

Near-Death Experiencers' Beliefs and Aftereffects: Problems for the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin Naturalist Explanation

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ABSTRACT: Among the phenomena of near-death experiences (NDEs) are what are known as aftereffects whereby, over time, experiencers undergo substantial, long-term life changes, becoming less fearful of death, more moral and spiritual, and more convinced that life has meaning and that an afterlife exists. Some supernaturalists attribute these changes to the experience being real. John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, on the other hand, have asserted a naturalist thesis involving a metaphorical interpretation of NDE narratives that preserves their significance but eliminates the supernaturalist causal explanation. I argue that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's psychological thesis fails as an explanation of NDEs.

KEYWORDS: near-death experience, near-death experience aftereffects, John Martin Fischer, Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, naturalism, supernaturalism

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are well-known, life-changing events (Greyson, 2014; 2021; Hagan, 2017; Holden et al., 2009). An NDE occurs when a person survives a close brush with death or some other extreme circumstance and has a range of experiences: that can include an out-of-body experience (OBE), hyper-real consciousness, perceiving a tunnel with a bright light at the end, feeling consumed with peace and joy, viewing a trans-material environment, talking with

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deceased loved ones and spiritual beings, and/or having a life review (Charland-Verville et al., 2014; Greyson, 2021; Holden & Loseu, 2015). Any viable explanatory thesis about NDEs needs to account for these well-established facts (Greyson, 2021; Greyson et al., 2009; Moody, 1978; Sabom, 1982).

Most skeptics, as well as believers, grant that NDEs occur and need explanation. The controversy concerns whether the experience is a perception of objective reality or simply a subjective experience, such as an illusion or a hallucination. Naturalists, those people who believe there are no souls or God (Plantinga, 2000), hold that NDEs are purely physical events, a result of brain activity that is either drug-induced hallucinations, naturally occurring illusions, or the result of some other material cause (Blackmore, 1993; Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016; Sacks, 2012). I will refer to this philosophical position as the Naturalist Thesis. The supernaturalist, on the other hand, has a broader metaphysics that includes material objects as well as souls and deity. From the perspective of people who hold this philosophical position, some NDEs are veridical: observations of another reality that reveal the initial moments of an afterlife (Alexander, 2012; Burpo, 2010; Greyson, 2021; Habermas & Moreland, 1998; Holden, 2009; Long, 2014). I will refer to this position as the Afterlife Thesis. The challenge is to establish which thesis best explains the NDE phenomenon.

In this paper, I will bracket this broader, more weighty issue. My focus will be on a feature of NDEs: whether the Naturalist Thesis sufficiently explains what are called NDE aftereffects, both the life transformation and the beliefs that accompany the change. I begin with a description of the phenomena.

Research has shown clearly that NDEs are life changing. People report both immediately after the experience and many years afterwards they are no longer the same (Atwater, 2003, 2007; Moody, 1978; Morse, 1991; Noyes et al., 2009; van Lommel et al., 2001). People generally experience both short-term and long-term aftereffects. Short-term aftereffects have physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and psychological aspects (Holden, 2017; Noyes et al., 2009). For instance, immediately after an NDE, some NDErs report a sense of “confinement” to the physical body, a physical discomfort resulting from having formerly been free of the body (Noyes et al., 2009, p. 54). As well, many NDErs who perceive themselves to have returned to embodied life are not sure how to interpret the experience and seek social acceptance from others; almost always believing that the experience was

absolutely real, if they confide in someone who responds with skepticism, they come away feeling sadness, frustration, and a sense of having been psychologically harmed (Holden et al., 2014). Long-term aftereffects, on the other hand, are more varied (Holden, 2017, p. 92). Research indicates that NDErs have an increased sense of well-being, self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-worth as well as a decreased fear of death. Long after the event, experiencers have become more moral, more altruistic, more caring, more connected with others, more spiritual—but usually less religious, more certain that life has meaning, and more certain that an afterlife exists (Noyes et al., 2009).

