

A Critique of Susan Blackmore's Dying Brain Hypothesis by Greg Stone



By [Kevin Williams](#)

[Greg Stone](#) began his college studies in physics, but ended up graduating with a degree in psychology (University of Colorado). He also studied at Chicago Theological Seminary at the University of Chicago. 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. Greg Stone's book is entitled "[Under the Tree](#)" which is a novel set in the world of the near-death experience. He has also written a new essay on Buddhism and reincarnation called "[The Buddhist Paradox](#)." Read all his other fascinating essays on his website at www.visitunderthetree.com.

Background on Susan Blackmore

Before you read Greg Stone's excellent critique of skeptic Susan Blackmore's theory of the NDE, you may want to first read a brief description of [Susan Blackmore's hypothesis](#). She is the author of several books including: *Dying to Live*, *In Search of the Light*, and her latest, *The Meme Machine*. Blackmore has more information at her website: www.susanblackmore.co.uk



Prologue to Critique



Discussions about the near-death experience and the idea that consciousness separates from the body are frequently challenged by skeptics who ask: "Didn't you know Susan Blackmore proved, scientifically, that NDE's are hallucinations caused by brain activity?"

When I first heard such claims, I rushed out and purchased *Dying to Live*, Blackmore's work on the near-death experience. After reading the book, however, I was left wondering what it was skeptics had read. *Dying to Live* not only failed to provide scientific support for a "brain only" hypothesis, it contained only conjecture and speculation.

In a moment of passion, I fired off a critique of *Dying to Live*, which was subsequently posted on a number of sites. Over the following years, readers wrote to thank me for having posted the critical analysis of the work.

Ms. Blackmore responded as well and confirmed my observation that the work was primarily that of conjecture and speculation. So much for the skeptic's argument that the issue of NDEs has been settled once and for all, scientifically.

The following is an edited version of the critique. (The content remains the same, the prose was in dire need of repair, as the critique originated as an unedited e-mail exchange.)

It is my hope that addressing the contents of *Dying to Live* lessens the flurry of posts and e-mails that arrive saying, "Didn't you know, Blackmore..." For those who have not read *Dying to Live*, I highly recommend the book, even though I disagree with the conjectures presented therein; the book nonetheless presents a worthwhile discussion of NDEs. In order to understand the subject, one must become familiar with all the different views that surround the subject.

Introduction

In dialogue with skeptics, I often encounter the claim that Susan Blackmore, in *Dying to Live*, provides scientific proof the near-death experience results from a "dying brain." Skeptics argue her work disproves the existence of spirit and the afterlife. A close reading of *Dying to Live*, however, shows otherwise. The following is a critique of the first eight chapters.

The Preface

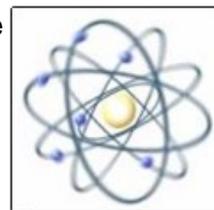
Though skeptics claim Susan Blackmore is an unbiased researcher, in the preface to her book, she makes her prejudices known as she assumes the viewpoint of the **biased skeptic**. She writes:

"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." And, "Of course, this comforting thought conflicts with science. Science tells us that death is the end and, as so often, finds itself opposing religion." - Susan Blackmore, *Dying To Live*



This is a misrepresentation of both religion and science. Consider the comment, "whole religions are based upon a denial of death."

Religion's primary concern lies with the spirit and its relationship to the universe. Some prefer the term "spiritual" to describe religious views, focusing on the core issue - the existence of spirit. Almost all religions hold the belief man is, in essence, a spirit or soul that lives beyond body death. This is not a denial of death, but rather a focus on the life of the spirit. No one I know denies the existence of death - the body dies. The



life of the spirit is another matter. By assuming spirit does not exist, Blackmore cynically reduces the subject of religion to a denial of death. If the spirit exists, however, and transcends body death (one of the two hypotheses considered in *Dying to Live*), then Blackmore, not religion, is in denial.

Thus, starting with page one, it's clear she does not intend to explore the subject of NDEs (and survival of the spirit) with an unbiased scientific approach. Her prejudice, not the research, will dictate the 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 being a method of inquiry.

She offers the unsupported and blatantly false statement that "science tells us" death is the end. Though she may personally believe death is the end, "science" makes no such pronouncement. Later in the book, **researchers with scientific credentials who take the opposite position** - that spirit survives body death - are mentioned, which puts the lie to her earlier statements that science tells us death is the end. Though it may be appropriate to state the personal belief that spirit does not survive body death, presuming to speak for "science" diminishes the book's credibility from the outset.

Dying to Live turns out to be, first and foremost, a personal opinion in support of the skeptical viewpoint, not a statement of scientific evidence or proof.

