenological description is similar for all five models, particularly when bracketing particular theological or philosophical claims dependent upon the description. The goal of this paper is not to prove or demonstrate the value of a specific model, but to show how soul concepts usually have a shared set of attributes based in common human experiences that then leads to more elaborate theories, usually as a result of rational reflections rather than empirical testing. Also, there is no attempt to essentialize the concept of soul; the purpose here is not to describe some “essence of soul” but rather a set of attributes that can be variously interpreted and valued when applied to any mode of soul. Perhaps the question of “How evident is the soul?” might be answered by delineating common features or “family resemblances” (by way of Wittgenstein), that are shared by the various models.

What are the shared characteristics that cut across these soul models and give some sense of what the soul may be apart from conceptual embeddedness in specific cartographies of soul? In a sense, what this paper describes is an ensemble of aspects whose functions contribute to sustained identity after death. Rather than engage the philosophical debates over nuances in these various models, the goal is to delineate core features while recognizing that no specific

set of these features may apply to any one model. The resources for this phenomenological description are available from a wide array of narrative accounts by persons claiming to interact with the dead via various states of mind as in dreams, vision, or afterlife encounters of some type. While this literature is often dismissed as lacking empirical validity, nevertheless the “anecdotal record” is extensive, particularly when including hospice narratives, end-of-life experiences, death bed visions, past life regressions, childhood past life claims, and other personal afterlife encounters.¹⁵

It is certainly true for all soul models that cognitive functions are taken as evident in post-mortem existence. The post-mortem soul can apparently think, remember, imagine, feel, and communicate as well as act based on self-selected intentions and purposes. This is true even in the oldest model of the interactive communally based soul as remembered and ritually connected with his or her community of origin. Apparitions (unlike ghosts) are interactive and expressive of cognitive functions, even if in a diminished sense. Mostly, such cognitive functions are taken for granted and not explicitly addressed as unique or unusual for the post-mortem individual. Post-mortem others can think, react, enter into deliberate conversations and express cognitive concerns unknown to living recipients. However, these cognitive functions frequently take on a supranormal aspect in the sense that communication is often noted as having telepathic quality, a kind of mind-to-mind communication, that may not depend upon spoken words, even though the forms of thought communicated are often sentence-like. In all models, including the one-life, one-judgment model, souls do appear, act, express cognitive and emotional concerns, and seem capable of decision making and creative responses.¹⁶

It is interesting that emotional responses also seem to include feelings of guilt, a desire for restitution, and a sense of obligation to others based on former life relations. In this sense, post-mortem memory is not simply a matter of a neutral reproduction of past events, but a lived-sense of the consequential impact of actions and relations now reframed from a post-mortem, ethical perspective. Post-mortem individuals often demonstrate concerns about former life actions which they now see in a new light once their post-mortem existence is confirmed. Others demonstrate a concern for the suffering or struggles of loved ones in grief over death and manifest a motive to sooth or heal the sorrow. Some souls seem to have a vivid sense of obligation to others even in a post-mortem context as well as a general concern for the well-being or success of family and even clan. Post-mortem souls also demonstrate confusion, uncertainty, doubt, and struggle as they seek to reorient to a post-mortem state. Anger, hatred, and desire for revenge are also found, for example, by those subject to murder or unexpected violence.

Another phenomenal aspect is noted as a metamorphic capacity. Not all post-mortem individuals appear in human form, to others or to themselves; they may be seen as a sphere of energy, a light, or a dispersed cloud of awareness. More typically, post-mortem persons do not often appear in a form that represents their appearance at the time of death, but of an earlier stage of life, usually more vital and healthy. The post-mortem soul is regenerative, able in some ways to manifest an inherent vitality no longer subject to physical aging. However, souls also appear dressed in the various garb of their time; almost all accounts of afterlife encounters describe clothed individuals, suggesting that self-image (as in dreams) is manifest through symbolic outerwear as intrinsic to identity. A naked soul is rare and found most usually in some erotic context; the visual norm is a healthy-seeming person, fully

dressed in their habitual wardrobe. These manifestations also include sensory qualities such as the smell of a favorite perfume, cigar smoke, musical sounds, various associated objects (like jewelry) with the departed or not recently departed animal companions who also accompany the dead.

Some post-mortem individuals seem to exhibit distinctive Psi abilities, for example PK or psychokinesis where physical objects, like a music box in the room of a departed, suddenly start to play. Or departed souls communicate veridical or true information about the future, thus exhibiting precognition. Or they reveal information about the past that is unknown to the recipient but later proved to be true, thus a form of retrocognition. Or they narrate accurate descriptions of events occurring in a distant place that later prove to be accurate, thus demonstrating clairvoyance. Some souls seem also to be able to transmit healing or positive loving energies that have an actual physical effect on the recipient. And many narratives give accounts of post-mortem domains inhabited by spirits, angels, and other non-physical entities. Overall, afterlife encounters (AE) are replete with paranormal features that are repeatedly demonstrated to be accurate even when the information conveyed is unknown to recipients.¹⁷

