

**A Critique of Susan Blackmore's Dying to Live and her
Dying Brain Hypothesis**

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Introduction

In my dialogue with skeptics, I often encounter the claim that Susan Blackmore has provided scientific proof that the Near Death Experience results from a dying brain. Skeptics typically argue that her work on NDEs presented in "Dying to Live" disproves the existence of the spirit and an afterlife.

These claims prompted me to read Blackmore's "Dying to Live." The following is a brief critique of the first eight chapters. I should mention that I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in the subject of NDEs who has encountered the skeptical viewpoint. The book itself is a testament to just how shaky the skeptics' argument really is....

The Preface

In the preface, Susan Blackmore makes her prejudices clear. She assumes the viewpoint of the biased skeptic. Though skeptics claim she's an unbiased researcher, her own words belie this claim. She writes:

"It is no wonder that we like to deny death. Whole religions are based on that denial. Turn to religion and you may be assured of eternal life."

She continues:

"Of course, this comforting thought conflicts with science. Science tells us that death is the end and, as so often, finds itself opposing religion."

Her bias and mischaracterization of both religion and science is apparent. Let us inspect her comment: "whole religions are based upon a denial of death." Religion, at its most basic, concerns the spirit and its relationship to the universe. Some religions posit a God, others don't. Some prefer the term (and practice) of spiritualism to religion, as it strips away dogma that might obfuscate the core issue -- the spirit. The premise of almost all religious practice is that man is in essence a spirit or soul that lives beyond body death. This is not a denial of death, as Blackmore suggests, but rather a focus on the life of the spirit which is not subject to body death. No one I know denies the existence of death. The body dies. That is death. The life of the spirit is another matter.

Blackmore assumes there's no spirit and cynically reduces the subject to a denial of death. Of course, if spirit exists and transcends body death (as one of the two hypotheses she's considering postulates), then Susan Blackmore, not religion, is in denial.

On page one, she makes it clear she doesn't intend to explore the subject of NDEs (and the survival of the spirit) with a scientific mind. It is obvious her prejudice, not the research, will dictate her conclusions.

We see further evidence of bias in her statement that belief in life after death conflicts with science, as though "science" were a monolithic authority that decrees "what is" rather than a method of inquiry.

She makes the unsupported statement that "science" tells us death is the end. Of course, this is blatantly false. She may personally believe death is the end, but "science" makes no such statement. Later in the book, we find many researchers with scientific credentials take the opposite position -- science is showing we survive body death.

Certainly I find it appropriate for Blackmore to state her personal belief that we do not survive body death. Presuming to state the position of "science," however, reflects her skeptical bias and diminishes her scientific credibility. "Dying to Live" ends up being a personal argument for the skeptical viewpoint, not scientific proof. It is first and foremost a statement of Blackmore's personal opinion.

Later in the preface, we find another illogical statement that points up her agenda and lack of scientific orientation:

"The problem with evolution is, and has always been, that it leaves little room either for a grand purpose to life or for an individual soul."

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. If a soul or spirit survives body death, as NDE researchers claim, then that spirit has nothing to do with evolution. The spirit is not an evolving bio-organism. The body is an evolving bio-organism, the spirit is not. She uses a biological argument to dismiss a non-biological premise, showing her intention is to dismiss the evidence a priori and substitute her personal biases which lie squarely within the field of evolutionary psychology -- the "man-is-an-animal" school of thought.

Susan Blackmore, in the text that follows, not only fails utterly to provide scientific proof, she fails to even approach the research in a scientific manner. This is greatest failing of "Dying to Live."

Skeptics who claim she is nonbiased are proven wrong, and skeptics who claim she provides scientific proof are shown to be in error.

Chapter One

Susan Blackmore puts forth two competing hypotheses: The Afterlife Hypothesis versus The Dying Brain Hypothesis. The Afterlife Hypothesis assumes spirit survives body death. The Dying Brain Hypothesis assumes the NDE is an artifact of brain chemistry. According to the "dying brain" hypothesis, there is no spirit which survives body death.

The remainder of the book supposedly concerns the arguments for these two conflicting hypotheses. But it doesn't. Blackmore never really presents the Afterlife Hypothesis. She only presents a version intended to be refuted. So much for the skeptics' claim she is unbiased.

When she lists four arguments for the Afterlife Hypothesis, she omits the most important argument (though later in the book she comes to it in passing). This primary argument is the experience of separation of spirit (and its consciousness) from the body. As this is the primary and most basic tenet of the Afterlife Hypothesis, that spirit is different from the body and survives body death, it deserves front-and-center attention. Instead, Blackmore first addresses tangential arguments. I'm not sure to what degree this is intentional.

She fails to formulate a clear and concise statement of what must be proved for each hypothesis. This is the function of a hypothesis -- to present clear statements postulating specific assumptions that can then be inspected. Blackmore leaves the hypothesis statements hazy and ends up concluding that neither has proof, but states her feeling is the Dying Brain Hypothesis must be right, so she assumes it is.

Opinion has value. Conjecture has value. But only when opinion and conjecture are not mistakenly presented as "scientific proof." This IS the skeptics' argument. Yet they quote Blackmore as Scientific Proof when she offers only opinion. By the skeptics' criteria alone, the work does not provide the proof they claim it does.

In NDEer quotes in the first chapter, we find specific references to the experiencer being "outside his/her body." We learn NDEs include the observation of actual proceedings, such as operations, from unusual vantage points. This very salient point is passed over for the time being. One can only guess why she chooses to leave the very essence of the Afterlife Hypothesis out of the picture at this early stage.

Particularly annoying is a brief passage regarding Tibetan Buddhism. In her references to Buddhism, she fails to acknowledge the primary activity of Tibetan Buddhism is to train its initiates to be outside their bodies. Without this understanding, which obviously involves the existence of a spirit separate from body, her passages are misleading and ill-informed to the extreme.

For example, regarding Buddhism, she states:

"The difference between these teachings and the folk-tales we have been considering -- and it is a very big difference -- is that in Buddhism these experiences are not meant to be taken literally..."

Blackmore could not be more wrong. (Perhaps they ban psychologists from visiting monasteries?) Tibetan Buddhism definitely holds to the Afterlife Hypothesis. Even readers with only passing familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism are aware they search for their reincarnated leaders and reinstate them in the monastery. It's quite obvious they take life beyond death very literally. Blackmore misappropriates Buddhist concepts with no understanding that Buddhist practices disprove her Dying Brain Hypothesis!

She provides convincing stories of the tradition of NDEs in Buddhist and Native American circles, then shows their similarity to modern day NDEs. She notes:

"Zaleski sums up the similarities and differences she found between modern and medieval accounts of people who died and were revived again. In both, the first step is a kind of dualistic parting of body and soul, with the separated spirit looking down on its former dwelling place..."

Thus, she arrives at the essence of the Afterlife Hypothesis, the separation of spirit and body. However, she chooses to ignore its significance. (More on this later when we come to her late-in-the-book brush off of this most critical aspect of the Afterlife Hypothesis.)

Her dismissal of the key issue casts doubt on the integrity of her work. She simply cops out with the following:

"Western philosophers and scientists have long argued cogently and powerfully against this dualist view and the few who still defend it ... are in a tiny minority amongst academics."

This is what skeptics call scientific proof? The opinion of a select few, who are not even experts on the subject? In an earlier passage, she notes that well over half the public surveyed believe in life after death, some seventy per cent, then dismisses

"popularity" as a criteria. Now she turns around and uses the same "popularity" criteria for her argument.

She goes on to give her personal opinion:

"The dualist temptation is so great. Just as we do not like to imagine that we will one day die, so we do not like to think of ourselves as just an ever-changing and perishable body..."

Of course, one could counter that people do not like to think of themselves as an immaterial being. They like to think of themselves as good old solid stuff. Makes them queasy to think of not being a body.

Blackmore does not present scientific proof, she presents her opinion that people don't like to think they're just a body, without stopping to consider they may not like to think of themselves as anything but a body. She presents amateur psychology in lieu of "proof." Her opinion does not determine whether spirit departs the body, it only explains her personal psychology.