I argue that the Naturalist Thesis fails to adequately account for the genesis of many of the core life changes that commonly occur for NDErs. My focus is on John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin's (2016) novel explanation of NDE aftereffects, in which they attempt to preserve the significance of NDEs for the experiencer, acknowledging that the experience is lifechanging and transformative, while denying it is real, eliminating the Afterlife Thesis. In response, I argue that their explanation of aftereffects is a non-starter. First, I argue that their main psychological argument—that is, the storytelling interpretation of aftereffects—has little to no empirical evidence. As well, research shows the proposal is most likely false. Second, I argue that the normative formulation of the argument is weak because of various well-known philosophical problems for naturalism. Last, I argue that their proposed example of a naturalistic life change provides a false interpretation of the testimony. I conclude that the Afterlife Thesis best explains aftereffects.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's Naturalist Thesis

In the final chapters of the books *Near-Death Experiences* (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016) and *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life* (Fischer, 2020), Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argued that although there are strong reasons for holding that NDEs have chemical and physiological causes, the occurrence is significant for the person who experiences it, and, for this latter reason, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin aimed to explain the genesis of aftereffects and why they are important to NDErs, without relying on a supernaturalist ontology in the explanation. The core issue is whether the reasons for transformative change—aftereffects—are best explained by beliefs found in the naturalist's toolbox. On this point, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) wrote that “one might worry that our project here, of explaining near-

death experiences in wholly physical terms, would . . . threaten the meaningfulness of life, and with it, awe, wonder, and hope” (p. 157). They went on to argue, however, that a non-literal account of NDEs as metaphorical fictions, while negating a supernatural reality, could, nevertheless, still indicate what is important and meaningful in life and, thus, stimulate transformative change.

More specifically, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) used well-known physiological explanations to account for the phenomenological experience of NDEs. For them, there are plausible naturalistic explanations of for NDEs themselves; thus, the explanatory or causal portion of their explanatory model—to account for the origin or source of NDEs—is settled. This explanation renders the reported memory of an NDE a fictional creation rather than a memory of an actual event. What they needed to complete a naturalistic explanation of NDEs was an account of how this fictional NDE narrative could result in profound change. To accomplish this part of their explanatory model, they added a new “storytelling” component to their naturalistic thesis. Their proposal was that, in general, storytelling is a powerful emotional and ethical source of motivation to change and of change itself, and although NDEs themselves are myths, the narratives/stories they produce are at least equally capable of fostering substantial transformation (Fischer, 2020, p. 171).

Their explanation contradicts the traditional literalist interpretation of NDEs. Traditionally, the experiencer interprets the NDE as they experienced it, whereby, for example, the experiencer believes she viewed the physical world from a position apart from her physical body and/or traveled immaterially to a heavenly realm, was greeted by physically deceased loved ones, and became aware of the justice of the afterlife—similar to Plato’s description of the Myth of Er in the *Republic* (Plato, 1992, Book X). Accepting the experience as they actually experienced it, the NDEr, both immediately and upon reflection over time, manifests physical, social, psychological, and spiritual life changes. In short, the supernaturalist’s motivation for the kind of life change described in the literature is conceptual; more specifically, the transformation has a *teleos*, a purpose, an end; people largely change their lives to prepare for the afterlife, to move into the light and have a favorable experience.

In contrast, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) replaced this literalist or “surface” story of the NDE with a “deeper,” metaphorical meaning rooted entirely in the ubiquitous earthly human pursuits of increasing one’s prosocial behavior (Fischer, 2020, p. 174). Thus, in the

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin account, *all* NDEs should be interpreted metaphorically; more specifically, as a “voyage,” one “guided by a benevolent parental (father) figure (or figures),” essentially an “authority figure,” who is virtuous—known, knowledgeable, benevolent, patient, kind, and loving (Fischer, 2020, pp. 174–176)—and who encourages more moral action in life.

From this perspective, the story of NDEs is akin to important portions of most people’s lives. They travel through life guided by parents and others who provide structure and moral standards to prepare them for, say, other relationships, friendships, marriage, education, and jobs. Accordingly, in an NDE, one travels from the “known” and comfortable to the “unknown” but hopeful. The experiencer usually feels “peace” and “joy” during this travel because the guide(s) are recognized, loving, and helpful, showing one the way. In physical life, most people are comfortable with their grade-school teachers whom they see as caring people, preparing students for a future job and/or college; that is, that are known and virtuous caretakers that guide and prepare their students for an unknown but valuable future. For Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, this history that nearly all people have is analogous with one’s metaphorical travel during an NDE in a tunnel being guided by a bright and peaceful light. The light is a guide to prepare one for what is to come, and the heavenly scenes are reported as vast and unknown. In short, the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin view is that human biographies are full of events in which they are guided and dependent but later transition to independence, a process that seems to be illustrated metaphorically in NDEs (Fischer, 2020, p. 176).

For Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016), the biographical story of NDEs connects the beauty and the meaning of life with the fact that we humans are finite, that life is important, and that throughout life, most people have been guided morally by exemplary people. An NDE, in a sense, calls the NDEr out of the world, isolates her as an individual, reminds her of past training and the caring exemplars who got her where she is, and highlights that she is responsible for her future. The NDE, essentially, nudges experiencers to live authentically by imitating moral caretakers, those who, in the early stages in life, put in the time, cared, and did, at times, supererogatory acts, guiding others along the path. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin replaced the “awe and wonder” of the supernaturalist afterlife and the motivation stemming from moral preparation with the emotive response to the moral excellence of parental figures. Fischer (2020) explained, that

our guides both teach and model greater prosocial and moral behavior . . . Awe and wonder come from recognition of the love and sacrifice of our parents, and increased prosociality and moral concern comes from a desire to learn from their teachings and to follow their example. (p. 175)

His claim is akin to that of virtue ethicists: People want—or should want—to become like morally exemplary people of our past.

For Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016), the Naturalist Thesis eliminates what they view as the speculative ontology of the supernaturalist and replaces it with a morally guided story. Although an important component of aftereffects is enhanced morality, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argued that supernaturalism is not the only or the best way to make one moral. Books on ethics, movies, and, even, natural phenomena such as the Grand Canyon inspire some people to be increasingly moral (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, ch. 10). The NDE story, they asserted, is like other great journeys, such as are found in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which, although fictional, inspire and motivate moral change.

The Afterlife Thesis

According to the Afterlife Thesis, at least some, if not all, NDEs are objectively real: One literally leaves one's body and has paranormal experiences involving the physical, material world and/or travels to and interacts with a heavenly, transmaterial realm. Many NDErs had a life review in which they experienced being on the receiving end of both their benevolent and malevolent actions. Veridical perceptions, in which the NDEr gains knowledge in the material or transmaterial aspects of the NDE that they could not have known through normal means yet is subsequently verified as accurate, is the best evidence for the objective reality of NDEs (Greyson, 2021, ch. 6; Habermas & Moreland, 2004, pp. 155–164, 210–216; Holden, 2009; Rivas et al., 2016; Sabom, 1982). Examples of veridical perception include NDErs who have conversations with deceased family members they did not know but later recognized in old family photos and with deceased people whom the NDEr thought were alive and are subsequently discovered to have died unbeknownst to the NDEr.

After an NDE, most experiencers undergo a life transformation with both short- and long-term changes. Many NDErs feel an ongoing connection to the greater reality they experienced, believe they will return to it, and, based on this belief, prepare for the afterlife, which

typically includes becoming more moral and often includes leaving jobs that are highly competitive, leaving a psychologically toxic relationship, and focusing on long-term positive projects to enhance their lives. Regarding NDErs' changed beliefs, Long (2011) wrote,

Belief in an afterlife is one of the most common NDE aftereffects. It's easy to understand why NDErs generally believe there is an afterlife. They believe they've been there. They may have experienced realms that are magnificent beyond anything on earth" (pp. 95–96).

The following testimony from one of Moody's (1978) interviews shows that the NDEr considered the NDE to have been a real experience and consequently came to a mind-body dualist conclusion:

I was more conscious of my mind at the time than of that physical body. *The mind was the most important part*, instead of the shape of the body. And before, all my life, it had been exactly reversed. The body was my main interest and what was going on in my mind, well, it was just going on, and that's all. But after this happened, my mind was the main point of attraction, and the body was second—it was only something to encase my mind. I didn't care if I had a body or not. It didn't matter because for all I cared *my mind was what was important*. (p. 88)

In another of Moody's (1978) interviews, an NDEr gave further testimony to a changed belief regarding an afterlife:

I suppose this experience molded something in my life. I was only a child when it happened, only ten, but now, my entire life through, I am *thoroughly convinced that there is life after death*, without a shadow of a doubt, and I am not afraid to die. I am not. Some people I have known are so afraid, so scared. I always smile to myself when I hear people doubt that there is an afterlife, or say, "When you're dead, you're gone." I think to myself, "They really don't know." (p. 90)

Moody's (1978) findings are not anomalous. NDE researchers such as Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, Melvin Morse, Jeffery Long, Bruce Greyson, and Janice Miner Holden have provided cases of NDEs with veridical perception, along with paranormal and transcendental components, in which both NDErs and they have come to dualist and supernatural conclusions (Holden et al., 2009; Rivas et al., 2016). The plausibility of the Afterlife Thesis provides an NDEr with reasons, an impetus, to change one's behavior, which corresponds to a high probability that if one has an NDE, it is likely one will manifest positive and highly transformative life changes. The Afterlife Thesis has notable explanatory power, providing an explanation that makes the change

probable (Craig, 2001, ch. 10). If, based on an NDE, one believes—or, as NDErs would say, *knows* from experience—that the afterlife is true, it is likely that one will have transformative change.