Later in the preface, another illogical statement points up her agenda:

"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."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Though the body is an evolving bio-organism, the spirit is not; when it comes to questions of spirit or soul, evolution is irrelevant. She uses a biological argument to dismiss a non-biological premise, revealing her intention to dismiss evidence a priori and substitute biases that arise from the field of evolutionary psychology - the "man-is-an-animal" school of thought.

Skeptics who claim the author of *Dying to Live* is non-biased are proven wrong; skeptics who claim she provides scientific proof are shown, by her own words, to be in error.

Chapter One



Two competing hypotheses are advanced in *Dying to Live*: The **Afterlife Hypothesis** and The Dying Brain Hypothesis. The Afterlife Hypothesis states spirit survives body death. The NDE is the result of spirit separating from the body. The **Dying Brain Hypothesis** states the NDE is an artifact of brain chemistry. According to the dying brain hypothesis, there is no spirit which survives body death.

The book sets out to examine arguments for these two conflicting hypotheses - then fails to do so. Blackmore never presents the actual Afterlife Hypothesis; she presents a version intended to be refuted - a straw man argument. So much for skeptics' claims of unbiased research.

In the list of four arguments for the Afterlife Hypothesis, the most important argument is omitted (later in the book it is addressed in passing). This primary and most basic tenet of the Afterlife Hypothesis - that spirit (and consciousness) separate from the body - deserves primary attention, but Blackmore instead addresses tangential arguments.

Failing to formulate a clear and concise statement of what must be demonstrated to support each hypothesis, she fails to test clear assumptions and ends up concluding neither has proof, after which she expresses her feeling the Dying Brain Hypothesis must be right. Skeptics make the mistake of claiming scientific proof when Blackmore offers only opinion.

In the first chapter, in quotes provided by NDErs, specific references are made to being "**outside his/her body**." NDEs, we learn, sometimes include the observation of actual proceedings, such as operations, viewed from unusual vantage points. This important point evidence, the very essence of the Afterlife Hypothesis, is ignored at this early stage in the text.

Particularly annoying to this reader is a brief passage regarding **Tibetan Buddhism**:

"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..."

She could not be more wrong. Tibetan Buddhism endorses the Afterlife Hypothesis. Readers with only passing familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism are aware they search for reincarnated leaders and reinstate them to their position in the monastery. Buddhists take life beyond death quite literally. Blackmore misappropriates Buddhist concepts and fails to understand Buddhist practice disproves her Dying Brain Hypothesis!

Convincing stories of the **tradition of NDE's in Buddhist** and **Native American** circles are compared to modern day NDE's:

"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..."

Dying to Live arrives at the essence of the Afterlife Hypothesis, the separation of spirit and body, then ignores its significance. This dismissal of the key issue casts doubt on the integrity of the work, integrity which is placed further in doubt by 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."

The opinion of a select few academicians, who are not experts on the subject, can hardly be called scientific evidence. In an earlier passage, she notes that well over half the public, some seventy percent surveyed, believe in life after death, then dismisses "popularity" as a scientific criterion. Now she turns around and uses "popularity" among academics as grounds for her argument. She offers 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..."

People also do not like to think of themselves as an immaterial being; they do not like to think of themselves as anything but a body. The argument cuts both ways. We are presented with amateur psychology in lieu of scientific proof. Her opinion does not determine whether spirit departs the body, it only serves to explain her personal psychology.

Later in the chapter, once again, she 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. It is the very hypothesis under consideration.

What spirit perceives while it is separate is a different question. This should be obvious, but apparently is not. Most of *Dying to Live* is spent disputing differences in perceptual or experiential content, rather than inspecting the core hypothesis.

To illustrate the point, consider the following thought experiment. Ask people in various lands to take a Sunday afternoon stroll and report their experience. There will be similarities, for example, the report of the mobility of the body through the environment accompanied by the senses taking in the environment. We would not be surprised, however, to find a walk through Manhattan produces very different content from that produced by a stroll through the bush country of Kenya. Likewise, when one investigates NDEs, one needs to distinguish core factors or invariants (such as separation from body) from the varied content of perception. When this critical difference is overlooked in *Dying to Live*, the validity of the work is undermined.

Chapter Two

Drugs are entered into the equation and Blackmore reveals her personal experiences with **NDE-like**

phenomena under the effects of controlled substances. She notes some differences in NDE's 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 in looking at content differences, while ignoring invariance in the basics. In our thought experiment, it was demonstrated that reports which varied due to differences between scenery in Kenya and Manhattan did not mean one subject did not take a walk. Likewise, if the stroller in Manhattan ingests drugs and then turns in a report that varies in content, this does not mean the subject did not stroll through the environment as requested, only that his perceptions varied due to his drugged condition.



In misapplying the invariance hypothesis, Blackmore fails to take into account:

- (1) Varying conditions of spirits when they separate (to varying degrees) from the body and,
- (2) The varied perceptual and cognitive content that occurs, depending upon the circumstances of separation.

