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## Introduction

No aspect of science and research has been discussed more emotionally than the topic of near-death experiences. The media have shown continued interest in this question for several decades now. One reason may be that such experiences fall in the overlap between neurological sciences, psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, and the science of religion, something that may also explain the broad interest of the general public. The very term of *near-death* experience reveals its emotional content. It is a term which suggests knowledge of one's own existence at the dividing line between life and death. But how might we apprehend such knowledge? Could such experience be verified by scientific methods, and if so, how could it be explained?

The multitude of views and models purporting explanation already indicates that near-death research is something of a tightrope walk between rationally explainable theories and the sphere of belief. But here the traditional quarrels between science and religion are not really the focus of public attention. Quite the contrary in fact: esoteric constructions which include occultism, superstition, and all kinds of spirituality have become more and more prominent. In this context, there is an urgent need for a critical review, and indeed, one which examines the way the natural sciences can throw light on this matter. This is the main aim of the book. Chapter 2 deals with historical aspects, while Chap. 3 discusses problems with the term "near-death experiences". The rest of the book considers models for medical explanation. Technical terms are explained in an appendix at the end of the book. It is my wish that the book will stimulate new and critical views on the topic of "near-death experience". To my mind, continually bringing one's own convictions into question is a precondition, not just for scientific work, but for any intellectual progress. Moreover, in these days when confident, selfish, and showy behaviour seem to be prized, a little humility would be in order, given the imperfections of human understanding against the backdrop of our endless universe.

Despite the long history of debate and research regarding near-death experiences, several myths have nevertheless set in:

- Near-death experiences already appear in reports from ancient times, whence they bear the stamp of immemorial knowledge.
- Near-death experiences have unique characteristics which set them apart from similar experiences in other circumstances than clinical death.
- Near-death experiences are generated when brain function is completely absent.
- Near-death experiences provide a proof of the existence of god or the supernatural.
- Near-death experiences provide a proof that god or the supernatural does not exist.

These myths will be investigated in the following pages.

Near-Death Experiences

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