This is the positive case for the beliefs arising from NDEs that motivate aftereffects subsequent to NDEs. In what follows, I continue the argument by casting doubt on the plausibility of the Naturalist Thesis.

Problems With the Naturalist Thesis

The Descriptive Problem

In this section I argue that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's (2016; Fischer, 2020) description of the emotions and beliefs that bring about both short-term and long-term aftereffects is not based on adequate evidence; it amounts to a logically possible explanation but one not backed by evidence. Their explanation is based entirely on the apparently deductive arguments for supernaturalism given by only two NDErs, Eben Alexander and Todd Burpo, both of whom claimed that NDEs and aftereffects can be explained *only* by the Afterlife Thesis. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin considered this claim implausible and, as an alternative, provided their possible, naturalist, storytelling interpretation, which they explained well. However, I contend that for their explanation of NDEs to achieve the status of *best*—in particular, better than an explanation based on the Afterlife Thesis—it must be not only a logically possible but also probable and backed by plausible evidence. To the contrary, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin did not provide statistical evidence for their explanation.

In fact, the evidence from research on NDEs indicates that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's "storytelling" explanation is highly unlikely. This evidence takes two forms: NDErs' own belief in the reality of their experience and their subsequent belief in the reality of an afterlife.

Evidence regarding NDErs' own belief in the reality of their experience came initially from numerous cases in which NDErs frequently remarked that their NDEs either were real or were "realer than real," that is, felt subjectively to be more real than normal waking life (Zingrone & Alvarado, 2009). Quantitative data in this regard comes from research by Jeffery Long, a physician and the founder of the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF), who has published a website (nderf.org) containing the largest ongoing collection of NDE narratives available publicly online, with 4,900 entries and growing. At this website, people of many nationalities, religions,

and languages have provided testimonies in their own words of their NDEs and have completed a questionnaire inquiring into specific aspects of their experiences and aftereffects. Although some NDErs are initially reluctant to share their experiences, in time they become less reticent, and most NDErs are forthcoming with their testimonies (Atwater, 2003; Noyes et al., 2009).

Over the years, Long has revised the questionnaire. One such revision included the addition of the question, “How do you currently view the reality of your experience?” As of 2014, 1,112 NDErs’ questionnaires had included this item, of whom 1,006 NDErs had responded (p. 379):

Experience was definitely real	962	95.6 %
Experience was probably real	40	4.0 %
Experience was probably not real	3	0.3 %
Experience was definitely not real	1	0.1 %

Long (2014) summarized, “The great majority of more than 1,000 near-death experiencers believed that their experiences were definitely real” (p. 379). These NDErs represented a broad spectrum of demographics, including “many physicians, scientists, attorneys, and nurses” (p. 379)—people who presumably are critical thinkers not prone to misinterpretation of their subjective experiences.

Data regarding NDErs’ subsequent belief in an afterlife comes from cardiologist Pim van Lommel and colleagues’ (2001) study of 344 patients from 10 Dutch hospitals who had been resuscitated from cardiac arrest. Of these, 62 (18%) reported an NDE (p. 2039). In 2- and 8-year follow-up, the research team interviewed the two groups—NDErs and non-NDErs—concerning their aftereffects. They found that “most patients who did not have an NDE did not believe in a life after death at 2-year or 8-year follow-up” (pp. 2042–2043), whereas “most NDErs strongly believed in an afterlife. Positive changes were more apparent at 8 years than at 2 years of follow-up” (p. 2043).

According to these data, most NDErs believe that both their NDEs were, and an afterlife is, real. It is unclear to me on what authority Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, neither of whom, to my knowledge, has reported ever having himself had an NDE, can declare that the testimonials of thousands of actual NDErs are invalid: that contrary to those testimonials of the reality of their experiences and of an afterlife, NDEs are actually mere “narratives” whose transformative power is based on their ability to remind experiencers metaphorically of their earthly life experiences with parental guides. In short, the data actu-

ally argue against the Naturalist Thesis interpretation of the nature of NDEs.