It is folly to reduce a complex human and spiritual experience into machine-like simplicity. When it comes to the study of humans, such reductionism 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, NDE's, drug-induced hallucinations, out-of-body experiences occurring under normal conditions and other kinds of hallucinations are all related."

In other words, the NDE is not an isolated phenomena. The common link between NDE and these other experiences is the release of the spirit, to a greater or lesser extent, from the body. This is the relation that should be investigated.

The real question 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? Evidence tells us the answer is no.

The spirit can and does leave the body in any number of situations, including those that occur 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. The Afterlife Hypothesis predicts the spirit should be 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 a common link that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis, she opines:

"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."

Failing to see the obvious common element between the different situations, she offers an unwarranted and unsupported assumption. How she arrives at her conjecture is not clear, as she doesn't make the case for her argument. She fails to support her reasoning. She assumes, incorrectly, that NDE phenomena must be purely medical, psychological, or physiological with no spiritual component.

Throughout the book, one finds this pattern repeated. Evidence that clearly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis is presented, then, without explanation, the opposite conclusion is advanced.

The sentences that follow lend further support to the Afterlife Hypothesis:

"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."

"The experience of leaving the body has a long history" clearly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis. She considers drugs to present "medical phenomena," but does she not consider how drugs affect the spirit's connection to the body. How do powerful hallucinogens and anesthetics affect a spirit's ability to remain connected to the body? Do toxic effects of such drugs bring the body close to death? As she presents these phenomena, she fails to take the Afterlife Hypothesis into account. Her bias prevents her from asking common sense questions.

She goes on to discuss the effects of 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..."

It becomes critical for our understanding to consider how drugs affect the interface between spirit, mind, and body. How drugs affect the condition of the spirit when it separates and when it returns? Drugs are a major source of confusion within NDE research.

Near the end of the chapter, research is cited that suggests the spirit separates from the body in other than death situations, which supports the Afterlife hypothesis. Blackmore writes:

"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 find a consistency between the Afterlife Hypothesis and the evidence reported. Blackmore, however, stands before the evidence and engages in 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 showing little or no activity should function in this clear-thinking manner is absurd, and totally unsupported by research. The author of *Dying to Live* reviews the literature, inadvertently presents a well-supported case for the Afterlife Hypothesis, then advances unsubstantiated conjecture. Bias and prejudice undermine scholarship.

The chapter ends 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 to a spiritual being that separates from the body. Understanding the details of how this happens is our logical next step.

Blackmore instead claims the agenda is to understand the dying brain, an assertion motivated by bias, not evidence. Prejudices erode and damage the quality of *Dying to Live*.

Chapter Three

The chapter opens with Blackmore presenting a claim that a person under the effects of **nitrous oxide** was able to view from outside his body. Her non-sequitur conclusion reads:

"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, when someone reports an out-of-body experience, he thereby demonstrates a reluctance to admit it was his brain at work. With no discussion of 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." **Non-sequitur conclusions** diminish her case. She states evidence for A, 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 NDE's. Scientists for the most part assume some form of materialism; that mental phenomena depend upon, or are an aspect of, brain events."

Skeptics must be squirming. What could she be thinking? She argues based upon what scientists assume. This is exactly the approach skeptics criticize. She favors scientists' assumptions over firsthand accounts. If skeptics were honest in their appraisal of *Dying to Live*, they would state "Susan Blackmore assumes..." and that would be the end of the debate. Instead, they misrepresent the work as scientific proof.

"As we have seen, the very occurrence of NDEs is not proof either way," she writes. With a wave of her pen she dismisses evidence she previously presented, evidence supporting the Afterlife Hypothesis, and asks us to accept non-sequitur conjecture. We should be wary of such biased thinking. The fact is the NDE - with its out-of-body component - goes a long way toward proving the spirit exists separate from the body. Later, she writes:

"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."

As we have already seen, however, she has no intention of considering the Afterlife Hypothesis. Even in *Dying to Live*, the Afterlife Hypothesis is a best fit with the evidence, however, when evidence points to the Afterlife Hypothesis, it is blatantly ignored.

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

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

Her response reads:

"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."

As she agrees anoxia does not provide "the" explanation for the NDE, that it is one among many possible factors, the obvious question to ask is, "What do ALL the factors have in common?"

One finds:

(a) Trauma to the body can interrupt the connection between the spirit and the body - drugs, lack of oxygen, injury, even the anticipation of great bodily harm or death. These are all factors which serve to disconnect or separate the functioning of spirit and body. That which requires research and explanation is how spirit interfaces with the body and what causes an interruption or severance of this connection.

And one finds:

(b) Experiences not involving drugs or trauma but rather 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 acquired skill. For example, Tibetan Buddhism or other training.