Later in the chapter, she again misses the crux of the issue:

"Some have argued that there is a kind of core experience that is common to all people and to all cultures but which is overlaid with cultural differences. It is tempting to think that if we could somehow delve beneath the surface of the accounts people give we would find the invariant, true NDE underneath. But this is a vain hope."

But there IS an invariant core to the Afterlife Hypothesis -- the separation of spirit from body. This is obvious. This is the very hypothesis we're considering.

What the spirit perceives while separate is a different question. This should be obvious to Blackmore, but apparently it isn't. She spends most of the book disputing differences in perceptual or experiential content, rather than looking at the core of the hypothesis.

To illustrate the point, let's say you ask people in various lands to take a Sunday afternoon stroll and report their experience. We recognize the similarities -- the mobility of the body through the environment with the senses taking in the environment. And we're not surprised to find a walk through Manhattan produces content that differs from a stroll through the bush country of Kenya. Likewise, when we investigate NDEs, we need to distinguish underlying factors (like separation from body) from the varied content of perception. This critical difference is overlooked, intentionally or unintentionally, in "Dying to Live." This undermines the validity of her work.

Chapter Two

In this chapter, Blackmore introduces drugs into the equation and reveals her personal experiences with NDE-like phenomena occurred under the effect of controlled substances. She notes some differences in NDEs when they occur as a result of drug use, then uses this to "disprove" the invariance hypothesis (the hypothesis that these experiences should have commonality):

"My own interpretation is that the invariance hypothesis is not supported. The NDE varies according to the conditions that set it off and the person having it."

As previously mentioned, she errors by looking at differences in content, not in the basic factor underlying the Afterlife Hypothesis -- the greater or lesser separation of spirit from the body. In the example provided earlier, we saw that just because the

scenery in Kenya differs from the scenery of Manhattan does not mean we can say one stroller did not take a walk because their report varied. We could also have a situation where the stroller in Manhattan has ingested drugs and turns in a report that seems bizarre and surrealistic. This does not mean he did not stroll through the environment as requested, only that his perceptions varied due to his condition. Thus we see the use of the "invariance hypothesis" must be done with great care or it leads to false conclusions.

In misapplying the invariance hypothesis, Blackmore fails to take into account, 1) the varying conditions of spirits when they separate (to varying degrees) from the body and, 2) the varied perceptual and cognitive content that could be expected to occur, depending upon the circumstances of separation. Blackmore attempts to reduce a complex human and spiritual experience into machine-like simplicity. When it comes to the study of humans, such reductionism often results in absurd conclusions.

This error underlies the theoretical turn she takes which colors the remainder of the book:

"Do you have to be near death to have an NDE? One motivation for asking this question is the 'just like hallucinations' argument. According to this view, NDEs, drug-induced hallucinations, out-of-body experiences occurring under normal conditions and other kinds of hallucinations are all related."

In other words, she notes there are related experiences, the NDE is not an isolated phenomenon. What she misses is that the common link between NDE and these other experiences is the spirit being released to a greater or lesser extent from the body. This is the link that should be investigated. Her real question here should not be: "Do you have to be near death to have an NDE?" But rather do you have to be near death for the spirit to separate from the body? The answer is NO. The spirit can and does leave the body in any number of situations, including those in which it is trained to do so without drugs or trauma. This is exactly what one would expect to find if the Afterlife Hypothesis is true. If one postulates spirit surviving body death, one also postulates spirit being different and separate from the body it inhabits. Thus, the Afterlife Hypothesis predicts spirit being capable of separating from the body under conditions other than impending death. The evidence Blackmore cites thus directly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis.

Instead of recognizing that she has identified a common link and has supported the Afterlife Hypothesis, Blackmore makes a drastic mistake:

"This might lend support to theories trying to explain the features of the NDE in medical, psychological, or physiological terms and go against theories involving a spirit or soul or heavenly realm."

She fails to see an obvious link and instead leaps to an unwarranted and unsupported assumption. How she arrives at this unwarranted and unsupported conclusion is not clear as she doesn't make the case for how she arrives at it. She fails to support her reasoning. Apparently she assumes, incorrectly, that the non-NDE phenomena are purely medical, psychological, or physiological and have no spiritual component.

Throughout the book, one finds this pattern. She presents evidence that clearly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis then leaps, without explanation, to the opposite conclusion.

She lends further support to the Afterlife Hypothesis in the sentences that directly follow:

"There is lots of evidence for NDE-type experiences in people who are not close to dying. The experience of leaving the body has a long history and surveys show that something like 10-20 per cent of people have this experience at some time during their life."

Thus, reports of other NDE-type experiences support the Afterlife Hypothesis, but Blackmore goes on to recount stories of drugs causing out-of-body experiences and feels justified in her conclusion that it is a purely medical phenomenon. She fails to even consider the link between drugs and the spirit's connection to the body. She fails to ask how these powerful hallucinogens and anesthetics affect a spirit's ability to remain connected. She fails to ask in what ways the toxic effects of drugs bring one close to body death. In other words, she fails to take the Afterlife Hypothesis into account as she presents these phenomena. One can only assume her bias is so strong that it prevents her from asking even the most common sense questions.

She goes on to discuss drugs including her own experience:

"Under conditions of extreme tiredness and smoking hashish I had an NDE-type experience complete with the tunnel and light, out-of-body travels, expansion and contraction of size, timelessness, a mystical experience and the decision to return..."

I shall return to this important passage when, later in the book, she uses her drug-induced experiences as the basis for her conclusions. I shall argue that Blackmore's confusion on the subject of NDEs is the result of her own drug-induced confusion -- which is not an uncommon occurrence.

What becomes critical for understanding is to consider how drugs affect the interface between spirit, mind, and body. And how drugs affect the condition of the spirit when it separates and when it returns. Drugs are a major source of confusion, both with the individual experimenter and within the scope of the NDE inquiry.

Near the end of the chapter, she reviews research that suggests the spirit separates from the body in other than death situations, which, of course, supports the Afterlife hypothesis. She notes:

"The argument used by others reporting on this research goes like this: if the brain is responsible for thinking, then when it is dying one would expect thinking to become disordered or less clear. The evidence that it becomes clearer therefore implies that the brain is not responsible; that the soul or spirit is experiencing the clarity and may go on doing so after death."

Again we see the consistency between the Afterlife Hypothesis and the evidence reported. Blackmore, however, stands before the evidence and engages in incredible denial:

"This is one possible interpretation of the evidence, but it is not the only one. It is not obvious that the dying brain must produce either more or less clear perceptions and thoughts. An alternative is that as the brain dies, less thoughts are possible and so the few that remain seem clearer and simpler by comparison."

That a dying brain or brain that shows no activity at all, should function in this manner is absurd, and totally unsupported by any brain research.

Blackmore reviews the literature and ends up presenting a consistent, well-supported case for the Afterlife Hypothesis, then puts forth an absurd and unsubstantiated position. Her bias and prejudices unfortunately undermine her scholarship.

She ends the chapter with an unwarranted conclusion, unsupported by anything that has preceded:

"Our next step is now clear, if not easy; to try to understand what happens in the dying brain."

The evidence points strongly to a spiritual being that separates from the body. Understanding the details of how this happens and what it means is our logical next step. Blackmore instead suggests our next step is to understand the dying brain, an assertion motivated by bias, not the evidence at hand. We see how her prejudices, stated in the preface, begin to erode and damage the quality of her work.

Chapter Three

This chapter opens with Blackmore presenting a claim that a person under the effects of nitrous oxide was able to view from outside his body. She then reaches a totally non-sequitur conclusion:

"I think this illustrates the reluctance we have to accept that our experience, especially profound and personally meaningful experience, comes from our brain's activity and nothing else."

In other words, because someone reported an experience of being out of body, he demonstrated a reluctance to admit it was his brain at work? How "scientific" is that? With no discussion of any facts that would contradict the purported event, with no discussion of the possible variables at work, without a shred of contrary data, she concludes the person made up the account because saying he was out of his body "made a better story." Blackmore's non-sequitur conclusions diminish her case. She states the evidence for A, then concludes B.

