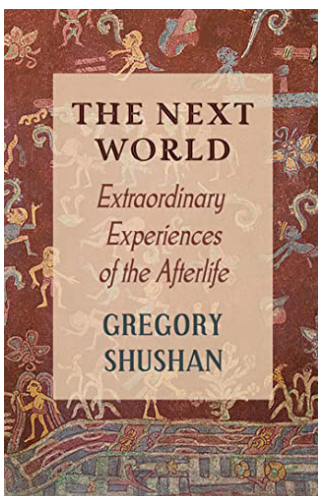


BOOK REVIEW

The Next World: Extraordinary Experiences of the Afterlife by Gregory Shushan

Reviewed by
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Our culture allows us to quantify death with precise statistics. We know that at least a million Americans so far have lost their lives to COVID-19. We have the daily numbers of mass killings in the United States; of those killed at the hands of Vladimir Putin's criminal war; of deaths due to starvation, specific diseases, obesity, psychosis, suicide, and so on. There are new technologies that claim they will be able to predict exactly when we will die from natural causes. And so on. What seems completely absent are platforms that entertain rational discussion of what exactly death and dying *are*, what they *mean*. What happens to a person when he or she dies?

Why so silent about this fundamental question? It turns out there is a small subculture of serious investigators curious about reports and conceptual issues that speak to this question. Gregory Shushan's book, *The Next World: Extraordinary Experiences of the Afterlife* is an original treatment of the subject, as wide-ranging in thought and feeling as it is rigorous and scholarly. Heartily recommended.

The book dwells largely on the near-death experience (NDE), but also reviews accounts of mediumship and cases of possible reincarnation. Modern NDE studies began in 1975 with the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*, but Shushan guides us through history and indigenous cultures in the far-reaching wider hunt for NDE-like experiences. The core elements of the NDE seem to reflect a universal component of human psychomental experience, and that would seem to point to the possibility of a 'next' world. One thing we may infer: For folks who manage to survive the death of their bodies, the next world must be a *mind-constituted* world.

Characteristic of the author's dialectical procedure, he does his best to review criticisms of the case for a next world. In most instances, Shushan handily disposes of the criticism, but continues to suspend judgment. His overall view seems to be that anything like scientific proof of life after death is not yet a plausible option. There are good rational reasons to believe in the reality of a next world, but they are yet to be altogether compelling. Universal agreement on the subject is bound to remain elusive, at least until some sort of reliable technology of communication is established. And yet the foregoing is not quite the point. Exploring the "extraordinary experiences" reviewed and assessed is an adventure in phenomenology, an exercise in evolving empathic attunement to the otherness of the transcendent.

The material covered is dense and varied. In the Introduction, we read:

My main interest is in understanding why afterlife beliefs and experiences are similar across cultures, and why they're different. The true nature of NDEs is irrelevant to the idea that they can inspire, influence, and even give rise to afterlife beliefs. (p. 5)

It turns out that the similarities of belief and experience suggest a core pattern of reality. At once we are confronting a phenomenon that suggests the reality of an afterworld. The afterlife belief is historically a major part of most religious systems, but, in fact, evidence for an afterlife, as well as the concept of an afterlife, may be viewed as part of our natural existence, depending on no religious claims. This is compatible with whatever interpretation one might adopt to make ultimate sense of the data. We are all free to mythologize our own experience in our own way. For one person, the afterlife is integral to one's religion; but, for another, survival is simply a fact of nature, a consequence of the relationship between mind and body. There are, I suspect, many who recoil from the idea of belief in an afterlife, precisely because it may seem to entail religion. It might revive childhood fears of hell, drummed into them by Sunday School teachers.

Anyone interested in the "true nature of NDEs" (objectively real or delusory) has an immense possible database to work with. Shushan acknowledges there are "thousands of books" written on the subject, and he seems to have read a significant portion of them. As to the variety, ambiguities, and complexities of the available data, Chapter One, "Near-Death Experiences: Peeling the Universal, Cultural, And Individual Layers," lays the groundwork for the skeptical approach that follows. By skeptical I don't mean the stance of the disbeliever but the stance of the inquirer who suspends judgment until the inquiry is complete.

Not only are extraordinary afterlife experiences found in all cultures and times, the NDE, as Shushan points out, is an aggregate of distinct but related experiences, perhaps occurring to someone who is "near" death only in a psychological sense. Among the ND motifs are reports of out-of-body experiences (OBEs); encounters with deceased friends and loved ones; seeing or blending with a mysterious loving light presence; a panoramic memory of, and spiritual insight into, one's entire life; all of which generally results in a transformation of one's worldview, and, more telling yet, the acquisition of supernormal powers. Each of these motifs, say, the light presence, may occur outside the NDE. The elements of the NDE archetype are interpreted in various ways, depending on the various cultural settings—Christian, aboriginal, indigenous, classical Greek, the lower East Side of New York City, etc. Does an underlying, universal narrative emerge from the totality of these cross-cultural reports? Shushan's careful analysis concludes that the evidence reveals the active presence of a universal narrative suggesting the possibility of human postmortem existence. After taking into account the various individual and cultural colorings of the experiences, the outline of a universal story—*reality*—does emerge from the NDE multiplex. Then there is this crucial fact: The experience occurs

even during cardiac arrest when the brain is deprived of oxygen, and consciousness is supposed to be impossible, according to current brain science. Just at the point where the mainstream view dictates no consciousness at all is possible, people are reporting conscious experiences, among the most intensely real and meaningful that they ever had.