The Normative Problem

It may be the case that the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016; Fischer, 2020) thesis is not only a descriptive account of the patient's emotions and beliefs that result in aftereffects but is also a normative one, prescribing how an NDEr *ought* to interpret her experience. On this argument, they hold that naturalism is an exemplary explanatory thesis, which gives it a high antecedent or prior probability, before considering local evidence, such as experiencers' own accounts and documented aftereffects; based on this assumption, they conclude one should adopt the best of the naturalistic explanations, irrespective of how unlikely it may be. In short, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argued that one should adopt the Naturalist Thesis explanation of NDEs and their aftereffects because naturalism is a well-established paradigm.

I hold that, along with the descriptive problem discussed above, the normative version of the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin thesis is also problematic. I question the core premise: the background probability that naturalism is plausible. If the implausibility of naturalism is established, then there is no reason to hold that one should adopt the naturalistic explanation of NDEs and their aftereffects, without consideration of plausible evidence. In what follows, I will list some of the reasons why naturalism is not plausible. Many of these arguments have well-known counterexamples and responses in the professional philosophical literature which, for the most part, I will not pursue in this paper. Rather, the goal of the following brief arguments is to show that naturalism is not an obviously true thesis but is most likely equiprobable with supernaturalism, rendering actual data about NDEs and their aftereffects crucial in evaluating whether the Afterlife Thesis explanation is true. Following are some of the well-known core arguments against naturalism.

1. *The success of science does not increase the probability of the Naturalist Thesis over the Afterlife Thesis.* It is undeniable that science has been successful at explaining how things work and making life comfortable through inventions, but, despite these accomplishments, it is another issue to assert a strict ontology, as the naturalist does, holding that only material objects exist and that there is no trans-physical self or immaterial God. I highlight that it is consistent to hold that science is successful and, also,

that there is a transcendent self that escapes the body when there is a close brush with death or some other extreme circumstance. Supernaturalism and science are not incompatible, and, thus, the success of science should increase the probability of not only naturalism but also supernaturalism. This conclusion casts doubt on one of the important strands of evidence for naturalism.

2. *The Naturalist Thesis does not adequately explain NDEs.* To establish this point, I will present two core arguments. There are, however, many others.

First, I assert that one should believe the supernaturalist's account of NDEs because of the phenomenon of continued consciousness. Research indicates that NDErs—even those who lose physical consciousness—have the subjective experience of continued consciousness—in some cases while having a non-functioning brain. During this continued consciousness, many NDErs experience vivid, complex, and ultra-real perceptions, which should be impossible based on materialist science (van Lommel, 2010). Thus, there is reason to hold that the mind can function independent of the brain. Some skeptics, however, claim that NDEs occur in the reviving brain, as it first begins to function while returning to consciousness (Fischer, 2020). Once again, data provide a means to assess this claim. Many NDEs are associated with full anesthesia in surgery or with cardiac arrest. “When coming out of anesthesia . . . most people experience a profound sense of confusion and disorientation. It takes a while for the brain to actually wake up, even after you are conscious” (TAHOEDOC, 2017); confusion and disorientation also characterize return to consciousness following cardiac arrest without anesthesia (van Lommel, 2010). By contrast, most NDE accounts are completely lucid (Long, 2014). Thus, the likelihood that NDEs in people who have been unconscious occurred during the return to consciousness is, in light of actual data, implausible.

Second, the naturalistic account of NDEs is unlikely because of the phenomenon of veridical perception. Whereas over 100 cases of verified-as-accurate AVP associated with NDEs have been collected, extremely few cases exist of presumed AVP later shown to involve some error; based on these data, many researchers have concluded that the mind can function independent of the body (Holden, 2009; Sabom, 1982; Sartori, 2008). Skeptics have argued that because a few hospital studies designed to capture AVP under controlled circumstances have failed, AVP must not be a real phenomenon (Augustine, 2007; Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2020, p. 153). However, these six studies do not provide strong evidence, involving extremely small sample size of 12 NDEs, and it seems unlikely that someone experiencing an NDE would focus on a message or a series of numbers planted in one's hospital room

during what seem to be the last moments of life (Greyson, 2021, p. 73).

In summary, the Naturalist Thesis fails to account for the phenomena of both continued consciousness and veridical perception during NDEs.

3. *Naturalism cannot explain objective morality.* For the naturalist, we humans are exclusively material, biological organisms; there is no God, and there are neither souls nor anything immaterial. From this philosophical perspective, there are only physical states of affairs known empirically. All knowledge comes from the senses, and the senses tell us how things are; for example, the observation, “The woman jumped into the car” tells us what happened, how things are, not how things *ought to be*. Thus, from this perspective, only descriptive, empirical statements are justified; normative phenomena are not included/addressed. Morality, however, is normative; thus, there is no morality in the naturalist’s toolbox, which, at least provisionally, presents a serious problem. This is the well-known is-ought problem explained by David Hume (2000, 3.1.1) and the naturalistic fallacy of G. E. Moore (2004, ch. 1, section 12).