Later in the chapter, she states:

"Are these profound experiences a direct correlate of changes in the brain's activity and nothing more, or are they experiences of a separate mind, soul, astral body, or spirit? ...The general **assumption** of today's science says one thing yet people...say another -- especially people who have had NDEs. Scientists for the most part **assume** some form of materialism; that mental phenomena depend upon, or are an aspect of, brain events." (emphasis added)

Skeptics must be squirming in their chairs. What is she doing? She is not presenting scientific proof, she is saying we have an assumption. That scientists assume. Exactly what skeptics criticize. She favors the assumptions of scientists over the firsthand experience. If skeptics were honest, they would state "Susan Blackmore assumes..." and that would be the end of the debate. Instead, they misrepresent her work as scientific proof.

She continues:

"As we have seen, the very occurrence of NDEs is not proof either way."

With a wave of her pen she dismisses the evidence she has previously presented, which supports the Afterlife Hypothesis, and asks us to accept her contrary non-sequitur assumptions. But we should be wary. The NDE, with its out of body phenomena, goes a long way toward proving the spirit is separate from the body.

Later, she says:

"If the Afterlife Hypothesis can answer them best then I shall accept that and work with that as well as I can. If the dying brain hypothesis does better than I shall work with that."

But, as we have already seen, she has no intention of considering the Afterlife Hypothesis. So far, even in *Dying to Live*, the Afterlife Hypothesis best fits the evidence, but she doesn't consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. I would have far less trouble with her work if she would admit her prejudices up front. Instead, she pretends to be unbiased and pretends to consider the two hypotheses on their merits, but does not do so. Skeptics use this white lie to support their argument that "she studied both and the evidence prevailed." We see the opposite. When evidence points to the Afterlife Hypothesis, she blatantly ignores it.

Next, she takes up the ever popular "cerebral anoxia" argument. The loss-of-oxygen-to-the-brain scenario. She presents four reasons researchers argue anoxia cannot be responsible. It is only necessary for us to consider the first:

"1. NDEs can occur in people who obviously do not have anoxia."

Her response:

"This is certainly true but is not a sound argument at all. As we have seen, there is clearly no one cause of the NDE. The fact that NDEs can occur without anoxia is no argument against it sometimes being responsible for them."

She agrees anoxia does NOT explain the NDE experience. It is only one among many possible factors. So the obvious thing is to ask what do ALL the factors have in common?

We find, 1) trauma to the body which can be seen to interrupt the connection between the spirit and the body -- drugs, lack of oxygen, physical trauma, anticipation of great bodily harm or anticipation of death. All factors which serve to disconnect or separate the functioning of spirit and body. All completely and entirely consistent with the Afterlife Hypothesis. What requires research and explanation is HOW the spirit interfaces with the body and WHAT causes an interruption or severance of this connection?

And, 2) Experiences not involving drugs or trauma but involving a decision on the part of the spirit to separate from the body, either as a demonstration of natural ability, or as a result of acquiring such skills. For example, Tibetan Buddhism or other training.

Thus, we have, 1) "accidental" separation and, 2) "intentional" separation. The key factor is separation.

Blackmore recounts the story of a volunteer in high G force experiments, who, while outside his body, "went home and saw his mother and brother." Again and again we have examples that cry out for explanation in terms of the Afterlife Hypothesis, but Blackmore does not even consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. She states evidence for it, then dodges with:

"The invariance hypothesis is not sustainable. The NDE is not always the same and we need to try to understand its different elements in different ways."

She fails to consider the very basis of the Afterlife Hypothesis, that the spirit separates from the body. And instead uses the difference of content as an excuse to ignore the very profound, consistent, core of the NDE and associated experiences -- the separation of spirit from body.

She fails to ever ask what is the nature of spirit? What are its perceptual and cognitive abilities when it separates? Without at least an inquiry into such matters, she isn't capable of beginning to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. Her bias toward materialism does not allow her to even consider the alternative hypothesis.

Without considering the profound ramifications for the Afterlife Hypothesis, she goes on to ask how anoxia affects the brain even though we know anoxia is NOT the common element. She states anoxia is not a common invariant factor of the NDE, then goes ahead anyway and attempts to explain the NDE on the basis of anoxia. She fails to ask what condition does anoxia cause that is the same as other NDE causes.

Without entering this question into the mix, we have a one-sided and incomplete analysis based entirely upon her intended bias toward a brain explanation. The Afterlife Hypothesis is merely trotted out in this work as a straw figure to be knocked down.

It's very apparent Blackmore does not provide anything at all like the scientific proof skeptics claim.

Chapter Four

In this chapter, author Blackmore discusses drug-induced hallucinations. She fails, however, to explore the question of what is hallucination, what exactly does one see when one views an hallucination? She works from the assumption that the nature of hallucination is known, when this is not the case. The study of consciousness exists in such a primitive state that these questions are not answered. She works on the premise that hallucination is a visual or auditory perception that does not coincide with "objective" reality -- but fails to establish exactly what it is one views or hears. It's obvious that something is perceived. Some form of mental imagery.

As a result of her biased model, she does not address the question of how a spirit detached from a body, as in the Afterlife Hypothesis, might perceive mental pictures or imagery -- whether or not they coincide with "objective" reality. In other words, she fails to even consider the model of mind that would accompany the Afterlife Hypothesis. She confines her speculation to brain theory. To be an unbiased researcher she must investigate the phenomena within the paradigms of each hypothesis.

She goes on to discuss the NDEer passing through a tunnel of mental energy:

"There are many serious problems with such a theory. If the other worlds are a part of this world then they cannot really account for the afterlife."

Such a conclusion proves false when we consider the reports of NDEers. They not only see ethereal energy patterns, they see this world, the world of operating rooms and other mundane settings. In other words, reports tell us "this" world is intermingled with the "other" world of mental energy pictures. We can see this in everyday experience -- we are perfectly capable of managing both the world of imagination and mental images while we go about our business in the "real" world. Mixing subjective and objective reality is a common experience. Why this should not be so after death is not made clear by Blackmore. In fact, it is not even considered.

Blackmore fails to consider the world that exists if spirit separates from body, as in the Afterlife Hypothesis. She fails to consider that model and skews her analysis to the premises of her Dying Brain Hypothesis.

Blackmore continues:

"Something should be seen leaving the body and going into the tunnel. The tunnel itself would be present in physical space and we should be able to measure it or in some way detect its presence."

Yes, and that's why those skilled at observing the subtle energy that surrounds the spirit are able to perceive such things. Reports from NDEers claim an ability to perceive other disembodied spirits while they are out of body. Mediums skilled at communicating with disembodied spirits are able to perceive this energy as well. Research shows death bed patients often perceive disembodied spirits. Will we ever possess detectors sensitive enough to measure the mental energy patterns that make up our subjective world? Yes, of course. The history of science is filled with examples of technology breakthroughs that have allowed us to detect that which was formerly invisible. There's no reason to suspect this will not apply in this field.

Blackmore comments:

"Still we should not reject such theories out of hand just because they seem senseless. It is better to apply some criteria to them and see how they fare. Is this theory specific? No, not at all. The tunnels described are all different in precise form and this theory can say nothing about what forms they should or should not take."

Blackmore again looks at content, not underlying phenomena. The structure of specific tunnels is not in question, as has been stated, they are mental constructs, mental or ethereal energy patterns. As such they take many malleable forms. Blackmore fails to understand such mental energy is NOT confined to a brain, but rather is patterned energy that makes up a mind, not a brain. If one considers the Afterlife Hypothesis, and the NDE reports, one must consider mind to be patterned energy that can be viewed by spirit. This patterned energy exists separate from, but superimposed upon, the body.

When the spirit separates from the body, in the Afterlife Hypothesis, it remains "cloaked" in its mind. Thus, every individual spirit exists within an energy mass when it leaves the body. The content of this mind will vary from individual to individual. Thus, one sees why we have varying content, but consistent, invariant mechanics.