Another aspect is contact with others who are dead that can interact with post-mortem others and who report self-conscious cognitive exchange, conversations or thoughts, with multiple other dead. This implies intersubjective relations between post-mortem individuals and communal formation linking specific souls with other souls. Another aspect is interaction with non-human agents, such as angels, guides, spirits, or “light beings” in which those beings offer help, comfort, guidance, or direction for the confused or lost souls, often immediately after death. These light beings are described in a rather vague way as immaterial and not necessarily as a recognizable form, but rather as self-conscious agents whose most evident qualities are love, concern, and healing. Thus, the post-mortem realms are described as populated by more than humans or animals and as clustered by community and soul affinities. Often there is a report that afterlife conditions reflect in some fundamental ways the beliefs or imaginal constructions held during incarnate life and then actualized in relationship to others who hold similar views in an afterlife domain. The intersubjective structure of afterlife existence seems to take on a communal character differentiating (as in waking life) post-mortem souls according to shared beliefs. Interestingly, classic images of heaven and hell are severely lacking in these descriptions and the most common description is an afterlife in which post-mortem individuals live in an environment similar to their previous social and cultural context. In other words, the afterlife often looks like a version of this world only now in a virtual or etheric form as a construct of a shared imaginal co-creation. We might therefore reverse the famous saying of the semantic scholar Alfred Korzybski that “the map is not the territory” and say in afterlife, in fact, “the map makes the territory” based on shared mental-emotive projections. This suggests that cartographies of soul, as maps, may be virtual constructions held in the minds of believers as a formative imaginal power, particularly in conjunction with others who share that map. In this sense, one might ask, why then are there not more classic images of heaven and hell reported in literature?

One response to that question is – persons who may subscribe to beliefs in heaven and hell do not actually hold strong formative “classic” (or medieval) images of those places, whereas the embodied actual life of the individual leaves a profound and deep, if

subconscious, impression on the post-mortem soul. By “imaginal” I am not referencing the creative use of imagination but instead, a formative mental capacity whose expressions vivify the lived world and animate our shared social context with believable but often subliminal contents. Any “world picture” now, in this present life, is a mental construct of what we believe in the context of what we experience; the very concept of “social life” is an imaginal construction. Afterlife might have great continuity with our “mental picture” of social existence carried over into a viable etheric domain reflecting that picture and reinforced by similar beliefs of others. What is implied is that the construction of that domain is not simply based on conscious thought but far more upon subconscious, embodied attitudes that spontaneously manifest at death.¹⁸

Evidential NDE

However, all this may seem a bit fantastic to the ordinary person unaware of or lacking contact with the post-mortem realm. What kind of evidence do we have to support such views beyond esoteric cartographies and anecdotal records of afterlife encounter? The primary evidential resource is found in Near-Death Experiences (NDE). There is a very large database on NDE and the research has been developing for over 50 years. To begin with, the contexts for these narratives are primarily medical, not religious nor esoteric. In a crisis situation, often life-threatening, an individual undergoes a medical procedure, and during this procedure, the person dies. By “die” I mean that the person is regarded by medical personnel as “clinically dead”: no heartbeat, no respiration, no eye reflex, no measurable brain activity, lowering temperature, no bodily sign of life. However, because dying is a process, a series of biological stages with increasing paralysis, under optimal circumstances, this process can be halted and result in revival and resuscitation.¹⁹ A certain percentage of persons resuscitated give a descriptive narrative of their post-death experience. A rough estimate of the frequency of NDE among the general human population is about 5 percent,²⁰ which in America would be about seventeen million people.

The explicit “after-death” perceptual domain is characterized descriptively as, at first, spatially congruent with the location of the non-living body – the “extra-corporeal identity” is located in a space that seems identical to the physical space inhabited by the previously embodied individual, e.g., the operating room. This perception of spatial continuity often reflects a change in perspective: floating above the physical body, hovering near the ceiling, drifting about the room. This condition is accompanied by vivid, often enhanced perceptions of sounds, conversations, gestures, and motions made by others in that space. Cognitive functions are lucid, and feelings are often intensified. However, the inhabited “space” is not simply three-dimensional, geometric space; it is primarily constituted as a perceptual field whose complexity can take on many aspects of a transphysical nature, as indicated by the non-functionality of gravity and loss of substance mass and density. The post-resuscitation entity, as immaterial “self-awareness,” exhibits a freedom of movement and spontaneity no longer limited by the dynamics of physical life. This “extra-corporeal identity” denotes a non-physical self, disidentified with the dead physical body, and yet able to maintain a discreet identity with heightened qualities of perception and vivid memories that can be recalled at will by a resuscitated individual.