One may argue in response to this problem that we should take the norms that we are given as mind-dependent truths. For example, suppose one intuitively feels that murder is wrong and claims this is a sufficient justification not to enact it (Street, 2015). When we turn to the metaethical explanation of normativity, that is, the explanatory story for why we should obey ethical dictates, a common naturalist response is that we should obey our normative nudges because doing so is evolutionarily advantageous: By acting accordingly, one will most likely ensure the continuation of the species. In response to this claim, there are two problems.

First, it seems to me that the explanatory story fails to establish normativity; it fails to explain why we ought to take the nudges from reason as authoritative. Such evolutionary hunches—for example, the command of reason not to murder and not to torture the innocent—are, on this explanation, a byproduct of haphazard causes brought about through the process of natural selection and random mutation. For example, the naturalist could hold that Smith *ought* to obey norm X because it will continue the species, and he ought to promote the continuation of the human species—for example, by participating in altruistic, other-oriented actions—because this is a norm that humans obtained through chance processes. It seems to me this naturalist explanation does not have a strong moral pull to override one’s self-regarding, non-altruistic desires. Thus, it provides a weak basis for normativity. On the other hand, the supernaturalist’s conclusion that divine decrees/commands are standards for a system of justice such

that good actions are rewarded and unjust ones punished provides sufficient moral motivation to override personal desires in favor of altruistic ones. On the supernatural metaethical account, the good is not good because of haphazard causes but because of a system of justice organized by an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent designer.

Second, we should not adopt an evolutionary metaethical naturalistic account of morality because evolutionary-grounded principles are transitory and relative. A principle may seem immutable now, but, over time, the processes of evolution necessitate change. For instance, slavery is now a morally repugnant act, but it was not so in the past and may not be in the future. Thus, mind-dependent moral truths resulting from the tumultuous processes of evolution do not establish a viable account of morality. Given this reasoning, there are no objective moral norms for the naturalist, which is a remarkable conclusion, given the present topic of NDE aftereffects whereby research has shown that NDErs become more moral. If the naturalist's worldview does not include objective morality, then it cannot explain increased morality in the aftermath of an NDE.

4. *Naturalists cannot explain freedom and moral responsibility.* Naturalists have two options on the topic of free will and moral responsibility: causal determinism or compatibilism. If the former is advocated, the philosophical theory uncontroversially states that there is no freedom or moral responsibility (Mele, 2014, ch. 6); human actions are a result of physical causes ruled by the laws of physics, chemistry, psychology, and sociology. If, on the other hand, the latter is adopted, there also is no viable explanation of freedom, for the compatibilist holds that causal determinism is true and events cannot be otherwise.

Despite this state of affairs, compatibilists explain that determinism is consistent with free will. On the traditional, libertarian notion of freedom, one is free if and only if one could have done otherwise. For example, Smith can choose to be a philosophy or a psychology major. Suppose he chooses to the former. His choice is free only in case he could have taken another route and chosen to be a psychology major. Thus, metaphysical libertarianism is a blatant denial of causal determinism. The compatibilist, on the other hand, asserts that freedom is being able to do what one wants (Mele, 2014, ch. 6). Returning to the Smith example, imagine Smith reflects on the virtues of the two majors and decides, again, to be a philosopher. Suppose also that based on his psychology he could not have chosen otherwise. He is causally determined, but compatibilists point out that it is what he wants; consequently, he is free. In response, this is clearly a diminished/deflationary account of freedom.

Freedom and determinism are, it seems to me, incompatible. If this is so, then it is a devastating conclusion for the naturalist. If one is not free—at least, in the libertarian sense—one cannot actively choose to be more moral, more altruistic, and more connected to others.

5. *Naturalists cannot explain meaning and purpose.* A common feature of long-term NDE aftereffects is a stronger belief in the meaning of life (Noyes et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the naturalist cannot explain how life can have objective meaning. For instance, Fischer (2020, ch. 1) sided with Thomas Nagel, Richard Taylor, and the famous existentialist, Albert Camus, who claimed that there is no objective meaning of life because, according to naturalism, there is nothing outside of nature to give an objective meaning or purpose. Fischer, however, provided a mitigated response and argued that there is meaning “in” life, whereby he took a mind-dependent conception of meaning. For him, one uses one’s own subjective values to deem whether one’s life went well or whether one life is better than another. There are, however, no true standards in the objective, third-person sense but only one’s personal judgment, which presents a problem.