Thus, we have "accidental" separation and "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 fails to even consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. She states evidence, 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 basis of the Afterlife Hypothesis, that the spirit separates from body. She instead uses variety of content as an excuse to ignore the profound, consistent core of the NDE and related experiences - separation of spirit from body.

She fails to ask, what is the nature of spirit? What are the spirit's perceptual and cognitive abilities when separate? Without an inquiry into such matters, it is not possible to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. Her bias toward philosophical materialism prevents consideration of the alternative hypothesis.

Without considering the Afterlife Hypothesis, she asks how anoxia affects the brain, even though anoxia itself is not the common element. She argues anoxia is not a common invariant factor of the NDE, then proceeds in her attempt to explain the NDE on the basis of anoxia. The real question is, "What condition does anoxia cause that is the same as conditions caused by other precipitating factors?" In other words, "What do they have in common?"

Without asking these questions, we end up with a one-sided and incomplete analysis based entirely upon bias toward a brain explanation. The Afterlife Hypothesis is merely trotted out as a straw figure to be knocked down.

Chapter Four

In this chapter, the author discusses **drug-induced hallucinations**, but fails to explore the question of **what exactly is a hallucination**, what does one view in a hallucination? The assumption is made that the nature of hallucination is known, when this is not the case. The study of consciousness, still in a primitive state, does not answer this question. She works on the premise that a hallucination is a visual or auditory perception that does not coincide with "**objective**" reality, but fails to establish what it is one views in a hallucination. It's obvious that something, some form of mental imagery, is perceived. What is it?



As a result of bias, she does not ask how spirit, detached from a body, as in the Afterlife Hypothesis, might perceive mental pictures or imagery. How do such perception correlate with "objective" reality? In other words, she fails to consider a **model of mind** that would accompany the Afterlife Hypothesis and confines her speculation to **brain theory**. An unbiased researcher must investigate the phenomena within the paradigms of each hypothesis.

Writing about the NDErs passing through a tunnel of mental energy, she states:

"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."

This conclusion proves false when we consider the NDE reports. They see not only **ethereal energy patterns**, they view the "objective" world - the world of operating rooms and other more mundane settings. Reports tell us "this" world is intermingled with the world of **mental energy**. This same phenomenon is common in everyday experience - people are perfectly capable of managing the world of **imagination**, the world of **mental images**, while going about their 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, the question is not even considered. She 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."

That's why those skilled at observing the **subtle energy** that surrounds the spirit are able to perceive such events. Reports from NDErs claim an ability to perceive other **disembodied spirits while out of body**. Mediums skilled at communicating with disembodied spirits 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? Of course. The history of science is filled with examples of technological breakthroughs that have allowed researchers to **detect that which was formerly invisible**. There's good reason to suspect this scenario be repeated 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."

She again focuses on content, not underlying phenomena. The structure of specific tunnels is not in question; as has been stated, they are mental constructs, mental energy patterns. As such they take many malleable forms. Such mental energy is not confined to a brain, but rather is patterned energy that makes up the mind, which is not the 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, as in the Afterlife Hypothesis, it remains "cloaked" in its mind. Individual spirits exist within energy masses when they leave the body. The content of this mind will vary from individual to individual, which explains why we have varying content, but invariant mechanics.

The collection of **energy patterns** we shall call the mind can best be imagined by comparing it to the **quantum pilot wave** concept, in which a less substantial, information-bearing, **quantum wave pattern is entangled** with a denser, macroscopic structure. (An analogy would be a **radio signal** directing the motions of a large super tanker.) The **patterned energy of the mind** entangles 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.

The invariant element that precipitates the NDE or OBE is 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, surrounded by its mind, which also detaches (to a greater or lesser degree) from the body/brain.

The spirit's attention, when out of body, 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 concert with other disembodied spirits. One has variance of content, invariance of the mechanics. In our mundane, every day lives, we are familiar with the **mental realm** that cloaks the spirit. This is the subjective world, 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 less dense mental energy patterns, varies. This accounts for the varied nature of NDE accounts which include both perceptions of physical setting and patterned mental energy.

If one intends to compare the Afterlife Hypothesis to the Dying Brain Hypothesis, one must take this model of the mind into account. One must understand the spirit in its disembodied condition. Without such understanding, one never compares the two hypotheses, which leads to a failure to determine which model best explains the phenomena.

Blackmore, unable to conceptualize the assumptions of the Afterlife Hypothesis, gives it no consideration at all. Contrary to skeptics' claims, she fails to weigh the evidence in light of the two opposing hypotheses.

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 one decides they're purely imaginary and lack substance, one must attempt to understand the ways in which the reports might be accurate - as presented. One must at least attempt to come to grips with the details and not summarily dismiss the phenomena as brain-induced hallucination.

If one is to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis as more than a straw man 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?

When one goes the extra step and considers the model in detail, a more coherent theory emerges which explains the phenomena without the necessity of dismissing NDE reports. The model fits the data.