The tendency in medical research with regard to NDE has been to focus on the attributes, or descriptive qualities, of NDE emphasizing the phenomenological character of the

experience. The initial work on this phenomenology was first articulated by Ray Moody (1975), who created the phrase “near-death experience,” and listed 15 descriptive aspects of a composite NDE event where no one event necessarily had all characteristics.²¹ Since then, others have added to the list of characteristics, including negative NDE, while more recent research has tended to cluster various features into discreet categories, typified by Bruce Greyson’s well-known fourfold typology where the NDE event is analyzed according to cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental features.²² Among these features, the most common are: a sense of separation from the physical body as a discreet mobile identity (or OBE); enhanced cognitive abilities; intensified feelings; lucid awareness of local physical surroundings; movement away from those surrounding, often into or through a velvet darkness (in a minor sense, a tunnel); leading to a non-ordinary realm inhabited by postmortem others, including relatives, friends, animals, and “beings of light” who are perceived as helpful and supportive; intense feelings of peace, calm, and joy; and in deeper NDE, a cosmic encounter with Light, the Divine, or other manifestations of great ontological import for the experient. There may be a life review, an experiential sense of the impact and consequences of the experient’s thoughts, words, or actions on others, empathically felt by the experient; a recall of past lives or possible future events (precognition); telepathic communication with other beings, often characterized as teachers or guides; a decision to remain or return; and finally a sense of reversion to an embodied state, involving a fairly sudden and dramatic shift in perspective back to the resuscitated physical body. The aftereffects of the encounter often result in a positive and sometimes dramatic reorientation in personality and worldview.²³

Early researchers attempted to construct a model of NDE based on “core features” as representative of possible “universal” aspects across multiple cultures, while more recent studies have tended to focus on discreet and specific aspects of the NDE event.²⁴ In 2006, Bruce Greyson characterized his fourth typological NDE category of “transcendental features” as “reflecting apparent otherworldly phenomena, [which] includes apparent travel to a mystical or unearthly realm or dimension, an encounter with a mystical being or presence, visible spirits of deceased or religious figures, and a border beyond which one cannot return to earthly life.”²⁵

In her review of 30 years of NDE studies, Janice Holden writes on the NDE as conceptualized in two distinctive ways: a material aspect where experients note the features or activities of the physical world and the transmateral aspect where the experient “perceives phenomena in transcendent dimensions beyond the physical world.”²⁶ Holden seems to create a middle ground between physical and transcendent with her emphasis on transmateral. In a 2012 article, Greyson differentiates NDE from mystical experiences in three ways: in NDE there is the persistence of individual identity; an utter clarity of perceived events [hyper-lucidity]; and a lower frequency of union with the Divine.²⁷ In a more recent article, Greyson and Khanna observe that as a person approaches death his or her consciousness alters and generally passes through three sequential stages: “resistance to dying, surrender and life review, and finally transcendence, a culminating phase including features typical of spiritual or mystical experience.” In this same study the investigators also determined that those who had an NDE do show greater spiritual growth than those who underwent a similar crisis without NDE and that “the degree of spiritual growth was positively correlated with the depth of the NDE.”²⁸

Certain additional features of the NDE can be noted. Persons who have NDE and align with the above general description are often not religious, may be atheists, or have no specific theory of an afterlife. The catalyst for such experience seems to be a crisis that results in non-ordinary states of mind; categories for such experience include cardiac arrest, invasive surgery, childbirth, or life-threatening conditions based on severe illnesses, accidents, or critical emergencies. Generally, NDE events are not induced at will (like some OBEs) and are not under the control of the experient. Religious beliefs do not seem to inform the NDE experience. NDE is generally a “staged event” or a process in which the immediate environment dominates but then gives way to a certain degree of out-of-body exploration often in the local context, then a transition phase to a non-local context, through a loss of physical surroundings (darkness), then arrival at some ultra-domain wherein post-mortem others appear. Many stop at this stage and then return to the body. However, researchers have clearly determined that other NDE experiencers continue to another phase, termed “deep NDE” in which there is a participatory encounter with powerful beings of light or even more deeply some form of Divine-conscious awareness that has a profound and lasting post-recovery effect.²⁹ The Dutch NDE researcher Pim van Lommel differentiates between individuals who had a “moderately deep NDE, a deep NDE, and a very deep NDE” as do other researchers.³⁰

A useful concept here is that of “transliminality” as articulated by parapsychologist Michael Thalbourne. He defines it as “the degree to which a threshold can be crossed. Persons high in transliminality will experience a much larger number of different types of input from subliminal regions, whereas others, lower in transliminality, may hear from that region on considerably fewer occasions.” A person’s transliminal sensitivity may be an index of creativity and responsiveness to “irruptions” from the subconscious or superconscious domains.³¹ Those with deep NDE may be persons with a high transliminal capacity which allows them to consciously access more profound types of mystical or visionary perception. Even in less deep NDE the experient can engage in OBE that mimics the sensory world of physical perceptions (particularly sight and hearing) while moving about in a transphysical spatial context. The implication is that sensory awareness is a psychic phenomenon as much as a physical phenomenon and the “mimicking” may be simply an exercise of the psychic aspects of normal sensory awareness in a transliminal context. Intentionality is also obvious as OBE experiencers explore their environment and move about unhindered by gravity or even material substances passing easily through walls, floors, and ceilings. And in this state, they very clearly produce veridical evidence by accurately describing what was said, done, or moved both in the room where they died and in other physical locations including veridical, detailed conversations in other rooms.³²