This collection of energy patterns that we shall call the mind can best be imagined by comparing it to the quantum wave concept. Patterned energy entangled with denser and denser physical energy. This patterned energy becomes entangled with the body and the brain. The degree to which the spirit disentangles mind from body monitors the degree to which spirit can be out of body.

Thus, one finds the common element, the invariant element, that precipitates the NDE or OBE -- the disentanglement of the mind and spirit from the body. The disentanglement of subtle energy from coarse energy. In the Afterlife Hypothesis, one would find the spirit moving out of body, still surrounded by its mind which detaches (to a greater or lesser degree) from the body / brain.

The spirit's attention, when out of body, often shifts from the concerns of the body to the subtle energy of the mind. It views old energy patterns and/or creates new ones. Either by itself or in communication with other such disembodied spirits. Thus, one has variance of content, but the invariance of the mechanics.

We are familiar in our everyday lives with the mental realm that cloaks the spirit. This is the world of the subjective, the world of the mind. The world of consciousness. The degree to which the spirit, outside the body, focuses on dense physical as opposed to mental energy patterns varies. Thus, the varied nature of NDE accounts which include both the perception of physical setting and patterned ethereal energy.

If one intends to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis and compare it to the Dying Brain Hypothesis, one must take this model into account. One must understand the nature and ability of the spirit in its disembodied condition. Without such a model, one never even compares the two hypotheses. One fails to truly see which one best explains the reports and phenomena.

Blackmore, unable to conceptualize the assumptions of the Afterlife Hypothesis, gives it no consideration at all. Contrary to skeptics' claims, she does not weigh the evidence in light of the two opposing hypotheses. That myth can be put to bed.

When we obtain mountains of reports from experiencers attesting to out of body states it is incumbent upon us to explore the reports as they are given. Before we decide they're purely imaginary and lack substance, it is incumbent upon us to attempt to understand the ways in which the reports might be accurate -- as presented. We must at least make an attempt to come to grips with the details of the hypothesis and not merely dismiss it as brain-induced hallucination.

If one is to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis, not merely as a straw argument to be discarded, one must look at how the detached spirit interfaces with the body. One must take the basic premise of the Afterlife Hypothesis, the separation of spirit from body, and ask -- how might this work?

It turns out that when one goes the extra step and considers such a model, a more coherent theory emerges which explains the phenomena without dismissing the NDE reports out of hand. The model fits the data perfectly.

In Blackmore's Dying Brain Hypothesis, the reports do not fit the assumptions. She must assume the NDEers are mistaken in their reports. She must discard evidence. She must avoid the actual research.

Perhaps she fails to explore the Afterlife Hypothesis due to a lack of knowledge and insight. Perhaps her bias in favor of the Dying Brain Hypothesis prevents her from considering both hypotheses. In either case, the primary failing of the work is the lack of a valid inquiry into the Afterlife Hypothesis. She fails to even correctly state the assumptions of the Afterlife Hypothesis, let alone compare the research data with the assumptions.

Chapter Five

In this chapter we get more insight into the author's actual agenda, which it turns out, is NOT researching and comparing the two previously-stated hypotheses. Blackmore takes off the mask and admits:

"I have been developing a theory of the NDE that tries to explain it completely in terms of processes in the dying brain."

At last, honesty as to her motives and her bias.

She considers others' objections to her attempt to reduce the Near Death Experience to brain physiology:

"The first is a direct challenge to any physiological or naturalistic theory of the NDE. It is simply this: that some NDEers claim they could accurately see events from outside their bodies. In other words, they claim paranormal powers. And paranormal powers, by definition, cannot be explained in terms of 'normal' theories."

Her dismissal of this basic objection makes no sense for a number of reasons:

- 1) She dismisses off hand the very claims she purports to study. How can a researcher study a phenomena honestly, if she merely dismisses the reports?
- 2) She now dismisses the Afterlife Hypothesis as "paranormal." From the very beginning of the book, we were supposedly going to evaluate the Afterlife Hypothesis, but now she dismisses it merely by labeling it "paranormal?" This is not science.

The proper approach would be to continue the research as originally stated and compare the two hypotheses in light of the data. If we do this, we find claims of out of body perception directly support the Afterlife Hypothesis which states the spirit survives body death in a conscious state. Claims of out of body perception support this hypothesis as they demonstrate the existence of a spirit which can detach from the body. Thus we see actual reports from those who experience the phenomena support the Afterlife Hypothesis, and contradict the dying brain hypothesis.

Of course, Blackmore's approach flies in the face of any concept of scientific procedure. If you find data support one hypothesis over another, even if you are not sure exactly how the underlying phenomena work, you are bound to further investigate the hypothesis that the data supports. She does not do that.

Let's follow Blackmore's argument a step further:

"The second objection often comes from people who have had NDEs or other kinds of mystical experiences. You are wrong, they say, this feeling of bliss is nothing like a chemically induced high. It is a spiritual joy; an experience of the soul; a transcendence of ordinary pleasure and pain. Drug induced joy is a sham; not the real thing at all."

This objection, voiced by those who had the experience, those closest to the subject of our research, falls in line with the Afterlife Hypothesis. They claim the experience is not body/brain/drug based, but rather an experience of separation from ordinary body sensations. That's what the research data reports.

Of course, if one takes the Afterlife Hypothesis seriously, one would predict a change in feeling/perception when the spirit disentangles or disengages from the coarser energy of the body. In fact, a rather detailed picture of what happens and what might be expected can be drawn up from the Afterlife Hypothesis, and it matches the reports of those who experience NDE.

Does Susan Blackmore attempt to consider the data in light of the two hypotheses at hand? Does she consider the reports of the very people she purports to study? No, she dismisses the data and instead inserts her "contention." She states:

"... It is my contention that this "real thing" -- NDEs, mystical experiences and indeed everything encountered on the spiritual path -- are products of a brain and the universe of which it is a part. For there is nothing else."

Anyone interested in the serious pursuit of knowledge using the scientific method should be flabbergasted. Not only does Blackmore blatantly toss out the primary research data and substitute her own prejudices, but she goes on to make an outrageous statement: "For there is nothing else." It begs the question, how does she know "there is nothing else?" Skeptics are no doubt cringing with embarrassment. Not only is her statement not a "known" or a "proven," it's absurd.

Chapter Six

This chapter begins with perhaps the most accurate statements Blackmore makes anywhere in the text:

"Some very strong claims are made. The implication is always the same; that people during NDEs have actually seen the events occurring from a location outside their bodies. 'They' have left their bodies and that is why they can accurately see what is going on. If these claims are valid then the theory I am developing is wrong...."

Strong claims have been made. The data exists. The experience exists. Those reporting the experience concur -- they view from outside their bodies. This should not be a surprise given the Afterlife Hypothesis predicts exactly this result. When making a decision on which hypothesis is supported by the research, it is undoubtedly the Afterlife Hypothesis, not the Dying Brain hypothesis.

So, Blackmore is correct. The Dying Brain theory she's developing is wrong. But she fails to acknowledge the fact. Here is how she responds to reports that clearly contradict her hypothesis:

"I want to be quite clear. It is my contention that there is no soul, spirit, astral body or anything at all that leaves the body during NDEs and survives after death. These, like the very idea of a persisting self, are all illusions...."

Once again, in the face of data that contradicts her theory, Blackmore simply contends the Afterlife Hypothesis is false.

When skeptics quote Blackmore, they're not quoting proven science, they're merely referencing her contention. This is the "proof" they rely upon to dismiss the phenomena at hand. It's clear she doesn't intend to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis supported by the research. She resorts instead to personal bias and sweeps the obvious aside with personal prejudice. This is not science.

How does she explain reports of out of body perceptions that contradict her theory?

"The answers include prior knowledge, fantasy and lucky guesses and the remaining senses of hearing and touch."

She's aware of the tenuous nature of her argument and must reassure us:

"This may sound destructive and doubting -- an exercise in debunking. But my intention is not to debunk so much as to assess the alternatives."

If one follows her arguments throughout the book, it's very clear her sole purpose IS to debunk. She has no intention of assessing alternatives. When research clearly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis, she ignores the data or dismisses it as "lucky guesses and fantasy." She contends there is no spirit, and thus no reason to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. She replaces research data with personal bias and opinion.