The lack of an objective meaning of life poses a problem for the naturalistic explanation of aftereffects, for research shows that NDErs come to have a stronger notion of purpose and meaning of life. The naturalist, on the other hand, does not have a viable account of objective purpose or meaning.

The preceding five points provide reason not to be confident of naturalism as a general explanatory hypothesis: The theory fails to explain NDEs, objective morality, freedom and responsibility, and the meaning of life. Notice, however, that the supernaturalist hypothesis does not have this problem. First, the supernaturalist does not have the Humean is-ought problem, for all knowledge is not known *a posteriori*. Rather, there are absolute and universal truths that are timeless, known *a priori*. Second, the supernaturalist can explain freedom and responsibility, for the theist’s ontology includes a transmatural self that is largely outside of material causation but can cause physical changes. Thus, there is ground for denying causal determinism and affirming metaphysical libertarianism. Third, the supernaturalist can adequately explain an objective meaning to life, for there are objective moral standards that give life meaning and a God that gives purpose to each life.

Given these arguments, one ought not to adopt the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016; Fischer, 2020) explanation of NDEs and their aftereffects based on an assumption that naturalism is highly likely

as a background probability. There are reasons to hold that naturalism is not probable. Perhaps one may argue that the two views are equiprobable, again, as a prior probability. If this argument is granted, then naturalism and supernaturalism are on equal footing when considering, in this case, NDEs and their aftereffects. For this reason, we should deny the main premise for the naturalist's normative argument for Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's account of NDEs and their aftereffects, which eliminates the normative argument.

The LSD Interpretation Problem

Another problem for the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016, Fischer, 2020) thesis is that there are no (or few) instances of their virtuous caregiver explanation. I have found no case of someone who has had an NDE, believed it was a fiction but valuable, and, on the basis that the experience was an abstract depiction of the voyage of life, underwent a transformational change. To abate this problem, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin provided evidence for naturalistic life changes. They held that it is not exclusively supernatural events that inspire "awe" and "hope," that motivate change, but, in addition, that physical experiences, such as the observation of the "Grand Canyon" or the "sunset on the Pacific Ocean" spark human emotions and inspire change.

In my view, however, these naturalistic experiences do not seem to motivate the long-term transformation of the kind NDErs experience (Noyes et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) emphatically disagreed. They wrote, "How could viewing the Grand Canyon make one a better person? That's a good question. But the point is that it can. It does. People have long recognized the transformative power of coming into contact with the natural world" (pp. 112–113). Their response is that naturalistic life transformations are possible and do occur. However, the issue here is probabilistic. The data show, again, that the great majority of NDErs believe in the afterlife and experience significant and lasting aftereffects, which is a strong correlation in support of the Afterlife Thesis. To cite support at least as strong, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin need to go beyond a claim of possibility and occasional occurrence and provide statistical evidence showing that the great majority of people who visit the Grand Canyon have a profound and lasting transformational life change. More specifically, they need to provide evidence that a large percent of people who have an NDE believe it is false but valuable, leading them to harken back to their upbringing and the virtues of their parental guides.

To provide better evidence on this point, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) turned to Oliver Sacks's (2012) account of an LSD trip that had many of the characteristics of an NDE. Their strategy was to show a case in which an experiencer believed their experience to have been a fiction yet manifested aftereffects that were meaningful and transformational. In Sack's example, one LSD experiencer reported having a drug-induced hallucination in which he communicated telepathically; experienced hyper-sensation with clarity and vividness that he perceived to be more real than physical reality; had an out-of-body experience, followed later by perception of a tunnel with a bright light at the end; felt immersed in love and peace; communicated with deceased loved ones; had a life review; and, most importantly, had immediate and, possibly, long-term aftereffects. The experience had nearly the full gambit of NDE features, but only one type of what Holden (2012) classified as a spiritual aftereffect (p. 66). On this point, the LSD user told Sacks, "I feel a special connection to every day, that even the simple and mundane have such power and meaning" (Sacks, 2012, p. 102; Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, pp. 161–162).