Subsequent chapters provide an historical panorama of accounts of the near-death configuration in different epochs and different cultures. There is a chapter on near-death experiences in early civilizations, classical Greek and Roman, and one on shamanism and near-death experiences. In fact, we see how the NDE links shamanism to the rise of Greek philosophy and modern psychotherapy. The search takes us into the near-death worlds of Oceania and into the worlds of Victorian and Edwardian mediumship. The pointers for the momentous idea of a "next world" are diverse in names and specific narratives, as we should expect from across cultures, but at the same time they all repeat a single, overall transcendent message.

In addition to discussion of NDEs, there are chapters on mediumship and reincarnation phenomena. As for the latter, there is a fascinating discussion of "intermission" memories (Chapter Six), memories from the twilight state between death and one's rebirth. I was struck by one who described himself as if lost in nothingness, a graphic metaphor of unembodied existence for some people who feel lost in the cosmos. On a more upbeat side, "most met a god or god-like figure who helped them decide on their future parents. Many saw their future siblings" (p. 137).

The last chapter of the book poses the question, What kind of afterlife? Much is discussed, but the crucial insight is here stated (in the form of a question): "One might . . . ask, given the cross-cultural and individual differences between people across the world—religious, linguistic, social, environmental, and so on—why should anyone expect a single afterlife that would be the same for all humanity?" (164). The evidence, in fact, points to a great diversity of reported accounts, which in no way detracts from their credibility; our afterlives are likely to be about as wildly diverse as our current lives.

The philosopher H. H. Price wrote an essay comparing the next world to a dream world. The dream is a key part of the cycle of our waking, dreaming, and nonconscious existence. It may be the best available model of what a mind-based afterlife might be like. Shushan probes the possibilities of the dream model of the next world. What he reviews is a wide and varied range of conceptions of what the afterlife is like, from Tibetan Buddhism to native North American societies, and he repeatedly finds an explicit emphasis on the mind-dependent nature of the afterlife, a mind-world akin in different ways to dream-worlds, but a

world whose mental nature is expanded to include the normally quiescent so-called *paranormal* powers hid behind the innocuous-sounding letter of the Greek alphabet—*psi*. This is likely to involve any number of complications in the modalities of afterlife identity and creativity. What the author has shown is that some kind of a “next world” is a coherent theoretical possibility, based on a vast quantity of empirical data. We are invited to make of it what we will.

The book ends with two interesting appendices, the first titled “Extraordinary Experiences or Cultural Imagination: ‘All In The Brain’ Revisited.” The discussion here focuses on what the author calls as “A Culture of Disbelief” (p. 180). In particular, he digs into the arguments of materialist scholarship as it appears in academic studies of religion. The chief target of the main academic assault is any claim in which something clearly *extraphysical* presents itself. Sound the alarm—the door is open to magic, mysticism, mayhem!

The assault is extreme, inept though it be, and ends in many cases denying not just the meaningfulness of the experience but its very existence. The aim is to destroy the experience itself. One might indeed argue that the economic and technological rise of the religion of physicalism has led, directly and indirectly, to the invalidation of masses of deeply significant, indeed sacred, modes of human

thought and experience. Nor would it seem extravagant to say we’re talking about a species of crime against humanity. Much of this appendix is devoted to hammering home for the ironclad-skeptics the *reality* of OBEs and NDEs, etc.—realities they cannot explain physically and therefore pretend there’s no there there.

The second appendix is about the near-death experience of Mrs. Leonora Piper. Mrs. Piper was one of the great mental mediums who also had an NDE. The appendix is confined to Mrs. Piper’s NDE, which she underwent in 1896 during hernia surgery. The description of her NDE speaks for itself; it is both uniquely poetic and detailed but clearly contains the classic features of the experience: being out of the body, encountering a light, passing through a tunnel, sounds of transcendental music, seeing deceased friends and loved ones, and resisting the return to her body, the “depression” of it all, in contrast to her totally positive visitation to what seemed another, decidedly nicer world. I especially liked the “loose, Greek, flowing garments” and strains of music animating the air. She also noticed an open building where “some sort of educational work was being carried on” (p. 198), a portent, perhaps, of a new higher education to be explored in the next world, should we find ourselves still conscious after death.