In deeper experiences, space becomes multidimensional, inducing transformation and new awareness in a developmental sense. Kenneth Ring claims that NDE is “a catalyst for spiritual awakening and development” as “NDErs tend to manifest a variety of psychic abilities” as a result of deep encounter. The deep encounter includes, according to Ring, a rapid approach to a brilliant light that emanates “pure love, total acceptance, forgiveness of sins, and a sense of homecoming” and is accompanied by “knowledge of a universal nature,” profound insight into one’s life and purpose, and may also include transcendental music, cities of light, and “paradisical environments.”³³ Ring reports that generally, the reorientation of post-NDE experiencers includes: characterizing oneself as spiritual rather than religious, being inwardly close to the Divine, de-emphasis on formal ritual, conviction in the

reality of life after death, enhanced psychic abilities (including visions of future events or precognition), openness to the concept of reincarnation, and a shared or underlying unity between religious traditions.³⁴

However, Chris Carter notes that contemporary NDE literature describes the more “horrific” aspects of NDE in three principal types: inverted NDE (feelings not of peace but fear and resistance to dying); a meaningless void (instead of a velvet darkness) sometimes witnessed by women during childbirth under anesthesia; and hellish NDE (a scenario in which the experient is in a location identified as hell-like, sensing an evil presence). NDE experiencers of such encounters typically take the hellish experience as a warning that requires correcting harmful or socially destructive behavior (drug or alcohol dependency, violent activities, illegal conduct, and so on), or overcoming poor mental or emotional habits. Religious beliefs were found to be less significant than social behaviors and mental attitudes in such narratives which, nevertheless, illustrate the possibility of negative post-mortem survival. Such accounts represent less than 4 percent of all NDE narratives.³⁵ Significantly, this content is mirrored to some degree in afterlife encounter or AE narratives in which contact with the dead by living individuals results in a report that afterlife contact is unpleasant, disturbing, or in some ways negative, roughly only 2 percent of such narratives.³⁶ Such low percentages suggest that only persons with more severe and disturbing mental or emotional problems tend to experience negative NDE and those experiences do not tend to be very deep.

NDE provide the best examples of transphysical awareness as they are epitomized by intense, vivid perceptions in an out-of-body state, rich with paranormal aspects. NDE provide the classic example of empirically accurate paranormal perceptions, often providing veridical information attained when the physical body is measurably inert and clinically dead. Certainly, such claims radically challenge material theories of consciousness and in many ways support soul conceptions in the general history of Western religious and esoteric traditions. Further, there is the creative aspect of the imaginal capacity as manifest in the NDE state: what is perceived is not simply “given” but may also be “created” as a legitimate aspect of extra-corporeal, imaginal construction. While NDE experiencers may narrate “core features,” they may also be creative individuals even in the post-mortem state. The NDE experient as a creative agent may not be a passive spectator of psychic events but also an active, imaginative agent whose response to his or her circumstance depends on the degree to which paranormal activity was a feature of his or her embodied life. Such agency may be correlated with “like-minded others” and manifest as subconscious affinity leading the individual to join an intersubjective afterlife community with relatives, friends, and sympathetic persons in the post-mortem state.

Historical and Evidential Correlation

One of the criticisms of NDE research and narrative accounts, by both materialists and religionists, is that the descriptions given do not delineate the full reality of soul-life after death. In brief, the NDE experient does not die, but comes back to life and while the narrative may be taken as a genuine account of subjective experience, with veridical evidence, nevertheless, death was averted and return to life affirmed. Subsequently, say some critics, at best such a narrative is only a partial, relative, and unfinished account and not, in fact, the full afterlife story. However, it appears that materialists say this because they

are groping for some means to dismiss the challenging evidence and religionists as well because most of these accounts do not support traditional afterlife beliefs.³⁷ Another critique is a bit more substantive, and refers to the “How evident is the soul?” question: is the OBE extra-corporeal entity the “soul” or is it some other kind of vehicle preceding an actual and complete death? To put a finer edge on the question, is an OBE experience a manifestation of the soul as separate from the body or is it more like a “projection” of conscious identity similar to such an image in a flying dream? What is this projected entity?

The first critique of the incompleteness of the experience rings true insofar as there is no doubt that death is avoided and recovery to life is accomplished. The unfinished story may indeed lead to post-death changes and transformations not recorded and yet, there is significant correlation between afterlife encounters and NDE with out-of-body (or OBE) narratives representing a mediated zone between the living and the dead as OBE narratives frequently tell of encounters with post-mortem individuals, known in the literature as spontaneous mediumship.³⁸ The actual value of the NDE narratives is not simply the narrative account but the fact that the body is assessed as clinically dead and then remarkably comes back to life. The perceptual story is an evidential narrative that occurs in a transphysical context, demonstrating that there is some form of identity consciousness that survives death, whatever stage that story may represent. This remarkable fact does not offer the full story of afterlife, but it sets the stage for a radical affirmation of possible soul life beyond all bodily dependency.