The facts do not fit Blackmore's Dying Brain Hypothesis, thus she must assume the NDEs are mistaken. She must discard evidence and substitute conjecture. She must avoid the actual research.

Perhaps she fails to explore the Afterlife Hypothesis due to a lack of knowledge and insight or perhaps bias prevents her from considering both hypotheses equally. In either case, the primary failing is the lack of a valid inquiry into the Afterlife Hypothesis. Failing to correctly state the premises of the Afterlife Hypothesis, let alone compare research data with the assumptions, undermines the work.

Chapter Five

In this chapter, the author's actual agenda becomes clear. It is not an agenda that includes researching and comparing the two stated hypotheses. She 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."

The attempt to reduce the near-death experience to brain physiology rests upon a semantic dodge:

"The first is a direct challenge to any physiological or naturalistic theory of the NDE. It is simply this: that some NDEs 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 evidence that stands in opposition to her theory makes no sense, for a number of reasons:

- (1) She dismisses the very claims she purports to study.
- (2) She dismisses the Afterlife Hypothesis as "paranormal." Though our task was to evaluate how evidence fit the Afterlife Hypothesis, she now dismisses the hypothesis entirely by simply labeling it "paranormal."



The proper approach would be to pursue the research as originally proposed and compare the hypotheses in light of the data. One finds 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 directly support this hypothesis as they demonstrate the existence of a spirit which can detach from the body. The actual reports from those who experience the phenomena support the Afterlife Hypothesis and contradict the Dying Brain Hypothesis. This is the type of analysis one conducts if one is doing science.

Scientific procedure dictates that if you find data that support one hypothesis over another, even if you are not sure exactly how the underlying phenomena work, you are duty bound to further investigate the hypothesis the data supports. Following the 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 have had the experience, those closest to the subject of our research, conforms to the Afterlife Hypothesis. They claim the experience is not body/brain/drug based, but rather an experience of separation from ordinary body sensations.

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. A picture of what might be expected can be extrapolated from the Afterlife Hypothesis. Such a projection closely matches the NDE reports. Susan Blackmore dismisses the data and instead inserts her "contention:

"... 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."

Those interested in knowledge gained via pursuit of the scientific method are left adrift. Not only does Blackmore blatantly toss out primary research data and substitute her own prejudices, she makes the outrageous statement:

"For there is nothing else."

This begs the question, how does she know "there is nothing else?"

Chapter Six

This chapter begins with perhaps the most accurate statements found 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 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, without doubt, the Afterlife Hypothesis wins out.

Blackmore is correct: the Dying Brain Hypothesis is wrong. But 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...."

In the face of data that clearly contradicts her theory, Blackmore simply contends the Afterlife Hypothesis is false.

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."

Aware of the tenuous nature of her argument, she 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 the arguments in the book, however, it's clear the sole purpose is to debunk. There is no intention of assessing alternatives. When research clearly supports the Afterlife Hypothesis, the data is ignored or dismissed as "lucky guesses and fantasy." She contends there is no spirit, thus no reason to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis. Research data is replaced with personal bias and opinion.

Assessing the merit of her dismissal of NDE reports, we find claims the NDErs are not really seeing from a vantage point outside the body, claims that **NDErs construct a visual image as a result of hearing and touch**. This conjecture **does not correlate with 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 the content they view, but also the actual experience of viewing. One can perform a simple demonstration to illustrate the difference. Sit down, close your eyes, and visualize the room - based upon what you hear and feel. Now open your eyes and view the room. You can distinguish the two events. In the latter, you experience the actual process of viewing.

The **conjecture** that **prior knowledge** accounts for reports in which subjects view events, settings, or personnel does not hold up, for often it is the first time the setting and events are viewed. In such cases, no prior experience exists upon which to draw. Prior knowledge fails to 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. Sit down, close your eyes, and recall a memory of being in the room. Open your eyes and perceive the room. Notice the difference between the recall of the memory and experiencing "in the moment." Blackmore ignores reports that claim the experience was not one of reconstructing memories, but rather one of being aware in the present.

The "fantasy" explanation does not merit a response when it comes to reports wherein the scene viewed matched actual physical events. She risks falling into the dubious trap of becoming the "authority" on someone else's experience when she puts forth such conjecture. Assigning the label of fantasy arbitrarily removes the research from the realm of science and places it squarely in the realm of 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 readers. This covers all the bases - yes, you perceived correctly, but it was a "lucky guess." This is an arbitrary method of eliminating research that contradicts one's pet theory.

It's apparent Blackmore does not respect the reports of people who have actually had a NDE. She does not need their reports. (After all, their reports are fantasy or lucky guesses.) When actual research disproves her theory, she tosses the research aside and substitutes conjecture. If this analysis seems overly harsh, 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 offers no proof that NDE perceptions are imagination, she only offers conjecture, prejudice, and bias. She dismisses the simplest conclusion - that people making the reports are truthful and accurate. This allows her to circumvent the obvious: the reports support the Afterlife Hypothesis and contradict the Dying Brain Hypothesis. She 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."

