



EDITORIAL

Consciousness Science is Incomplete: It is Time for a New Paradigm



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Early in the twentieth century, psychotherapy began to turn from psychoanalysis towards a new idea: behaviorism (Viney, 1993), which emphasized observable and measurable behavior, not cognitions and emotions. John B. Watson was an early foundational figure in this movement. He stated that consciousness cannot be isolated in the laboratory for study, and, in fact, could not be studied at all. Further, Watson held that anything not subject to laboratory analysis was either not real or not important. This led to the behavioral assumption that the brain is a “black box” that played no role in behavior and could thus be ignored. Many found this to be repulsive and abhorrent for several reasons. However, behaviorism maintained its grip on psychology for decades before other methods could be developed. Plaudits went to those who could do relevant lab studies and get statistically significant results. Psychologists tried as much as possible to run lab studies in a scientific way but ignored a huge amount of data: subjective experience. Such experience, in natural and uncontrolled conditions (a.k.a. real life), is key to understanding consciousness, the human condition, and human nature. Science is clearly unprepared to address such data.

If we accept Watson’s reasoning, then there is little hope of understanding consciousness. Researchers have recognized this problem, and so consciousness science has for about 4 decades been focused on various forms of neuroscience—they have rejected Watson’s contention that consciousness and the brain can be ignored. This is a true step forward, but not nearly far enough. What has been left out (again) is subjective experience, which is the result of and the currency of consciousness. There is a strong case to be made that non-laboratory data, that is, experiential and subjective data—under certain constraints—qualify as valid scientific data. The status quo rejects such ideas, labeling subjective experience as “anecdotal.” Before this became a pejorative term, anecdotal simply meant unpublished. But in consciousness science, the term is a plain insult to those who maintain what I hold in this editorial. It has been said that “the plural of anecdote is not data.” In response to this, I hold that—when certain conditions are met—anecdotes *are* scientific data that can be very useful indeed. My goal here is to set out what I see as the necessary conditions and to give an example of how this methodology works.

To make my perspective clear, I argue that: (1) the incompleteness of consciousness science has delayed progress in humanity’s understanding of itself. In particular, consciousness has become a hot topic since the early 1990’s, but the understanding of consciousness remains elusive; (2) Subjective experience is the most direct and relevant method of studying and understanding consciousness; (3) The most fruitful data regarding consciousness are to be found in connection with death-related phenomena and anomalies thereof, e.g., near-death experiences (NDEs), after-death communications (ADCs),



reincarnation, and mediumship. *These four death-related anomalous experiences (DRAEs) have large data sets in the literature but are forbidden subjects for standard researchers.*

Clearly, these DRAEs are not acceptable scientific subjects, since little to none of these can be studied via the standard scientific method. One can search mainstream science forever without seeing a mention of DRAEs, due to the issues described above. Ethics and common sense tell us that we cannot kill a person in a lab setting, then bring them back and interview them in order to study, for example, NDEs. But the scope of science must be broadened to include such data, if we are ever to understand consciousness. Such broadening can be achieved by adjusting the scientific methodology used. I will illustrate this idea below. Here, however, I want to point out that I am not the only researcher to hold that a paradigm shift is vital. There are others in the NDE research community who entertain similar positions. Their work is very important, and I will illustrate the power of subjective experience in understanding consciousness.

Here, I describe a way of merging DRAEs and standard experimental science. I will cite *three principles* that render subjectivity a valid scientific source of data, using NDE data to illustrate my model. The model consists of three principles: (1) *intersubjective agreement*—independent experiencers of a subjective phenomenon consistently report certain aspects of the experience, the frequency of which can be measured; this allows, in the case of NDEs, a method of taking an experiencer's testimony and subjecting it to a rigorous pattern of investigation; (2) *Agreement with classical and/or new science*—if the DRAE can be described by using standard physics (e.g., electromagnetism and general relativity; Arnette, 1992, 1995) or new, speculative physics (e.g., string theory and multiverse theory), this provides a strong case to be made for the objective reality of the subjective experience; and (3) *veridical evidence*—perceptions by the experiencer that can be independently verified by independent records or the perceptions of others (Rivas et al., 2023). Such cases make a nearly impenetrable defense against skeptics.

As an example, consider NDE data. NDEs are full of detailed information, as given by the experiencer (NDER) during post-experience interviews. There are so many phenomena in NDEs that occur frequently enough that a scale can be created to administer to NDErs and determine (1) whether the person had an NDE and (2) the depth of the NDE if experienced. Bruce Greyson (1983) has created such a scale, and it is now commonly used by NDE researchers.

Let us consider one of these phenomena. In my work, I have approached NDEs as data waiting to be explained, and my model is a form of interactionist substance dualism (ISD). This is a long-standing position on the mind-body problem. The idea is that humans are a *combination* of a material body and a non-material mind, both of which can exist without the other; but, both are necessary for life on Earth. This position was first laid out clearly by René Descartes in the seventeenth century (Viney, 1993), but it attracted immediate criticism—partly because Descartes could not give a model for mind-body interaction. ISD has been consistently rejected by scientists and philosophers and is considered a dead idea.

The example I choose to discuss involves what I call *induced recombination*: mind and body have been separated at the beginning of the NDE but are recombined by an outside stimulus. In operating rooms, for example, some NDErs report being outside their bodies, and the two parts coming together again with great force (Sabom, 1982). Below are some example reports.