Let's assess the merit of her dismissal of NDE reports. She claims the NDEers are not really seeing from a vantage point outside the body. She claims they're constructing a visual image as a result of hearing and touch. This contention, however, does not fit the reports of those who have the experience. They recall the actual event of viewing from specific locations. In other words, it is not merely that which they view, the content, but also the actual experience of viewing. One can perform a simple demonstration to illustrate the difference. Lie down, close your eyes, and visualize based upon what you hear and feel. Now open your eyes, stand

up, and view the room. You can distinguish the two events. In the latter you experience the actual process of viewing.

Her contention of prior knowledge does not account for reports in which subjects view events, settings, or personnel for the first time and do so with specificity. In such cases, there is no prior experience upon which to draw.

Prior knowledge does not account for awareness of viewing in the moment. Blackmore's claim is comparable to saying a person only imagined he woke up this morning because he had prior knowledge of what it was like to wake up. There is a discernible experiential difference between reconstructing memories and actually viewing in the present. One can again experience this by lying down, closing your eyes, and recalling memories of being in a room. Then open your eyes and perceive the room. There is a difference between the recall of a memory and actually experiencing in the moment. Blackmore's explanation ignores reports which claim the experience was not one of reconstructing memories, but rather one wherein the person is quite aware and quite in the present.

Her "fantasy" explanation does not even merit a response as we are talking about reports wherein the scene viewed matched actual physical events. Blackmore falls into the dubious trap of becoming the "authority" on someone else's experience. Arbitrarily assigning the label of fantasy takes the research out of the realm of science and places it squarely in the realm of Blackmore's personal opinion. As long as she is the authority who determines what is real and what is fantasy, we arrive not at scientific conclusions but rather at her personal view of the world.

Blackmore's final attempt to dismiss the evidence by attributing it to "lucky guesses" is an insult to both the readers and the subjects of this research. This covers all the bases -- yes, you perceived correctly, but it was a "lucky guess." This is a slick, arbitrary method of eliminating research that contradicts one's pet theory. This is not science, this is out and out bias at work. How skeptics can hold this work up as a model of science escapes me.

It's apparent Blackmore does not respect the reports of people who have actually had a NDE. She does not need the research reports. She does not need to take into account those who have actually had the experience. She's perfectly happy making up her theory without regard to their experience. (After all, their experiences are merely fantasy or lucky guesses.) The actual research disproves her theory, so she tosses the research aside and substitutes conjecture. The dismissal of the research data is Susan Blackmore's fantasy.

If this seems to be an overly a harsh analysis, consider her closing remarks in this chapter:

"Why are so many books full of accounts of people seeing at a distance while out of their bodies? I think there is a simple answer to this. When things seem real we expect them to correspond to an external shared reality. The NDE, like many other altered states of consciousness, is an exception to this rule. In the NDE things seem real when in fact they are constructed by the imagination. No wonder people are led astray."

She proves to be disingenuous in the extreme. She offers no proof NDE perceptions are imagination. Only her conjecture, prejudice, and bias. She arbitrarily states this "is an exception to the rule" when "what seems real is imagination." For no other reason than her bias contends that it is so.

She dismisses the simple conclusion -- the people making the reports are truthful and accurate. The reports support the Afterlife Hypothesis and contradict the Dying Brain

Hypothesis. Blackmore's conjecture is not science. The research supports the Afterlife Hypothesis.

Blackmore states:

"Finally, many people have a strong desire to believe in a life after death and, even more so, in a self that persists through life. Evidence that what they saw was correct may seem to back up the idea that they, themselves, do have a separate existence and might survive."

She's right. The evidence supports the Afterlife Hypothesis. She dismisses the evidence, however, saying simply that because people have such a desire they must be exaggerating, falsifying, and fantasizing the experience of being separate from the body. This is the same as saying that because alcoholics crave liquor there really isn't any liquor -- they're making it up. That desire leads to fantasy. That the objects of our desire therefore must be fantasy.

If, as the data suggests, spirit exists separate from the body and survives body death, then it is Blackmore's desire to deny the existence of spirit that leads to exaggeration, falsification, and fantasy. I believe this to be the case. Her Dying Brain theory is the result of her passionate desire to debunk the Afterlife Hypothesis.

Chapter Seven

In this chapter, Blackmore agrees the NDE is a real experience, but disputes the reality of the content:

"I don't think any of them makes any sense or can do the job of explaining the NDE. This is a wide and sweeping dismissal but I believe it is justified, not least because all these theories start from confused assumptions about the difference between reality and imagination."

She's right. The confusion rests in a failure to understand the difference between reality and imagination. A failure to understand objective and subjective. But the confusion is Blackmore's. She fails to understand the "reality" of the subjective -- energy patterns that make up the mind (not brain) which encompass the spirit and account for much of the content of the NDE. She fails to understand that in the typical NDE one views BOTH the mental energy patterns AND the "objective" world. The reader can perform a simple demonstration to illustrate the fact. Look at the room, objective reality. Now imagine a lion with polka dots laying on the floor. Superimpose the imaginary, subjective lion over the objective room. We manage to "focus" back and forth and superimpose all the time. When the spirit departs the body, as in the NDE, this combination of subjective and objective comes into play.

Blackmore comments on the nature of the world the NDEer encounters when they depart from the body:

"The act of dying, according to Ring's new theory, involves a gradual shift of consciousness from the ordinary world of appearances to a holographic reality of pure frequencies."

Ring refers to the energy patterns or pictures I reference above. He notes the increased focus on subtle energy patterns when the spirit is outside the body.

Blackmore states:

"The second error is to suggest that consciousness can function in this other reality without the brain."

Of course, there's no "error" here as the Afterlife Hypothesis states the spirit exists independent of the body. The Afterlife Hypothesis does not tie consciousness into the brain. Ring's statement is entirely consistent within the framework of the Afterlife Hypothesis and the evidence.

Blackmore fails to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis on its own terms. Instead, she applies the assumptions and premises of the Dying Brain Hypothesis. She fails to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis and its assumption that spirit consciously separates from the body/brain. Ring's argument and the evidence support just such an assumption. Blackmore falls back on prejudice -- the brain did it.

She recognizes the aborted nature of her inquiry:

"My dismissal of the holographic theories might still seem cavalier, especially since they seem to provide an insight into mystical experience generally."

Her dismissal not only seems cavalier, it is. She fails to consider the very evidence and hypotheses under consideration.

Blackmore takes up some of the concepts in Talbot's Holographic Universe including David Bohm's implicate order and Pribram's speculation on the holographic mind model. Both Bohm and Pribram, however, work on the assumption the brain is the source of consciousness, so neither should be considered spokespersons for the Afterlife Hypothesis. Bohm describes a classical universe resting on top of a more basic quantum reality. He describes this underlying reality as "idea like" but fails to consider that mind and spirit exist separate from the body. Thus, he fails to take the step that would make his theory relevant to the questions at hand. His theories only become useful when they are applied to the concept of mind as separate from the brain. When one considers the mind to be energy patterns which encompass the spirit, the application of quantum theory, implicate order, and so on, begins to make sense. (Roger Penrose is another physicist whose brilliant theoretical work on the consciousness question fails because he does not consider consciousness separate from the brain. He and Stuart Hammeroff run aground trying to figure out what structure in the brain allows for a quantum / classical interface or "wave collapse." If they were to pause for a second to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis, as supported by NDE reports, they would see the mind provides the "quantum" aspect of the equation while the brain is entirely classical. They see how mind interfaces with the brain, and a viable model of spirit-mind-body that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis would emerge. See Penrose's *Shadows of the Mind*.)

In the section, "Paranormal Phenomena (Not) Explained," Blackmore claims:

"Theories of alternate realities and the like appear to explain the paranormal by positing an underlying interconnected reality from which everything else arises. But it is appearance only. They cannot adequately explain telepathy, clairvoyance, seeing at a distance during an OBE or psychokinesis..."