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

If, as the data suggests, spirit exists separate from the body and survives body death, it is Blackmore's desire to deny the existence of spirit that leads to exaggeration, falsification, and fantasy. The 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."



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 the 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 covered with pink dots stretched out on the floor. Superimpose the subjective, imaginary lion over the objective room. People manage to shift focus back and forth and superimpose thoughts over the objective world all the time. When the spirit departs the body, this combination of subjective and objective comes into play.

She comments on the nature of the world the NDErs 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 adds:

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

There's no "error," 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 consistent with both the Afterlife Hypothesis and the evidence.

Blackmore fails to consider the Afterlife Hypothesis on its own terms. Instead, she applies the assumptions 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 body of 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 evidence and hypotheses under consideration.



She takes up concepts presented in Talbot's **Holographic Universe**, including **David Bohm's implicate order** and **Pribram's speculation on the holographic mind model**. *(Both Bohm and Pribram 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 question at hand. His theories become useful only when they are applied to the concept of mind separate from the brain. When one considers mind to be energy patterns which encompass the spirit, the application of quantum theory and implicate order begins to make sense.

Roger Penrose, another physicist presenting theoretical work on consciousness, also fails because he does not consider consciousness separate from the brain. 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 mind; the dynamics between mind and spirit; communication between spirits; and the impingement of mind upon the body. A detailed explanation emerges when all these factors are taken into account.

Blackmore disputes the existence of explanations by critiquing only Bohm's work. 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. Blackmore appears to respond 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. I'm no doubt too critical of Blackmore in this regard as she does not have the tools to construct such a model. There would be nothing wrong, in my opinion, with her simply admitting she does not understand the Afterlife Hypothesis and holds a bias in favor of the Dying Brain Hypothesis. 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. (*Of course, one needs to arrive at an accurate description of the observer, rather than using the metaphor of a little person sitting in the brain.*) It is just this spirit that the Afterlife Hypothesis posits and which the NDE evidence supports. 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 off hand.

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 homonculus ... 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.

She then presents the "[mental models](#)" concept 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 the analogy further:

"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 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 computational theories are no longer appropriate.)

Her "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."

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 solipsistic, must be discarded if they 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 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, that which 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 "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 assumes the spirit creates the mental models, in which case the physical emerges 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."

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 which considers the physical to be thought, thus an illusion. This is 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, but rather 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, but such may be nothing more than a common side effect of LSD. Drugs bring confusion not enlightenment. Blackmore states her experience with NDE/OBE phenomena occurred as a result of drug use, so we may guess that 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 titled "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 a 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 additional examples, which we know are a few among many, many reports with the

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. She 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, the 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." She is unable to 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. That is not something of which a mental model is capable.

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. When we are out of body, 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 of imagination follow:

"... 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."

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. Those reporting distinguish between the experience of recalling memories or imagining and the experience of perceiving in the present. As pointed out, 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.

(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 always approaches from a higher vantage point. The

land always descends to the water's edge. Thus, one can remember the "wide shot" one viewed as one approached. Is this what she means by bird's eye view memory? (She provide other examples.) In the seashore example, 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, however, 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 NDErs. Her theory falls apart on this point; the seashore example is 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 her cornerstone argument for explaining away evidence that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis and disproves the Dying Brain Hypothesis. In her argument, however, she fails to:

- (1)** Account for the 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)** Account for "perceiving in the moment" reports of the NDErs. She fails to account for their vivid perceptions which differ from recall or imagination.
- (3)** Account for the NDErs perception of physical events never before encountered, physical events and details which do not exist in memory.
- (4)** Answer the question of who perceived the bird's-eye view in the first place in order to "remember it." NDErs 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)** Explain unique events the NDErs 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." 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 clicked story of accident witnesses whose reports vary. Our "normal" perceptions are rarely, if ever, one-hundred-percent accurate. Blackmore tells us nothing new and employs false standards. On that basis, all our perception is invalid. What is important, however, is that there are correct perceptions. She fails to account for such correct perception of details from an out of body vantage point that's impossible to achieve with bodily senses.

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 convoluted explanation 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" positions is experienced as the same "you" that perceives in normal day to day living. 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 (in some NDE cases there is no brain activity), the creator of this highly complex and consistent model is inoperative, which means there should be no "you" to control (or even view) 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 body 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, 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 NDErs consistently report being outside the body instead?

"... 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 NDErs 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, she fails to investigate the actual reports and substitutes conjecture. When NDErs 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 and old photos.

Thus, her conjecture does not fit the data. Not only is it not scientific proof, it is conjecture that does not conform to the facts at hand.

