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Is There Historical Evidence of Near-Death Experiences or do We Merely See What We Want to See?

2.1 The Wondrous World of the Dutch Painter

The beginning of the 16th century was a time of many problems in Europe: pestilence, the early stages of a period of climate change which we call today the Little Ice Age, and hostile armies threatening Europe from all sides. It is no surprise therefore that many people already feared the approaching apocalypse, and it is perhaps no coincidence that this period has produced some of the strangest and most mysterious paintings. One of these, which is attributed to the painter Hieronymus Bosch (born around 1450 in 's-Hertogenbosch and died in 1516, *ibid.*) by many but not all art historians, is still a subject of fascination today. Not only does it depict fabulous creatures, but it also deals with one of the most important issues for human beings: the question of life after death.

The central topic of the painting *Ascent of the Blessed* is the ascent of the soul into heaven, a topic that is deeply embedded in our civilization. The painting, oil on wood, was done in the years 1500 to 1504, and can be seen in the Doge's Palace in Venice. It illustrates how decedents move through a kind of tunnel, at the end of which is a very bright light. So is this artistic freedom or insight into some real experience? (Fig. 2.1)

Amazingly, this painting is the one most often reproduced in publications dealing with the topic of near-death experience. Indeed, it has already gained an iconographic significance: anyone who sees the painting already knows what the publication is about. But one should really highlight other features. To begin with, the painting is one of four panels entitled *Visions of Hereafter*. The polyptych begins with *Terrestrial Paradise*. This is followed by *Ascent of the Blessed*, *Fall of the Damned*, and *Hell*. It is still a matter of debate whether Bosch's panels were in any way inspired by similar paintings from the Dutch painter Dieric Bouts (born around 1410/20 in Haarlem, died in 1475 in Leuven) (Bosing 2012). In the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the biblical account of the last judgement, which falls upon everyone



Fig. 2.1 Hieronymus Bosch: "Ascent of the Blessed", oil on wood, detail

after death and which provides all those who suffered from injustice on Earth with transcendental redress, was an important topic of artistic depiction. In this content, it is worth remembering an approach to that same theme in literature, long before Bosch's time, by Dante Alighieri (born 1265 in Florence, died 1321 in Ravenna). Making full use of artistic freedom, he travelled through hell, purgatory, and paradise accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil.

Unfortunately, too little is known about the life of Hieronymus Bosch to provide a satisfactory explanation of the *Ascent of the Blessed* on the basis of his biographical background. As Bosing (2012, p. 38) has argued, the funnel-shaped light could just have been inspired by the astrological signs of his time. Indeed, anyone who looks carefully at the painting will easily recognize six regular ring-shaped sections in the funnel. Another author, Schürmeyer (1923), emphasizes the symbolic content in all Bosch's work (Fig. 2.2):

Bosch is anything but the inventor of all the thousand variants of demons and nuisances; he certainly did not shape the well known proverbs which he had

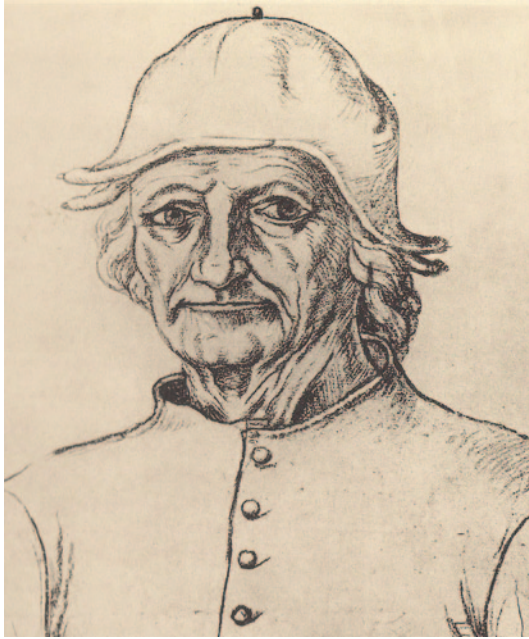


Fig. 2.2 Self-portrait of Hieronymus Bosch or posthumous portrait attributed to Jacques Le Boucq. (Born 1520, Valenciennes; died 1573). Arras/France, municipal library

painted allegorically. He only put new ideas in painting, and the way he created them characterizes him as an artist and man. (p. 31)