The phenomena above can all be explained when one understands the nature of the mind; the dynamics between mind and spirit; the communication between spirits using patterned energy; and the impingement of the mind upon the body by the spirit. A quite detailed explanation emerges when all these factors are taken into account.

Blackmore disputes the existence of explanations by critiquing Bohm's work alone. Bohm, however, did not attempt to answer such questions with his theory and never applied his implicate/explicate model to the concept of a spirit being separate from the body. I'm guessing Blackmore was responding entirely to Talbot's accounts and conjectures, which are, admittedly sketchy and incomplete.

In order to compare the Afterlife Hypothesis and the Dying Brain Hypothesis, one must start with the research. All phenomena reported can be explained quite easily by a comprehensive model of spirit out of body. Perhaps I'm too critical of Blackmore in this regard as she does not have the tools to construct such a model. Perhaps it would be better for her to merely acknowledge this shortcoming and not pretend to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. There would be nothing wrong, in my opinion, with her simply admitting she does not begin to understand the Afterlife Hypothesis and has a bias toward her own Dying Brain Hypothesis.

Continuing , she comments:

"If we think of the eye as a camera then we are inclined to think that it sends a picture up into the brain. What in the brain looks at this picture? Well, another sort of 'inner eye,' I suppose. And how does this inner eye see? This is known as the homunculus problem because it implies a little person, or homunculus, sitting in the brain looking at the pictures."

This description calls for exactly what we find in NDE and OBE phenomena, a spirit that exists independent of the body which answers the question of WHO is looking at the sensory input. (Of course, one needs to arrive at an accurate description, rather than the metaphor of a little person sitting in the brain.) It is just this spirit that the Afterlife Hypothesis posits, which reports and evidence support. All that's missing is research into the exact nature of this spirit. The only reason this does not happen is the idea is dismissed outright.

In place of genuine research, Blackmore suggests cognitive science has the answer... the brain as computer, the person as robot. She doesn't support this contention, and anyone even tangentially familiar with the subject realizes such models have failed dramatically to account for real life. She goes on:

"There is no need for that homunculus. Right from the start of the process of perception, the sensory information is transformed, processed, and stored as connection strengths between neurons...."

This explanation does not hold up. The old "stored in the neurons" theory has been found wanting. Anyone interested in the problems encountered with such models should read Roger Penrose's *Shadows of the Mind*, which addresses the failure of computational models to account for the nature of consciousness. Blackmore's simplistic, reductionist model fails to account for natural everyday consciousness, let alone the NDE reports of perception from outside the body.

Blackmore presents the concept of "mental models" from cognitive science. The idea is, basically, that thought and perceptions are little programs, subroutines stored in the brain. She proclaims: "'I' am no more and no less than a mental model." and "My brain builds 'me'." She takes it further and considers consciousness:

"My answer is that consciousness is just the subjective aspect of all this modeling. It is how it feels to be a mental model. Of course, 'I' am only one of the models."

"I am not a special being inside the head directing attention to one thing or another. Rather 'I' am just one of many models built by this system..."

She goes on to say 'me' is basically an illusion.

The computing model she presents, however, does not account for many aspects of consciousness -- non-computational thought, free will, qualia, etc. -- and most importantly it does not fit the NDE or OBE phenomena, which actually contradict and disprove her model. (That may be the real reason she needs to "debug" the

phenomena -- when one factors in the NDE and OBE, her theories are no longer appropriate.)

Blackmore's "mental model" theory becomes tenuous, mysterious:

"And is there a real world out there? Well, if we adopt this view we can never know. We **assume** there is in the way we talk about brains and what they do. But it is only an **assumption** -- a useful working model. It is just another of those ubiquitous mental models. Indeed everything we experience, including ourselves, is a mental model." (Emphasis added.)

She continues:

"If there is no underlying reality then the NDE, like every other experience, is a matter of the mental models being constructed by the brain at the time."

Her mental models which deny any possibility of knowing "reality," ends up being the ultimate subjectivism, with no bridge to the objective world possible.

Skeptics may be surprised to discover she holds this viewpoint which directly contradicts their debate platform. A primary tenet of their arguments, that the world "out there" is real and everything "in here" is unreal, falls apart if they support her theory. Their argument, that believers in the paranormal are overly solipsistic, must be discarded if they to embrace Blackmore, for her model concludes we can never know if there is a real world out there.

This "we can never know" theory simply fails to cross the threshold into an understanding of the subjective and the objective, and the relationship between them. A full discussion of such details lies outside the scope of this critique. A brief summary of idealism, however, includes the concept that our subjective experience is real and from this primary realm flows the objective world. In other words, the objective world flows from the subjective. Condensed thought (subjective) becomes the world of matter (objective). Thus, there's not only a perceptual link between the subjective and the objective, but a causal link as well. Ultimately one must gain an understanding of idealism and the link between subjective and objective if one is to truly understand the Afterlife Hypothesis.

For now, I will merely suggest we can know both the subjective and the objective. We're not stranded forever inside our craniums in the bleak, robotic world Blackmore proposes. In the Afterlife Hypothesis, consciousness is not an emergent property of a brain. Thus, what consciousness "models" and perceives and creates is not a product of the brain.

In Blackmore's model, we can never know whether what we perceive out there is real as we are only models in the brain, limited by our emergence from the brain. In the Afterlife Hypothesis, we can know what is real as our perceptions and knowledge are not limited by the brain / body. We can know the "out there."

If one analyzes Blackmore's theory, one finds it is, at its core, idealistic. If one removes the brain as the source of her mental models and replaces it with the spirit, one arrives at idealism consistent with the Afterlife Hypothesis. She considers the physical brain creates mental models and consciousness as emergent properties, whereas the Afterlife Hypothesis would have to assume the spirit creates the mental models. In which case, the physical would emerge from consciousness, not the other way around.

Dying to Live turns mystical thought inside out:

"Once **you** see that all 'you' are is a collection of mental models, **you** see the illusion." (Emphasis added.)

The attentive reader will ask -- who is the "you" that sees the "you" mental model? In traditional mysticism, it is the immaterial you, the spirit, that sees its "identities" as mental models. (Idealism.) Blackmore alters this traditional mystical view. Her statement should read: Once the mental model sees 'you' as a mental model, the mental model sees the illusion. Mental models trapped forever in feedback loops with no real you there. She turns mysticism upside down and postulates the physical as the only reality, a reality we can never know. This is not what we find, however, when we investigate real living persons. This is not what we find with NDEs and OBEs. We find the traditional mystical model -- with an immaterial being, a spirit that is you -- to be accurate.

Her misuse of "illusion" tips the reader off to her misunderstanding of the Buddhist concept of illusion, which considers the physical to be thought, thus an illusion. The ultimate version of idealism. In such a system, the brain is itself an illusion in the sense that all physical is illusion. Her model ignores the Buddhist concepts of reincarnation and afterlife, in which the "you" is obviously not a mental model. It is the "you" of the Afterlife Hypothesis.

She borrows the language, but not the meaning, of Buddhist concepts, when she equates illusion with her cognitive science mental models. She borrows "illusion" from Buddhism, but fails to explain Buddhist concepts of life after death and the survival of the spirit. Those beliefs support the Afterlife hypothesis and contradict the Dying Brain hypothesis.

Perhaps the western practice of mixing drugs and mysticism causes some of the confusion. She mentions an encounter with Baba Ram Dass:

"Once a successful psychologist, Richard Alpert, he had many experiences with drugs and studied with gurus in the East before becoming a teacher himself. When I met him I was confused."

She was confused. So was he. He commented to her that things just got more confusing. Such may be a side effect of LSD. Drugs bring more confusion than enlightenment, and Blackmore states her experience with NDE/OBE phenomena occurred as a result of drug use. In order to understand the NDE and related phenomena, it may be necessary to clear up the confusion introduced by drugs.

Chapter Eight

The most important question is taken up in this chapter -- "In or Out of the Body?"

The experience of being outside the body is the single most important aspect of the NDE; and defines OBE. Why is it so important? The experience of being out of the body directly confirms the Afterlife Hypothesis which states the spirit transcends death. If the spirit is different from the body, one would expect the spirit to be able to separate even in non-death situations, and that is exactly what the out of body experience confirms.