(Without going into a long dissertation on the matter, it should be pointed out her 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 OBE experiencers 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, 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 who can move and assume varied viewpoints without regard to the body. The Afterlife Hypothesis predicts this 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, turns around and states she is able to predict this experience, and then argues this 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. (Though the factor itself does not support the Dying Brain Hypothesis, she claims her ability to predict this factor supports the hypothesis.)

As we saw earlier, bird's-eye viewpoints do not support the Dying Brain Hypothesis, and she 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 her argument, she shows no way for the bird's-eye view to take place, no way for that perceptual viewpoint to be achieved. She states the bird's eye view is the work of imagination and memory, but does not state how that view comes into being in the first place so it can be imagined or remembered.

The ability to predict a factor that supports the Afterlife Hypothesis does not support the Dying Brain Hypothesis.

Her research fails to correlate OBE with imagination, yet she states the OBE is imagination. Her research correlates the OBE with out of body dream states that further support the Afterlife Hypothesis which predicts 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. She 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 seen 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 conjecture regarding brain theories that don't fit the NDE reports. A continued critique would be redundant, so I will spare the reader a lengthy trip over established ground.

Skeptics claim Blackmore provides scientific proof that NDEs are merely brain phenomena, proof spirit does not exist. This is simply false. *Dying to Live* presents conjecture, assumptions, speculation, but no proof. Furthermore, her conjecture does not match the evidence she presents.

The skeptics' second claim, that she has explored both hypotheses as an unbiased researcher is also false. The major shortcoming of *Dying to Live* is a failure to explore or present the Afterlife Hypothesis. It is propped up on false legs in order to be knocked down.

Every time the evidence and the reports clearly support the Afterlife Hypothesis, she makes a non-sequitur leap to the Dying Brain Hypothesis. Should we blame her for not understanding the Afterlife Hypothesis? No. This is not her area of expertise.

What is perhaps most needed in the field of NDE studies is a clear statement of the Afterlife Hypothesis so authors, like Blackmore, will be forced to address the actual hypothesis, not straw man versions.

The following are e-mails exchanged with regard to the above critique.

Susan Blackmore's Response, March 2001



I have not claimed that any of my work proves the Dying Brain Hypothesis. In fact no amount of research ever could. The most I could hope to do, and in fact what I tried to do in *Dying to Live*, is to show that we can account for all the major features of the NDE without recourse to such ideas as a spirit, a soul, or life after death.

My account was far from complete, but even if I had provided an extremely detailed and convincing explanation of every feature - from the tunnel and lights to the life review - it would always be open to someone to say ... "Right, I agree that tunnels and lights, and OBEs and life reviews can be explained by what happens in the brain, but after the brain has finally stopped something else carries on". In other words no amount of evidence can prove the Dying Brain Hypothesis. The best it can do is provide a plausible explanation of the events leading up to the death of the brain and body. As for what happens next - each of us will eventually get our own one chance to find out.

Am I as horribly biased as ZipZap (Greg Stone) suggests?

If having experiences, doing research and forming opinions based on them means being biased then, yes, I am. My obsession with NDEs and OBEs really began back in 1970 (before the term NDE was even invented) when I had a most extraordinary and wonderful experience. At the time I called it astral projection because that was the only name I had for it. Later I realized that I had experienced the tunnel, the wonderful light, an OBE that lasted several hours, a difficult decision to return and, finally, a mystical experience which is very difficult to describe in ordinary words. A few days after the experience I wrote my own account of it. For anyone who is interested it is now available [at psychology.ucdavis.edu/tart/taste/](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/tart/taste/)

After that experience I was probably very biased. I was convinced that my soul had left my body, that I had visited worlds beyond this one, and that death could not be the end. This is why I decided to give up a sensible career in psychology, and devote myself to parapsychology instead - to the disgust of my academic teachers and the horror of my parents.

The story of what I found is familiar (I wrote about it in [In Search of the Light: The Adventures of a Parapsychologist](#), Prometheus, 1996). I found that many of my assumptions were wrong; ESP was not round every corner, scientists were not trying to suppress evidence for it - there just wasn't any evidence that stood up to scrutiny. I had to change my mind. Interestingly, having changed my mind in such a dramatic way once, I have little fear of having to do so again. This is why I say that if any convincing evidence for the paranormal, or for life after death, comes along I will change my mind again. So far it has not.

Alongside all this I began to realize that chasing after the paranormal was an understandable, but inappropriate reaction to what I had seen. This was a deep, profound and life-changing experience. Saying that something left the body, or that it proved the existence of another world, was trivializing it. Gradually I explored, and found other ways of touching that experience again.