The second critique is more challenging because we simply do not have enough information or evidence to explain OBE consciousness. Some recent research in brain scan technology (fMRI) at the University of Ottawa has mapped voluntary OBE and shown that the brain scan is indeed distinctive for an OBE projection as compared to the normative reading on the same person in a non-OBE waking state.³⁹ In other words, it seems that OBE may require a capacity to alter psycho-physical states at will, creating a measurable shift in brain activity. While giving some real validity to OBE, this is still a far cry from soul evidence. In fact, it seems to reinforce the theory that OBE or extra-corporeal perceptions (ECP) are not based on a separation of soul from body, as the body of the OBE projector is healthy and fully functioning during the OBE event. If death is defined as an absolute separation of “soul” from the body, then OBE may be a soul-capacity or soul-projection more than an actual separation of soul from body. Insofar as OBE may be a “soul-projection” it raises the interesting question of the nature and extent of supernormal or non-ordinary human capacities.⁴⁰ Because OBE mimics NDE in many ways and may include contact with the post-mortem realms, such an ability may reflect paranormal soul capacities not usually accessible to a majority of people. In a similar way, mediumship may also be a paranormal soul capacity, an ability to communicate with the dead without OBE. Overall, the question of the exact nature of the NDE “extracorporeal identity” remains elusive and difficult to determine as an ontologically distinct entity, possibly soul, or, possibly a soul projection.

What are the correlates between NDE accounts and AE (afterlife encounters) and other cartographies of soul? Many cartographies discuss a staged process of dying, from the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol* to Sufi teachings and many Theosophical descriptions. NDE certainly confirms that dying is a phased process of stages, and while only narrating the early stages, confirms that persons with no esoteric knowledge all seem to go through distinct stages in dying and in the recovery of soul life in a post-death context. It is exceedingly rare for an

NDE experient not to have contact with other post-mortem individuals, affirming the theory that the dead await the living and act as guides or helpers to assist in the transition to afterlife. NDE affirms the intersubjective nature of post-mortem life, that we are not alone at death but enter into a diverse set of multiple relationships, including encountering guides and helpers (as noted so long ago by Plato). Beings of light might be correlated with angelic presence but now demythologized from classic imagery and seem more energy-like in keeping with contemporary thought. There is a distinct possibility of gnosis in deep NDE, in which a participatory encounter results in new ontological insights and illumination that have transformative effects on the experient after the return to incarnate life. Interestingly, the Tibetan Bardo Thödol has long taught that enlightenment (or “entering the clear light”) might be attained while dying or immediately after death or during various stages in the post-mortem condition.⁴¹ This teaching seems to be confirmed in NDE as many non-Buddhists have noted a primordial, absorbing light encounter as part of a deep NDE, a phenomenon also found in Western esoteric teachings. Of course, interpretations of such light differ but the phenomenal aspect of “transformative light” is a consistent theme in many NDE accounts. This light is variously described as colorless illumining light, an energetic darkness, or an overwhelming gold-white radiance.⁴²

Afterlife encounters that emphasize paranormal perceptions – telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance (distant viewing), PK or psychokinesis, and healing, what Charles Tart calls the “big five,” are all evident in NDE.⁴³ This also corresponds with esoteric cartographies where communication within the afterlife realms is often depicted as operative through higher psychic abilities.⁴⁴ Significantly, experiencers of NDE are not commonly persons with any particularly developed paranormal abilities and yet, in the NDE state demonstrate some paranormal capacities spontaneously, most commonly, telepathy and clairvoyance resulting in perceptions later confirmed as accurate (or veridical). This implies that paranormal capacities are latent abilities that become operative in a transphysical state and such manifestation is not a function of any special training but a natural feature of post-mortem interaction. Of course, special training might enhance such capacities and esoteric methodologies are frequently articulated as techniques for the development of inherent or latent abilities. Operative conditions in a post-mortem domain might well function through psychic means where the physical senses are now transmuted into purely transphysical mediums of communication.

The transformative capacity is also evident in NDE. Individual identity awareness results in unique states that are different from the normal physical state of the body. There is a return to health, no pain or suffering with generally positive emotions that result in an NDE self-image that is more alert and lucid than in the crisis state of death. Individual reports do sometimes note that the form of the incorporeal identity is not a body image but a “sphere of light” or some other more energetic form that nevertheless contains a discreet sense of identity. Remarkably, this transformation has been mapped to those born completely blind who in an NDE can suddenly “see” as though they had normal vision, a phenomenon studied in depth by Kenneth Ring.⁴⁵ More profoundly is the spiritual transformation as a result of some form of NDE gnosis. This type of deep knowledge references the “transcendent” aspects of NDE that are so often highlighted in esoteric traditions, though ironically, such gnosis is reported as a spontaneous event with no special preparations or spiritual practices involved. Experiencers claim a direct “knowledge” of a divine source, variously named, typically a kind of “cosmic consciousness” or “unitive experience” that

may and often does challenge the experiencers' former religious beliefs. The transformative result is a new certainty about afterlife, soul existence, and sacred aspects of the dying process. Also, some experiencers report an incredible energy surge whose effects may carry over into resuscitation and can re-emerge in later contexts.⁴⁶