I find this case inadequate to exemplify an experience that the experiencer considers fictional yet is transformed by it. Sacks, Fischer, and Mitchell-Yellin argued that the seemingly supernatural experience was actually naturalistically drug-induced, and the experiencer interpreted the experience as a "trip," a deceptive experience; thus, the spiritual aftereffect was naturalistic in origin. Their argument, however, is inferential and not explicitly stated by the drug-user's own testimony. In fact, there is ground for holding that the experiencer believed the NDE-like event to be veridical, a depiction of reality—consistent with how the vast majority of NDErs perceive their NDEs to have been real. After the LSD experience, the experiencer told Sacks, "That day will live with me forever; I feel I was shown *a side of life that most people can't even imagine*. I feel a special connection to every day, that even the simple and mundane have such power and meaning (Sacks, 2012, p. 102, emphasis added)." The drug-user's testimony is that his life is now meaningful because he has been "shown a side of life that most people can't even imagine." I take "shown" to mean "revealed," "uncovered," or "unveiled" to him, and, further, the content he discovered, he asserted, is "a side of life that most people can't even imagine," which I take to be his belief in the reality of the seemingly supernatural events he has described. The experiencer takes himself to know what most others do not, which seems to indicate he believed in the reality of the experience.

Note that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016) seem to have assumed that if the NDE features occurred while the subject was under the influence of a drug, then they are obviously hallucinations and not real. Research, however, has shown that NDE-like experiences sometimes occur in association with drug use, including LSD, as well as other non-life-threatening circumstances such as during sleep, after fainting, during meditation, and under the influence of alcohol. A comparison of NDEs in life-threatening circumstances and NDE-like experiences in non-life-threatening circumstances showed no significant difference in either the content or the intensity of the experiences; they are phenomenologically equivalent (Charland-Verville et al., 2014). In an earlier critique of Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's 2016 book, Mays and Mays (2017) stated that

psychedelics induce *both* ordinary, unreal hallucinations and the normal transmateral experiences in NDEs of the coherent, meaningful, nonpathological religious/spiritual/transpersonal type, which despite being "hallucinatory," nevertheless include veridical (real) perceptions of physical reality. The second half of [Sacks's cited] LSD trip matches a typical NDE because it *was* an NDE" (p. 83).

To substantiate this claim, Mays and Mays referenced studies that indicate notable differences between, on the one hand, hallucinations and similar experiences and, on the other hand, NDEs and NDE-like experiences. The former, they asserted, do not have a common theme, are experienced as "dream-like," are subsequently deemed to have been fictional, and are forgotten with time. By contrast, NDE-like experiences have a common theme, are experienced as "definitely real" both upon immediate recall and subsequently, and are recalled vividly, even after decades (pp. 79–80).

Thus, an interpretation of the second half of the LSD trip as an actual NDE or equivalent NDE-like experience seems more likely to be valid. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2016), however, did not consider this alternative. They assumed that because the experience occurred under the influence of a drug, it was a natural event and the experiencer believed it to be natural, which is an instance of presuming what one should prove, the fallacy of begging the question.

Also, it seems unclear how to evaluate the LSD trip as evidence. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's (2016) argument entails the inference that because NDEs are supposedly explained by physiological and chemical causes, then the *value* of NDEs is also explained by storytelling narratives. In particular, they contended that such experiences

should be interpreted as parental guided journeys that afterwards nudge experiencers to be like their parents or lead them to reason that they ought to be like their virtuous caretakers. There, however, is no evidence that the LSD user adopted any portion of the Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin account of the experience itself or its aftereffects.

Conclusion

There are strong reasons to hold that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's (2016; Fischer, 2020) thesis fails to satisfactorily explain NDEs or their aftereffects. As a descriptive, psychological thesis, I showed that it is not based on statistical evidence and is in tension with various studies on aftereffects. As a normative thesis, holding that we *ought* to adopt the best naturalist explanation of aftereffects because naturalism is well grounded, I proposed a number of explanatory problems: continued consciousness in an unfunctional brain, veridical NDE perception, objective morality, free will and responsibility, and the meaning of life. I argued that naturalism has severe weaknesses that can be accommodated by a supernaturalist thesis. Based on these arguments, the naturalist story-telling explanation of NDE aftereffects requires probable evidence that it does not produce. Last, I argue that Fischer's example of an NDE-like experience after an LSD trip is not a good example. For one, I argued that the drug user, like most NDErs, believed the experience was real, which is contrary to Fischer's thesis that the experience is not real but is merely metaphorical. As well, the experience probably *was* real, for the features of the drug user's experience were more like an NDE than the common features of a hallucination. Last, the experience did not have any testimonial account of the drug user interpreting the experience in Fischer's metaphorical way. My conclusion is that the Naturalist Thesis does not adequately explain NDEs or the vast array of their aftereffects, whereas the Afterlife Thesis is consistent with both the experience and its aftermath.

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