I have practiced **Zen** now for nearly twenty years. At the heart of this practice are the ideas of letting go, of non-attachment, and of no-self. The idea is not that there is no self at all, but that the self is not what we commonly think it is. 'I' am not a persisting entity separate from the world, but a flowing, ephemeral, ungraspable part of that world. As anyone who has had a mystical experience knows, everything is one. I think those lessons, and many more, were thrust upon me in that original experience. They gave me not only an academic desire to understand strange experiences but the motivation and insight to pursue a spiritual life.

As happens with many NDErs, my experiences and my research have taken away the fear of death, not because I am convinced that 'I' will carry on after this body dies, but because I know there is no one to die, and never was. If others, like ZipZap, disagree that is their prerogative. All any of us can do is seek the truth to the best of our ability, and - even if that truth turns out to be quite different from what we hoped or expected - to accept it when we find it.

I am glad that ZipZap so warmly recommends my book to anyone interested in NDEs. I hope it will speak for itself and provide interested readers with a way of understanding the NDE that does justice to the experience without requiring belief in spirits, souls, or an after life. Whether the theories in it are right only time and more research will tell.

Greg Stone's Response



Though I was disappointed that Susan Blackmore did not respond to the substance of my critique, I was extremely pleased that she did clarify some very important issues. The most important being that she does not claim her work proves the Dying Brain Hypothesis. Many **CSICOP** members DO make such a claim on her behalf and now, with her definitive statement on the record, that will no longer be an issue.

The other side of the coin in this regard is that she has not proven the nonexistence of the spirit. This, too, is often claimed by CSICOP members and other skeptics to be the case and, I presume, will no longer be an issue. (In my critique, I go a step further and discuss how her work doesn't even present a plausible argument for the nonexistence of the spirit, but rather takes evidence those points quite clearly to the existence of spirit and dismisses it summarily. No point to rehash the details here.)

In her response to my critique, she mentions "having experiences, doing research, and forming opinions." I'm all for people having experiences and forming opinions on the subject. My objection, stated in my critique, was that her opinions were being elevated to the level of scientific proof by those, such as CSICOP members, who claim to represent the "scientific" viewpoint. As she is a member and fellow of CSICOP, I would hope she would now make an effort to clarify the exact status of the work to the membership.

Personally, I find it ironic that she posted the account of her drug induced out of body experience on a site that promises a "safe place" for professionals to post their unusual experiences while she's an active member of a group that's primarily responsible for

making it unsafe to discuss and research such phenomena. Perhaps she may wish to reconsider her membership in CSICOP? She asks if I perceive her as being biased (I do), while she notes the bias and social pressure that exists within her profession and immediate circle. Maybe the personal bias is merely a function of the institutional and social biases with which she's surrounded.

The account of her OBE was invaluable in shedding light on her personal point of view. While I do not think it appropriate to discuss her personal experience in a public forum (but am willing to do so in private), the nature of the events that led to her current position (a la *Dying to Live*) are quite common. An extensive drug history, a drug-induced OBE, fear of being able to re enter the body, and the lack of spiritual knowledge with which to understand the experience all commonly lead to an "explaining away" of the primary phenomena. *Dying to Live*, in my opinion, is merely an extension of this need to "explain away" a rather profound, but nonetheless frightening and disorienting experience.

Rather than take this personal viewpoint as the last word of science on the matter, I think it is important to take NDEs on their own merit and allow science to move ahead in understanding exactly what we find, as it is, no matter where that takes us -- "even if that truth turns out to be quite different from what we hoped or expected," as Blackmore states. The evidence points very clearly in the direction of a consciousness that can exist outside the body and which survives body death. This is upsetting to many. And yet we must overcome our emotional queasiness and push forward.

A last note that echoes all that goes before -- she mentions her tenure in Zen Buddhism and the pursuit of a spiritual life. In an ironic way, this echoes the conflict and paradox between the experiences she recounts and her professional views. One must ask how can one have a spiritual life without spirit? One may possess humanity and other qualities, but certainly not spirituality without spirit. One cannot study Buddhism without also studying the spirit and its existence apart from the body. Buddha's teachings directly addressed the concept of non-attachment to the body and the physical; and addressed the transcendence of birth and death, transcendence beyond obsessive reincarnation. Buddha's teachings addressed exactly that which we find in the NDE, the OBE, and the past-life recall. The reduction of Buddhism, no matter which "school," to physical monism would not make Buddha smile. The concept of non-attachment is the exact opposite of physical monism, which she presents as Zen Buddhism. Physical or materialistic monism is total attachment, total identification with the physical. The exact opposite of Buddhism. Perhaps this best captures the bias I detect in her work -- an attempt to deny everything spiritual, including her own experiences and urges toward spirituality, in an effort to reduce everything to the material.

And yes, I'm happy to recommend *Dying to Live* as all viewpoints must be considered in depth and none discarded out of hand. In retrospect, I wish she had included the full text of her experience in the book. Perhaps in the next edition?