What about incongruence between NDE and esoteric soul cartographies or more traditional religious systems of afterlife? In NDE literature there is very little evidence of any kind of "fixed levels" or ontological hierarchy. Is this a feature of the incomplete process of dying or is the afterlife model of NDE more congruent with a post-mortem realm differentiated by personal beliefs and shared imaginal co-constructions? What does manifest, beyond interactions with known post-mortem others, is highly diverse and by no means reducible to a predetermined afterlife ontology. There is little evidence of heaven or hell, no evidence of explicit consequential judgment, and only transphysical agents whose primary purpose seems to be healing, help, and support for the dying or dead. Aspects such as magical phrases, warding spells, magical symbols or gestures, or necessary ritual instruments are all completely absent from NDE accounts. There is no mention of the paraphernalia such as magical amulets, sacred phrases, or protective actions of any type. Mostly these aspects seem to be cultural constructions that do not carry over into contemporary experience nor do they seem necessary or vital to endure a positive death transition. There also appears to be no particular coding of conditional states that would predetermine an afterlife effect. Regardless of a person's state, other than the previously mentioned emotionally turbulent or violent personality, the NDE outcome seems less based on subjective qualia and more on a general social ontological process that is absorbing and, in many ways, protective of the sanity and well-being of the dying. Later consequential outcomes are not evident in NDE narratives.

There is also very little correlation between NDE accounts and body-based energy constructions, such as Tantric Kundalini or east Asian Chi systems as found in Chinese and Japanese medicine. Perhaps this is a function of the transphysical nature of the NDE experiencer as "beyond body" consciousness. The majority of accounts note the positive energetic sense of well-being and sudden return to health and balance, but particular descriptions of the "astral body" or transcorporeal identity reveal no esoteric structures, centers, chakras, and so on as inherent to that vehicle (the same can be said for much OBE literature as well). Once again, the subjective reality of esoteric physiologies may be more imaginal construction than any form of objective body science. However, if the "map makes the territory" then esoteric physiologies may be a means for sketching out probable subtle body structures whose organization reflects particular ways of thinking rather than measurable topography. This also includes color codes in terms of auras. There is almost no mention of colored auras in the NDE or OBE literature. Perhaps this lack is based on another fact, that the aura is a phenomenon of the embodied soul, a manifestation of psychic states while in the body. Once beyond body, the subtle nature of that state may not manifest any distinctive systemic, coded, or visible manifestations. This raises an interesting question – to what degree does the body physiology imprint the soul-identity such that it might have subtle organs or etheric structures that mimic embodied states?

Overall, it seems clear that NDE literature supports many aspects of soul cartography and afterlife encounters, though not all. Particularly absent are the formalized structures of afterlife ontologies; afterlife seems more fluid and personalized by beliefs and shared mental

attitudes. It also seems that the soul is not an “ontological isolate” (distinct and separate from all others) but more a communal entity whose correlations with others may well determine to some degree the afterlife context for survival. In this sense, the soul seems to be an intersubjective entity that shares consciousness with others and yet maintains some sense of autonomy and purpose beyond group affinities. It might also be true that there are adept ways to follow in dying, but normal death, even crisis death, follows a general pattern that is not dependent upon any particular esoteric teachings. Such teaching may shape the transformative experience or promote a more successful way of dying, but every experient is thrust at death into an esoteric context – an afterlife rich with possibilities, caring others, mystical depths, and a wide array of zones, domains, or realms correspondent to the beliefs and attitudes of the dying, including relatively mundane realms similar to this life. NDE offers engaging evidence that soul may be evident in an afterlife context based on direct experience rather than on beliefs or esoteric practices.

Conclusion

What this overview offers is relevant for esoteric studies more generally. The preference of this author is to see esoteric studies as fully contemporary and not simply as a historical purview of past systems, persons, or organizations. It seems natural that any new discipline would construct a viable and meaningful history of its areas of interest. Having done that, that is, having constructed historical precedent and foundational texts, persons, and traditions, the next phase, it seems, is to expand esoteric studies or systems of belief into the context of contemporary research in multiple disciplines. This paper has drawn upon several disciplines that are relevant to esoteric studies: medicine, parapsychology, literary genres, philosophy, semantics, transpersonal studies, anthropology, and comparative religions. The very *topos* of “esoteric” requires more refinement to liberate its contexts from a strict historical or even “Western” perspective. I would argue that what makes esotericism interesting is not its historicity nor the fact that past human beings had unique, unusual, or non-ordinary ideas or experiences, but rather that the gnosis evident in those traditions represents a fundamental human capacity for transformation and spiritual illumination. What makes esotericism meaningful is this capacity that we all have for greater awareness in an increasingly complex cosmos of material, energetic, subtle and psychic possibilities. The real esotericism is right here, right now, in the heart and minds of living human beings.

Esoteric studies and organizations, facilitating an interdisciplinary approach to human potential, need to embrace all disciplines that support the exploration of that potential. That is why esotericism does not have a home in any one discipline or organization; for multidisciplinary scholars, the context for research is as much in the present and future as in the past. This does not mean that historical studies or teachings are obviated, or ancillary, but foundational to continued research into new areas of study no longer restricted to past models. While historical studies of esotericism represent core traditions in multiple cultures, emergent studies in many fields are offering new models that require a reconstruction of esotericism linked to emergent human capacities that might resonate with older traditions but can now engage more current perspectives, theories, and methodologies. Transphysical theories of mind, consciousness, and post-Darwinian biology linked to paranormal research, process ontology, and contemporary physics can all contribute to our understanding of what constitutes esotericism as an interdisciplinary, humanistic field of study.