The chapter begins with another report of someone claiming to have been outside, looking down on the body. The person making the report continues to be conscious, to think, and to perceive physical events. And reports slamming back into the body. The report includes the person confirming details of what he had seen while out of body.

Then Blackmore provides more examples which we know are a few among many, many reports with common elements of viewing the body from outside, seeing events transpire, and being jolted back into the body.

Blackmore notes:

"The people who have OBEs are just as likely to be male or female, educated or uneducated, religious or not religious."

(Which disproves her earlier contention that the experience arises out of people's religious denial of death.)

She notes drugs are often associated with OBEs and states:

"I have had OBEs myself with this drug (ketamine), though not as vivid as naturally occurring ones."

As noted before, her experience with the subject matter is drug-related.

Blackmore goes on:

"OBEs occurring in daily life tend to happen when the person is resting, about to fall asleep, or meditating, but they can also happen in the midst of ordinary activity."

(This will be seen to be important when it comes to her conjecture that all such experiences are the result of trauma-based imagination.)

She quotes researcher Kenneth Ring regarding the separation:

"... I believe that what happens when an individual is near the point of apparent death is a real, and not just a subjective, separation of something... from the physical body. It is this 'something' that then perceives the immediate physical environment and then goes on to experience events..."

Ring's analysis supports the Afterlife Hypothesis. The something, or spirit, leaves the body. His analysis conforms to the reports. His analysis matches the research data. The difference between Kenneth Ring (and others who study the phenomena intensively) and Blackmore is the degree to which their conclusions conform to the research data.

Blackmore, in my opinion, ignores the research and takes a tortuous route into pure speculation of a most tenuous nature. She speculates the only 'I' is a mental model, and the reason we apparently get out of the body is tied in with why we think we are in it, namely:

"Part of the answer is that building a model from eye-level view is the most efficient way of making use of the information coming in from our predominant sense."

And,

"It can only be a guess, but I imagine that dogs are more inclined to feel they are inside their noses than we are."

Time to stop for a chuckle, then on with her suggestion that these models (who we really are) dissolve under various conditions such as drugs. Blackmore writes:

"I shall never forget my own ketamine experience, the extraordinary sensation of watching the floating parts of the body that seemed to have nothing to do with 'me' coming in and out of vision as 'I' seemed to drift about away from them."

She says "I shall never forget" but, according to her hypothesis, the "I" should have been dissolved. Incapacitate the model maker, and the model should disappear. Yet there is this stable sense of "I." The "I" that "shall never forget." It seems she does not live her own theory.

She says she watched parts of her body which seemed to have nothing to do with "me." She experienced being separate from the body. If she was just a model, created by the body, this would be a very, very unlikely event. Her sense of "I" or "me" should have dissolved. It should not be viewing the body as though the two were separate.

She seemed to drift away from the body which a model would not do. A model would remain located in the position in which it was always created. How would a body create a model outside and distant from the body's perceptual organs? Remember her earlier contention that the model was created as a result of viewing from eye level. Now we are nowhere near the eyes.

She suggests other models just "take over." Any other model, she claims. Then why not models of the "I" burrowing through intestines? Or models of the "I" running down a nose hair? The body has all kinds of inner data by which to make these models. But instead we consistently find the "I" outside the body, where the body has no perceptual tools with which to model.

A few wild leaps follow in Dying to Live:

"... one possibility is to get back to normal by using whatever information is available to build a body image and a world. If the sensory input is cut off or confused this information will have to come from memory and imagination. Memory can supply all the information about your body, what it looks like, how it feels and so on. It can also supply a good picture of the world."

Let's analyze this claim. She states the body image and the world disappear and must be reconstructed. The mental model "I," an illusory product of the brain, somehow remains in charge and reconstructs from imagination. The research does not support this imagination conjecture. Reports include physical settings and events that are not contained in memory. And those making the reports distinguish between the experience of recalling memories or imagining and the experience of perceiving in the present. As I pointed out before, most people are fairly well aware of the differences between recalling, imagining, and perceiving in the present. We know when we stop to recall a past event, we know when we stop to daydream, and we know when we are in the present perceiving moment to moment. Most of those reporting NDE know the difference and state they are perceiving from outside their body very vividly. Not memory. Not imagination. Firsthand, in-the-present observation. To disregard these reports is to undermine the research with bias.

(The one time in "normal" life when we often confuse the present with memory and imagination is when we are drugged, which is when Blackmore experienced NDE. One might suggest her theory derives from the confusion arising from the drugged state.)

Blackmore attempts to explain away the common out of body experience of looking down on the body with a most unusual assertion:

"... there is one crucial thing we know about memory images. They are often built in a bird's eye view. Remember the last time you were walking along the seashore. Do you see the beach as though from where your eyes would be? Or are you looking from above?"

How does one acquire such bird's eye views in the first place? If it is a memory that contains an elevated viewpoint, one must ask where does the perceptual content come from originally? When did one "fly" in order to have such a memory?

In the particular example given -- that of a seashore -- one approaches from a higher vantage point. The land always descends to the water's edge. Thus, one can

remember a "wide shot" as one approached. Is this what Blackmore means by bird's eye view memory? (She doesn't give other examples.) In this case, the "wide shot" one witnessed with one's eyes gives you such a view. The person merely recalls an eye level view from higher ground.

When one recalls going to the market, does one recall the roof of the market? Not usually. My hunch is that Blackmore faces an almost intractable problem with the bird's eye view reported by NDEers. Her theory falls apart on this point and I believe the seashore example was a "cheat."

If one eliminates examples with higher vantage points built into the geography, one is still left with some valid cases of bird's eye view memories. Where might they come from? It turns out the OBE is more frequent than one might expect and therein we find the answer to what observes from such a viewpoint in the first place. The spirit frequently perceives from a wider / higher vantage point than the vantage possible using the body's senses. We achieve out of body states more frequently than is acknowledged. This is consistent with the Afterlife Hypothesis which states the spirit and the body are not the same and thus are able to be separate to varying degrees at any time.

Blackmore's model does not address the question of how one perceives from a bird's eye vantage point. Her hypothesis fails to account for perceptions from a bird's eye view. She fails to ask the critical question -- who or what perceives from that vantage point?

She goes on to say:

"The normal model of reality breaks down and the system tries to get back to normal by building a new model from memory and imagination. If this model is in a bird's-eye view, then an OBE takes place."

This is Blackmore's cornerstone argument for explaining away the evidence that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis and disproves the Dying Brain Hypothesis. In her argument, however, she...

- 1) ... fails to account for OBE when the person is not in a situation in which "reality breaks down." She fails to account for OBE without drugs, or injury, or near death.
- 2) ...fails to account for the "perceiving in the moment" reports of the NDEers. She fails to account for their vivid perceptions which differ from recall or imagination.
- 3) fails to account for the NDEer's perception of physical events never before encountered. Physical events and details which do not exist in memory.
- 4) ... fails to answer the question of who perceived the bird's-eye view in the first place in order to "remember it." NDEers are not shown bird's-eye view films of their operations prior to the experience. The question remains who or what perceives from that vantage point?
- 5) ... fails to explain unique events the NDEer viewed which were corroborated by others in the physical environment.

Blackmore turns away from actual research data, from the reports, and from logic in constructing her "model." The only thing the model fits is the confused state a drugged OBE brings about. Particularly the confused state that results AFTER the experience. This is common.

She makes false claims for her model:

"It (her model) easily accounts for the way the world looks and the fact that apparently correct details are often mixed with ones that are obviously false. The system has put together the best information it has..."

In other words, she tosses out significant correct perceptions solely on the basis that some errors were present. This is analogous to the cliched story of accident witnesses whose reports vary. Our "normal" perceptions are rarely, if ever, one hundred percent accurate. So Blackmore tells us nothing new and uses false standards. She throws out all perception on the basis of the presence of an error. On that basis, all our perception is invalid. What IS important is that there ARE correct perceptions. She fails to account for such correct perception of details from an out of body vantage point that NO body senses could attain.