2.2 If I Have not Charity, I am Nothing—Essential Questions of Our Existence

Half a millennium after Bosch, the American psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody (born 1944 in Porterdale, USA) published a collection of near-death experiences. Some of the stories seem to suggest an association with Bosch's painting. People who were clinically dead but subsequently brought back to life by reanimation also remembered a tunnel with bright light at its end. Even today many of the people concerned agree upon the artistic intentions of Hieronymus Bosch and interpret their own experiences as epiphany, that is, the appearance of a deity, or a glimpse of the afterworld. But is there another possible explanation? Could there also be a rational view? Are there scientific clues as to the nature of such experiences; experiences which may have been familiar to many generations of people?

Raymond A. Moody identified similarities in the near-death experiences of many people, with regard to both content and timing—a view which can no longer be upheld now that we possess the findings of much more research. This will be discussed further below.

According to Moody (1975) then, one can identify the following sequence of experiences in clinical death, while the exact time at which the experiences originated remains unknown. Each subject reports things they experienced, at times of varying length after the event. First, they experience unpleasant noises or a pervasive tolling or buzzing. Then the tunnel phenomenon occurs. They feel as though they are moving through a long and dark tunnel. Then they seem to leave their own body and view it from a distance. Light or an illuminated being appears, and the person “sees” spiritual versions of relatives or friends who have already died. This is accompanied by feelings of love and warmth. After that, their whole life passes by like a film.

It is surprising that, not only have the tunnel phenomenon and perception of light already become an important part of the way we imagine life near death, but even the film-like view of one’s own life is considered to be a typical experience for such a state. For instance, the latter is often used in a metaphoric way by film directors when a screen hero dies. But contrary to the assumption of a strict order and clear pattern, reports on near-death experiences actually differ enormously. The following examples taken from the author’s own investigations in Uzbekistan (Engmann and Turaeva 2013) will illustrate this.

A 39 year old man we interviewed had been in a car accident 3 months previously. He had been crushed inside the badly damaged vehicle and lost consciousness. When he came round, he saw doctors around him. He remembers that he wanted to go to the toilet and talked to the physicians. Afterwards he underwent an operation on the abdomen. Two days after the operation, he fell into a coma for 3 days, and was reanimated with electroshock therapy. When he regained consciousness, he remembers hearing voices like “*on a bazaar when everything swooshs.*” He also saw his grandfather wearing a “chalat”—the traditional clothes. His grandfather said something to the patient which he did not understand. But he reports that “*others asked me why I was lying down.*” However, the patient could not remember either when the vision occurred or who these “others” were. Finally, the patient said: “*I know about such things that people see, that the soul comes out when the heart stops, but I didn’t see such stuff.*” (p. 3)

Another man had a stomach operation, but apparently no reanimation. He claimed to have had a near-death experience. He saw the white coats of doctors standing in a row, but there were no people in them. There were nine

of these, and the fourth one along was dancing. He drew his vision like this:
 □□□□□□□□ (p. 5)

A woman who was reanimated reported that she was flying over the Earth. Everything was green and there were beautiful flowers; she had never seen such beauty in her whole life. She came to a beautiful house and met her mother, who was already dead. Her mother told her: “*You have to go back, you have children!*” (p. 5)

Having been in a state close to death and knowing that one has escaped from death at the very last moment is a shocking realization that leaves a lasting impression on anyone who has experienced such a situation. In some cases, it can seriously alter someone’s personal conduct and have a significant influence on their philosophy of life. And if the latter turns around religious convictions, it often happens that near-death experiences are seen as supporting such views. In contrast to personal beliefs of this kind, many protagonists of a metaphysical explanation for near-death experiences take this as proof of the existence of the supernatural. At this point, science, personal interpretation, and religion intermingle. But there are many problems with the current erosion of the interface between science and religion when it comes to near-death experiences. Furthermore, philosophical discussions over the ages have already pointed out severe problems with the notion of a scientific proof of the supernatural. The existence of supernatural phenomena or beings can neither be proved nor refuted by scientific methods. In the case of near-death experiences, it is easy to move directly into the sphere of opinion, personal interpretation, and belief. And this sphere is not only typical for near-death experiences, but affects virtually all fields of everyday life. It includes all the questions formulated by the philosopher Immanuel Kant (born 1724, Königsberg; died 1804, Königsberg) (Fig. 2.3):

What can I know?
 What ought I to do?
 What may I hope?
 What is man?