Perhaps what makes esotericism a nexus for interdisciplinary analysis is the fact that a human being is a highly complex entity irreducible to simply physical processes. The very idea of the soul, and its cartographies, expresses this complexity in relation to altered states of mind, empathic sympathy, moral concern for the well-being of others, aesthetic perceptions and artful expression, as well as a wide range of emotional, cognitive, and psychic capacities. Cartographies of soul reveal many alternative maps, and those maps correlate with NDE research and support the legitimacy of various soul concepts while also opening the door for further empirical research. Paranormal perception is also confirmed as latent soul capacities also delineated in many soul cartographies. What the history of esotericism demonstrates is the increasing complexity of more traditional, less spiritual models of the human. Esotericists have long emphasized the complexity of human capacities and pointed toward the non-ordinary as most representative of deep human potential. Now, as new evidence develops, we need a more robust theory of esotericism that will accommodate the increase in disciplinary data and theory.

Perhaps one way to describe esoteric studies in a contemporary context is to say that “esotericism” refers to an array of theories that support a transformational model of human becoming, based on non-ordinary perceptions, and encoded in diverse symbolic systems of thought designed to facilitate and promote the actualization of potential in its practitioners. Such a definition applies to both historical and contemporary studies and programs and demonstrates the integral relationships between past gnosis and the advent of gnostic experiences in the present. The more we understand those experiences, then and now, the more capable our ability is to develop that knowledge into a substantive realization that contributes to the on-going project of shared illuminations.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Endnotes

¹ Such a view is epitomized in Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1991); see also Francis Crick, *Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner, 1995) and Paul Churchland, *Neurophilosophy at Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), though the views differ considerably.

² For a good overview see Christopher Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

³ See Dianne Arcangel, *Afterlife Encounters: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Experiences* (Newburyport: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2005), 16-32.

⁴ For a brief overview and references, see: “Settling the Dead: Funerals, Memorials, and Beliefs Concerning the Afterlife,” Asia for Educators, Columbia University, 2023, <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/prb/journey.htm>.

⁵ Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold*, 2008.

⁶ Lee Irwin, *Reincarnation in America: An Esoteric History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), summarized from Chapter Two of that work.

⁷ Additional sources for *metempsychosis* theories are found in Cicero (*De Re Publica*), Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*, and other Greco-Roman sources. And of course, Neoplatonists like Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus likewise held theories of “soul revolution” as normative for post-mortem existence.

⁸ Best source for Native American rebirth theory is Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin, *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Beliefs among Native American Indians and Inuit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

⁹ All of these named groups and individuals are thoroughly described in Lee Irwin, *American Reincarnation*, 2017.

¹⁰ The classic source text for this debate in Christianity is I Cor 15:44.

- ¹¹ Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold*, 2008, 85-86, 93 for Islam and for Calvin, 65.
- ¹² The classic reference for this prohibition is the “Witch of Endor” narrative in I Sam 28.7, the usual source text prohibiting contact with the dead; similar prohibitions are found in Christianity and Islam.
- ¹³ For more on this model see Scott Rogo, *The Search for Yesterday: A Critical Examination of the Evidence for Reincarnation* (New York: Anomalist Books, 2005), 205-209, where he discusses theories of British philosopher Whately Carington and American psychologist Gardner Murphy. The concept of “psychon” was proposed by Warren McCulloch and Walter Pitts, “A Logical Calculus of Ideas Immanent in Nervous Activity,” *Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics*, Vol. 5 (1943): 115-133.
- ¹⁴ For transhuman models see: Amit Goswami, *Physics of Soul: The Quantum Book of Living, Dying, Reincarnation and Immortality* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing Co., 2001), 216-235; Eric M. Weiss, *The Long Trajectory: The Metaphysics of Reincarnation and Life After Death* (Bloomington: iUniverse, Inc., 2012), 266-274, (borrowing from Sri Aurobindo).
- ¹⁵ A good introduction to these narratives is Chris Carter, *Science and the Afterlife Experience: Evidence for the Immortality of Consciousness* (VT: Inner Traditions, 2012). The most detailed accounts are found in the Society for Psychical Research volumes, accessible at Hathi Trust Digital Library, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010083755>.
- ¹⁶ See Dianne Arcangel, *Afterlife Encounters* (2005) for an overview of afterlife encounters experienced by those in hospice expected to die soon.
- ¹⁷ See Arcangel, *Afterlife Encounters* (2005), for examples of such abilities.
- ¹⁸ This theory is well articulated by Stylianos Atteshliis, *The Esoteric Teachings: A Christian Approach to the Truth* (Strovolos, The Stoa Series, 1992), 145-162. Dr. Atteshliis develops his theory based on “elementals” as subconscious mental-emotive formations that sustain the conscious personality and are capable of manifesting vivid psychic impressions and creating entire thought worlds in concert with others.
- ¹⁹ National Public Radio, *Fresh Air*, SCETV Radio, “Erasing Death” interview with Dr. Sam Parnia, director of resuscitation research, Stony Brook University School of Medicine. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=172495667>; see also Bruce Greyson, “Implications of Near-Death Experiences for a Postmaterialist Psychology,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2/1 (2010): 39.
- ²⁰ P. M. Atwater, *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2007), 9.
- ²¹ Raymond Moody, *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon--Survival of Bodily Death* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).
- ²² Bruce Greyson, “Defining Near Death Experience,” *Mortality* 4/1 (1999): 11-12; for a thorough review of NDE characteristics see: *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*, eds. Janice Miner Holden, Bruce Greyson, and Debbie James (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 2009): 18-27.
- ²³ P. M. Atwater, *The Big Book* (2007), 16-17; a great deal of descriptive material on NDE is available online, particularly as collected by the International Association for Near Death Studies (IANDS) at: <http://iands.org/nde-stories/iands-nde-accounts.html>.
- ²⁴ For a more thorough review of NDE and the problem of theories of “transcendence” see Lee Irwin, “Mystical Knowledge and Near-Death Experience.” In *Death, Dying, and Mysticism*, edited by Christopher Moreman and Thomas Cattoi (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015): 153-175. Some material on NDE phenomenology and theory from that article is cited here, 154-157.
- ²⁵ Bruce Greyson, “Near Death Experiences and Spirituality,” *Zygon*, 41/2 (2006): 393-414.
- ²⁶ Janice Holden, “Veridical perception in Near-Death Experiences,” in *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*, eds. Janice Miner Holden, Bruce Greyson, and Debbie James (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 2009): 185, 210, 229-231.
- ²⁷ Bruce Greyson, “The Psychology of Near-Death Experience and Spirituality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*, ed. Lisa J. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 516-517. See also Atwater, *The Big Book*, 2007, 299-314.
- ²⁸ Bruce Greyson and Surbhi Khanna, “Spiritual Transformation After Near-Death Experiences,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 1/1 (2014): 49-50.
- ²⁹ See Chris Carter, *Science and the Near-Death Experience* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2010), 104-135 for an excellent NDE summary overview.
- ³⁰ Pim van Lommel, “Near-Death Experiences: The Experience of the Self as Real and Not as an Illusion,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1234 (2011): 20-21, 24.
- ³¹ Michael A. Thalbourne, “Transliminality: A Fundamental Mechanism in Psychology and Parapsychology,” *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 10/1 (2010): 73-75.