NDEs occurring in hospital operating rooms provide an unusual opportunity to learn about the forces at work between the mind and the NDEr's physical body. This is probably as close as we can come to a lab setting, and *veridical perceptions* are possible by comparing the NDEr's testimony with medical records. Revival of the NDEr's body by electric shock provides a distinct off/on transition for the body; NDErs observing this transition during the autoscopic phase (seeing one's body from a position outside the body), which Ring (1980) called Stage 2, are in a unique position to make important observations about the mind/body reunion. The three NDE excerpts below were from surgical patients whose hearts had stopped and who had observed their own revivals by defibrillator:

Case 1: I was up there at the ceiling, watching them work on me. When they put the shocks on my chest, and my body jumped up, I just fell right back down to my body, just like dead weight. The next thing I knew, I was in my body again. (Moody, 1975, p. 82).

Case 2: The nurse was on this side of the bed with that machine. She picked up them shocker things and put one there and one right there [pointing to appropriate places on chest] and I seen my body flop like that. ... It seemed like it just took me and slammed me together,

you know. It seemed like I was apart and then like two forces coming together in a crash. It seemed like I was up here [pointing to ceiling] and it grabbed me and my body and forced it back, pushed it back. (Sabom, 1982. p. 35).

Case 3: I was sitting up there somewhere and I could look down...They thumped me a second time...Then I reentered my body—a transition that was just like that [the snap of a finger]. (Sabom, 1982, p. 35).

Once their physical bodies were resuscitated, each of these NDErs reported an immediate return to the body. In the second account, this returning was likened to the expression of a powerful force, and in the first account, to the force of gravity. It can be seen from these three examples that NDErs vary somewhat in the way they describe an apparently common experience. This variation is consistent with the psychological principle of individual differences in attention, concentration, memory, and verbal skills. It is also important to realize that NDEs are difficult to describe in ordinary language. In most respects, the phenomena reported are beyond our common physical experience. Despite these potential sources of variation, the agreement among the reports above is strong.

Science, in general, begins with observation. Here, we have three observations of the same type of event. If there were only three examples, they could be dismissed in a number of ways. But, NDE science has established (via survey) that millions of NDEs have occurred to people globally. These three cases are the mere tip of the NDE iceberg, and such things have occurred an unknown thousands of times. So far, we have used the principle of *intersubjective agreement* (among the three cases) to establish and explain the existence of this particular phenomenon. But what of the principle of agreement with standard science? We must think carefully about this. The data above suggest that the change in the status of the body (from non-functional to functional) results in recombination. How can this be? What kind of force, as described by these NDErs, could be at work here? Do we need new physics to explain this, or is it beyond explanation?

Luckily, the solution is not new physics, nor impossible to find. The force is *electromagnetism*, a standard area of physics that provides a solution. The body generates an electromagnetic field (EMF) while it is alive. This is due to the tremendous number of charged particles moving

within the body. Magnetic fields are generated when charged particles move. Thus, the human body has a natural EMF. But death puts an end to this EMF, and if the body is resuscitated, the EMF begins again. The fact that the body's EMF can be switched off and on effectively makes the body an electromagnet, a common feature in auto junk yards. And the fact that the mind is affected by the state of the body implies that the two—mind and body—have something in common: the EMF. During life, the two EMFs work together, but this ends with death, when the body EMF goes to near zero. So, status quo science works here and provides an answer to an initially vexing question.

Such success of standard physics in solving the issue of recombination encourages a search for further research along these lines. A second example I find is the tunnel or portal described by those whose NDEs go beyond proximity to the body. I have explored this case extensively elsewhere (Arnette, 1992). Here, I give a brief summary. Many NDErs who have longer, deeper NDEs often report encounters with a tunnel or portal that they enter into, traverse, and emerge from into another reality. As in the recombination case, this tunnel to another world sounds outrageously fantastical and surely must be some kind of illusion or brain malfunction, according to skeptics. But if one is familiar with general relativity, one will immediately notice the similarities between the NDE tunnel and the relativistic wormhole (Einstein-Rosen bridge) predicted by relativity. This realization further cements the relationship between physics and NDEs, and one can take this approach much further (Arnette, 1999).

Thus, my approach extends science to human experience and unlocks the experiential world for investigation. In social science, such research already exists in the form of qualitative research methodology (Taylor et al., 2015). Phenomena such as the NDE can be explored with the model I propose. No longer will people dismiss problematic events as “anecdotal.” I argue that, under the conditions I describe, *they are indeed data*, of a type *otherwise unavailable* to us and supported by my three principles above.

In closing, I would like to address another theory that has recently gained traction in the world of NDE science. This is the so-called receiver theory or filter theory (see e.g., van Lommel, 2013), also known as “non-local consciousness” (NLC). This idea holds that consciousness does not reside in the human body. Instead, it is external and “non-local,” a term that has never been adequately



defined. But some aspects have been described. Consciousness, an external signal, field, or some other entity, is everywhere at once, and individuals tap into it when the brain receives the consciousness signal, filters the information, and results in the individual consciousness we experience. This individuation exists as long as the brain functions, but at death the brain of course also dies, and the signal disappears from the body. There is nothing left of the individual, since that consciousness no longer has a receiver/filter.

NLC is a theory that is blatantly false and unscientific, a fact that is obvious from the outset. See cases 1-3 above; these reports would be impossible under NLC theory. Many similar examples exist, and overall the data from NDEs are completely incompatible with NLC theory. This theory refutes the very data it is claimed to explain. This is the antithesis of science, which should spring from and explain the data and not refute it. NLC appears to be an attempt to grant the survival of consciousness while denying the survival of individual, differentiated consciousness. But mere examination of NDE data makes clear the survival of the individual's consciousness. It is unclear why NLC seemed necessary to those who created it (such as van Lommel), but my suspicion is that these people fear death and the survival thereof as a threat of some type. Only NLC believers can truly answer the question.

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