Thus, discussions about near-death experiences touch upon essential questions of our existence, the meaning of life, and human destiny. But near-death experiences are not the only situation that might make us think about such problems, and require a philosophical or religious approach. Other situations in life can bring about similar needs, such as the advent of a life-threatening cancer. Any such threat to one’s own existence in the imminent future can



Fig. 2.3 Immanuel Kant, vintage postcard after a painting of Fritz Rumpf. (Born 1856, Frankfurt on the Main; died 1927, Potsdam)

lead one to rethink one's life. Those who have lost relatives or close friends often find themselves in a similar situation. In contrast to this, in normal everyday life, the very limitations of that life are usually pushed to the back of our minds.

And yet we all know that the most disastrous experiences of our lives are not the only cause for reflection about the basic problems of philosophy. Humdrum and workaday things can also give occasion to it. A wonderful example is the eulogy of love by Paul the Apostle:

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. (New Testament, 1. Corinthians 13, 2)

And how much astonishment and wonder may be inspired by a glimpse of heaven on a starlit night? So often we can only marvel at our own existence. And it is in this spirit, not from a biographical or emotional standpoint, but from a rational point of view, that we approach our question: what singles out near-death experiences from other psychic experiences?

2.3 Are Abnormal Psychic Sensations a Basis for Exceptional Reports?

The painting by Hieronymus Bosch is not the only item to be considered as reification of near-death experiences. Even reports in old texts are discussed because of possible similarities to near-death experiences. But is every report which contains similar or even the same experiences about a real near-death experience? As we shall see in the following, the term “near-death experience” comprises several different elements. These elements are the many and varied experiences. Each experience on its own is not unique to a state of near-death or clinical death, since such experiences also appear in other conditions of the brain. Those conditions include neurological and psychiatric diseases, conversion disorder (see table p. 53), and sometimes simply abnormal experiences by someone with a perfectly healthy mind, not to mention states of trance and possession and—last but not least—drug abuse. Before we go into detail regarding these examples, we can already identify a difficulty in deciding which of the historical reports are based on which cause or origin of the experiences.

There is another important point. In a strict interpretation of the words, near-death experiences are connected with clinical death, which means that they stand for experiences in a state of near death, immediately prior to the occurrence of death. Such a state of clinical death is potentially reversible by reanimation. This feature distinguishes clinical death from ultimate biological death. If reanimation fails, clinical death passes over to biological death. Cases in which clinical death is survived without severe physical or mental harm imply the availability of emergency service systems and intensive care medicine. Unfortunately, despite the high density of emergency facilities in modern industrial countries, only a few reanimations are actually successful. If we now consider the times when those old reports were drafted, reports today considered by some as descriptions of near-death experiences, we must take into consideration the number of people who might have survived a clinical death without major alteration. It is easy to understand that the number of such people might be extremely low, in view of the fact that there was only very crude medical support in those times.

On the one hand, people with extraordinary experiences or diseases always influence religious thinking in a society. Consider, for instance, what was known as *morbus sacer*, the holy disease, because there was no other explanation for epileptic seizures than possession of the afflicted person by some supernatural force. Or consider the case of Bernadette Soubirous, a girl from the city of Lourdes in the south of France, who had visions of the Virgin Mary in 1858, when she was 14 years old. At first, the Catholic church regarded these visions as an illness, but the ever increasing number of pilgrims seemed to demand a spiritual explanation. Even today—150 years after the visions of Bernadette—Lourdes still remains an important place of pilgrimage. As another example, in 1445, the shepherd Hermann Leicht from the village of Langheim in Germany had three visions of the baby Jesus. The result was the erection of a pilgrimage church *Vierzehnheiligen* (church of 14 saints) in the city of Bad Staffelstein. We can see here how people who have obviously had visual hallucinations have to a certain extent built up our religious views.

One would like to ask how far these phenomena have contributed to shaping religious convictions. From a historical point of view, two main hypotheses present themselves:

- A person with abnormal psychic sensations stands at the very beginning. The person's experiences spread round a certain community and become interpreted as the result of some supernatural influence.
- A society already has a theoretical concept on how to approach the "final questions". Then a person with abnormal psychic sensations comes along and these sensations are taken as a proof of the concept, or influence that concept.