She goes on to try to explain away "you" the viewer:

"In the OBE you actually feel that 'you' are at the imagined point. This makes sense because it is this imagined world that you control. You can no longer control the actual body because you no longer have a good body image. Instead, you have either a new body image, outside the physical, created by memory, or you are just a moving position, moving as imagination takes you. In either case, 'you' will seem to be at that location because that is what can be controlled by what you (the system) are thinking about."

This explanation is convoluted in the extreme and fails to conform to the data. It is worth considering in detail as it forms the crux of her argument that skeptics accept as "scientific proof" --

"In the OBE you actually feel that 'you' are at the imagined point."

It should be noted that in NDE and OBE reports the "you" that views from "outside the body" viewpoints is experienced as the same you that perceives day to day. In other words, they experience actually being there. This differs from imagining such a view. The reader can verify the difference by perceiving the room, moment to moment, then closing his eyes, and viewing the "memory." There is a qualitative difference.

"This makes sense because it is this imagined world that you control."

Reports include viewing objective physical settings and events. This contradicts the claim of an imagined world that one "controls."

Most people are aware of the difference between an imaginary world they can move about as in a daydream, and the objective world which does not respond to their "control."

The imagination scenario fails to explain the consistency of NDE reports of viewing outside the body. Imagination would be more random.

"You can no longer control the actual body because you no longer have a good body image."

According to Blackmore, the "you" never controls the actual body. The "you" is merely a model the body's brain constructs. It controls nothing. It is merely a "model" that floats behind the eyes as a result of perceptual input processing.

Thus, when the body's brain and senses are incapacitated or traumatized (some NDE cases involve situations where there was NO brain activity), the creator of this highly complex and consistent model is inoperative. Thus, there should be no "you" to control anything.

"Instead, you have either a new body image, outside the physical, created by memory."

Why would one have "memories" of something one never experienced? If "you" are only a brain-created model then "you" can only model the body's perceptions. The "you" model has no way to create a memory from an outside viewpoint. The outside viewpoint reported is not a series of snapshots of prior memories. It contains moment by moment, in the present, motion and continuity of perception.

If the brain is creating new models under stress, why would it not create that which it knows best -- the inside of the body. Why does the brain not randomly generate wild trips through the intestines? Why do NDEers consistently report being OUTSIDE the body instead? The consistent out of body reports cannot be explained by Blackmore.

"... or you are just a moving position, moving as imagination takes you. In either case, 'you' will seem to be at that location because that is what can be controlled by what you (the system) are thinking about."

Again, the perceptions of NDEers contradict this explanation. They do not always view imaginary scenes. They often view objective physical settings. And, as above, that which creates the model is supposedly out of operation.

Blackmore continues:

"Why should people be surprised at seeing themselves as others see them? This is often given as evidence that the OBE cannot be imagination. However, this does not follow. You may have gathered lots of information about yourself..."

Again, Blackmore fails to investigate the actual reports and instead substitutes her conjecture. When NDEers report they view the body "like others would," they do not mean they catch imaginary glimpses compiled from memory. They do not mean they recall seeing glimpses of themselves in the mirror, or old photos. They view the body in its entirety from outside in the moment. The experience is very different from recalling glimpses in a mirror, old photos, etc.

Thus, we see Blackmore's conjecture does not fit the data. Not only is it not scientific proof, it is conjecture that does not even conform to the facts at hand.

(Without going into a long dissertation on the matter, it should be pointed out that Blackmore's model falls apart when one takes into account OBE phenomena when there are no drugs, no injuries, no near death. The mechanisms Blackmore proposes obviously fail to account for such reports.)

Moving on from the basic argument to Blackmore's attempt at supporting her contention:

"... it was suggested that people with vivid imagery would be more likely to have OBEs. This was found not to be the case, suggesting that OBEs are not imagination. However, since then it has been found that OBEers have superior spatial abilities; they are better at detecting the viewpoint from which a three-dimensional object is seen and are better able to switch viewpoints in their imagination."

Thus we see OBEs are not imagination, as I've stated. The second finding is interesting -- they "are better able to switch viewpoints." This finding is consistent with a spirit that can move and assume varied viewpoints without regard to the body. The Afterlife Hypothesis predicts this very outcome.

In an amazing intellectual sleight-of-hand, Blackmore goes on to claim a bird's-eye viewpoint is a prediction that supports her Dying Brain Hypothesis:

"Another prediction concerns the habitual use of bird's-eye viewpoints. This theory predicts that people who habitually imagine things or dream in a bird's-eye view should be more likely to have OBEs (whether deliberate or spontaneous). Both Irwin and I have found this correlation for dreaming but not for waking imagery."

Blackmore takes a key experience that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis, then states her ability to predict this experience supports the opposing Dying Brain Hypothesis. She cleverly takes a factor that disproves the Dying Brain Hypothesis and claims her ability to predict that factor supports the Dying Brain Hypothesis.

As we saw earlier, bird's-eye viewpoints do not support the Dying Brain Hypothesis, and Blackmore has not shown they do. To the contrary, the bird's-eye view directly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis which postulates the spirit leaving the body which puts the spirit in a position to have a bird's-eye viewpoint.

In Blackmore's argument, she shows no way for the bird's-eye view to take place, no way for that perceptual viewpoint to be achieved. She merely says it is the work of imagination and memory, and does not state how that bird's-eye view ever comes into being so it can be imagined or remembered.

Being able to predict a factor that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis DOES NOT support the Dying Brain Hypothesis.

Her research fails to correlate OBE with imagination, and yet this is what she stated the OBE was -- imagination. Her research does correlate the OBE with out of body dream states which further supports the Afterlife Hypothesis which predicts more frequent separation from the body when there is lessened attention on the body, such as in sleep and dreaming.

Blackmore fails in the extreme to explain away the cornerstone evidence for the Afterlife Hypothesis -- the out of body experience -- and instead twists the very essence of the experience, the bird's-eye viewpoint, the viewpoint of a spirit separate from the body, into a claim for the Dying Brain Hypothesis.

Closing Note

The remainder of Dying to Live only furthers the basic errors that have arisen in the earlier chapters. These include a failure to consider the assumptions of the Afterlife Hypothesis, a failure to conform to the data on hand, and the presentation of pure conjecture regarding brain theories that don't fit the reports of NDEers. Thus, a continued critique would be redundant and I will spare the reader a lengthy trip over already established ground.

Skeptics claim Blackmore has scientific proof that NDEs are merely brain phenomena, proof that the spirit does not exist. This is simply false. Dying to Live fails in this regard. She presents conjecture, assumptions, speculation, but no proof. And her conjecture does not match the evidence she presents. An exercise that would prove enlightening for skeptics would be to read Dying to Live with the same criteria they apply to the study of the paranormal.

The skeptics' second claim, that Blackmore has explored both hypotheses as an unbiased researcher is also false. The major shortcoming of Dying to Live is her failure to explore or present the Afterlife Hypothesis. She props it up on false legs in order to knock it down. At each point that the evidence and reports clearly support the Afterlife Hypothesis, she makes a non-sequitur leap to the Dying Brain Hypothesis. But should we blame Blackmore for not understanding the Afterlife

Hypothesis? No. This is not her area of expertise. We could ask, however, that she not pretend to present an unbiased look at both hypotheses.

What is perhaps most needed in the field of NDE studies is a clear statement of the Afterlife Hypothesis so that authors, like Blackmore, would have to address the actual hypothesis, not their straw versions.

The author, Greg Stone, grew up with a love for science, as his father was a physicist. He began his college studies in physics, but ended up graduating with a degree in psychology (University of Colorado). After non-degree study in religion at Chicago Theological Seminary at the University of Chicago, he became a trainer in an Outward Bound-style program designed for teachers and streetworkers running inner-city schools. Subsequently, he moved into advertising-related career. His strong interest in promoting tolerance for religion and individual beliefs led him to direct "A Campaign to Remember," the fund-raising film for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. He believes his personal love for both science and spiritual matters mirrors a trend in society toward a greater understanding of the connectedness of the two disciplines.

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