³² The well-known example of veridical NDE is the Pam Reynolds case, see: Michael Sabom, *Light and Death* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 37-52.

³³ Kenneth Ring, *Heading Toward Omega: In Search of the Meaning of Near-Death Experience*. Kindle Edition, 2011: Loc. 746, 1313-1319, 1330.

³⁴ Kenneth Ring, *Heading Toward Omega*, 2011: Loc. 1437, 2346, 2353-2359, 2945-2947, 3137-3149.

³⁵ Chris Carter, *Science*, 2010: 127-135; Nancy E. Bush, *Dancing Past the Dark: Distressing Near-Death Experiences*. Kindle Edition, 2012, passim.

³⁶ Dianne Arcangel, *Afterlife Encounters* (2005), 55.

³⁷ For an overview of criticism of NDE accounts; see also Atwater, *The Big Book*, 2007: 195-207; for the counterpoint to these dismissive claims, see pp. 209-224. For the religionist claims, see pp. 225-236.

³⁸ For example, see Robert Monroe, *Ultimate Journey* (NY: Doubleday, 1994), 60-64, 97-104; Wagner Alegretti, *Retrocognitions: An Investigation into the Memory of Past Lives and the Period between Lives* (Brazil: International Academy of Consciousness, 2004), 71-82; and Michael Newton, *Journey of Souls: Case Studies of Life Between Lives* (Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2001) gives elaborate detail about life after death based on past-life regressions. See also Ryan Foster, Deborah Lee, and Ann Duvall, "Two Cases of Spontaneous Mediumship Experiences of Near-Death Experiencers," *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 34/1 (2016): 44-54.

³⁹ Andra M. Smith and Claude Messier, "Voluntary out-of-body experience: an fMRI study," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (2014), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00070/full>.

⁴⁰ On supernormal capacities, see G. Bryan Young, Ingrid A. Hutchinson-Young, Hugh McCague, and Peter C. Blanco, "Defining the Psychic Body," *Rose+Croix Journal*, Vol. 13 (2019): 83-95; Dean Radin, *Supernormal: Science, Yoga, and the Evidence for Extraordinary Psychic Abilities* (NY: Deepak Chopra Books, 2013) and Charles Tart, *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal Is Bringing Science and Spirit Together* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

⁴¹ For a Rosicrucian AMORC view, see: H. Spencer Lewis, *Mansions of the Soul: The Cosmic Conception* (San Jose: Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC, 1956), 209-229.

⁴² Atwater, *The Big Book* (2007), 319-325.

⁴³ Charles Tart, *The End of Materialism* (2009) discusses contemporary research on each of the big five and concludes that there is sufficient evidence to show that all of these capacities are real and actual.

⁴⁴ See Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁴⁵ Kenneth Ring, *Lessons from the Light* (MA: Moment Point Press, 2006), 73-96.

⁴⁶ P. M. Atwater, *The Big Book* (2007), 299-314, 326-330.