The truth seems to be somewhere in the middle. Myths change over the years. Influence factors are cultural exchange with other societies and the perpetual impact of changes in one's own society. The latter is brought about by advance of (scientific) knowledge, but also by philosophical controversy with religious dogma. A compromise between the two statements could be that there is such a thing as a collective unconscious, as postulated by Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (born 1875, Kesswil; died 1961 Küsnacht). But the assumptions are vague, and transcultural similarities between religious beliefs may well have their origin rather in the above-mentioned Kantian questions (p. 7). After all, it is a basic desire of all peoples everywhere to answer such questions as these.

A fear of **end of life** and a **sense of life** affects everyone regardless of time and culture. Furthermore, other factors shaped early religious thinking: **cyclic elements** in seasons, **dualisms** such as heaven and earth, **fertility** of the earth



Fig. 2.4 Portrait of John Locke, lithograph, c.1840

(which gives birth to plants as though from nothing), the threat to life by **natural disasters**, and many more. This subsequently took on a life of its own and became incorporated in symbolism, rites, and concepts (see the discussion of darkness-light dualism or gematria in the following chapters).

With regard to near-death experiences, the low occurrence rate and miscellaneousness of experiences refute any argumentation in the style of Jung. On the contrary, modern psychoanalysis points to life events and individual development as shaping behaviour and perception rather than inborn or inherited beliefs. This reflects much older philosophical discourse, beginning with the Stoics and later evoked by English philosopher John Locke (born 1632, Wrington; died 1704, Oates) who declared the mind to be a *tabula rasa* at birth, whence only experience causes notions. Locke (1805) wrote as follows (Fig. 2.4):

For to imprint any thing on the mind, without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible. If therefore children and idiots have soul, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths; which since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions. (ch. I, § 5, p. 15)

Furthermore, he opined that simple ideas, “*the materials of all our knowledge, are suggested and furnished to the mind only by those two ways [...] sensation and reflection.*” (ch. II, § 2, p. 93)

Locke is the originator of empiricism and liberalism in philosophy. According to Russell (1969, p. 585), his political doctrines even became a basis for the American constitution. As Russell put it, liberalism “...stood for religious toleration; it was Protestant, but of a latitudinarian rather than of a fanatical kind; it regarded the wars of religion as silly. It valued commerce and industry, and favoured the rising middle class rather than the monarchy and the aristocracy;...” (p. 577).

Locke’s doctrine that all our knowledge derives from experience—and so is a posteriori—is a counterpart to the philosophy of René Descartes (born 1596, La Haye en Touraine—today Descartes; died 1650 Stockholm) and the scholastics which had prevailed hitherto. Followers of Locke were the Irishman George Berkeley (born 1685, County Kilkenny; died 1753, Oxford) and the Scotsman David Hume (born 1711, Edinburgh; died 1776, *ibidem*) who consolidated empiricism. In fact, strict empiricism also raises some problems and leads to solipsism –negation of the real existence of all things which surround the self. So the debate went on, challenged by Immanuel Kant who proposed his “thing in itself” as a solution to the problem, but which also provoked counterarguments.

These irresolutions used the romantic movement in philosophy as an opportunity to revive the concept of dualism between body and soul and the possibility that man could get insights into the things that lie beyond. Near-death experiences played an important role in such argumentation, as we shall see in the following. But flowery and seductive philosophical concepts are not the best. Rather, one should prefer those which mirror life praxis. In this sense, empiricist philosophy gave way to a non-speculative, comparable, and calculable approach to nature in which scientific understanding is possible by observation and experimentation. But Kant’s final questions remain open. It seems man has to face up to and live with imperfection. And near-death experiences do not contribute anything to resolve this impasse.

All in all, at first glance, it is indeed conceivable that some historic reports about near-death like states may have been influenced or provoked by people who really had survived a clinical death. On the other hand, one should make the following point:

Either a physical or psychic abnormality occurs very frequently or repeatedly, or many people share the same abnormality, or else it must be so impressive that the story goes ‘round the world’. If these preconditions are not fulfilled, it is unlikely that the event would make any impression on myths or reports.

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