

"I am saddened by, and gravely disappointed by the article recently published in Esquire. The content attributed to me is both out of context and does not accurately portray the events around Dr. Eben Alexander's hospitalization. I felt my side of the story was misrepresented by the reporter. I believe Dr. Alexander has made every attempt to be factual in his accounting of events."

— Dr. Laura Potter

Eben Alexander answers skeptics' criticisms



In October, a [Newsweek article](#) featured an excerpt from neurosurgeon Eben Alexander's new book, *Proof of Heaven*. Several skeptics wrote articles critical of Dr. Alexander's *Newsweek* account, notably neuroscientist Sam Harris. Harris disputes that Alexander's cortex was shut down which allowed the "hyper-real" experience of heaven Alexander reported. While the severity and duration of the meningitis infection, the resulting coma, an enhanced CT scan and neurological examinations all indicate global impairment of the neocortex which would not support consciousness, to Harris these constitute only secondary evidence and consciousness could still have been possible. For Harris, complete brain inactivity can be demonstrated only by brain imaging like fMRI and EEG. It should be noted that while he has a Ph.D. in neuroscience, Harris does not practice neuroscience and is not a clinician.

Alexander responded to these criticisms on [Alex Tsakiris' Skeptiko podcast](#).

Specifically Alexander responded to Harris:

"Isolated preservation of cortical regions might have explained some elements of my experience, but certainly not the overall odyssey of rich experiential tapestry. The severity of my meningitis and its refractoriness to therapy for a week should have eliminated all but the most rudimentary of conscious experiences: peripheral white blood cell [WBC] count over 27,000 per mm³, 31 percent bands with toxic granulations, CSF WBC count over 4,300 per mm³, CSF glucose down to 1.0 mg/dl (normally 60-80, may drop down to ~ 20 in severe meningitis), CSF protein 1,340 mg/dl, **diffuse meningeal involvement and widespread blurring of the gray-white junction, diffuse edema, with associated brain abnormalities** revealed on my enhanced CT scan, and **neurological exams showing severe alterations in cortical function** (from posturing to no response to noxious stimuli, florid papilledema, and dysfunction of extraocular motility [no doll's eyes, pupils fixed], indicative of brainstem damage). Going from symptom onset to coma within 3 hours is a very dire prognostic sign, conferring 90% mortality at the very beginning, which only worsened over the week. No physician who knows anything about meningitis will just "blow off" the fact that I was deathly ill in every sense of

the word, and that my neocortex was absolutely hammered. Anyone who simply concludes that "since I did so well I could not have been that sick" is begging the question, and knows nothing whatsoever about severe bacterial meningitis."

In a **second blog article** in response to the Skeptiko podcast, Harris seems not to have read Alexander's comments on Skeptiko—nor Alexander's book—very carefully, stating "I find that my original criticism of Alexander's thinking can stand without revision" and further stating:

"[Alexander] doesn't understand what would constitute compelling evidence of cortical inactivity. The proof he offers is either fallacious (CT scans do not detect brain activity) or irrelevant (it does not matter, even slightly, that his form of meningitis was "astronomically rare")—and no combination of fallacy and irrelevancy adds up to sound science. The impediment to taking Alexander's claims seriously can be simply stated: ***There is absolutely no reason to believe that his cerebral cortex was inactive at the time he had his experience of the afterlife.*** The fact that Alexander thinks he has demonstrated otherwise—by continually emphasizing how sick he was, the infrequency of E. coli meningitis, and the ugliness of his initial CT scan—suggests a deliberate disregard of the most plausible interpretation of his experience. It is far more likely that some of his cortex was functioning, despite the profundity of his illness...."

Specifically, **Harris did not address the "diffuse meningeal involvement and widespread blurring of the gray-white junction, diffuse edema, with associated brain abnormalities" nor the neurological exams all of which indicate severe damage to the cortex and brainstem.**

Alexander examined **nine neuroscientific hypotheses that might explain his experience**, including the hypothesis that **some isolated cortical networks** may have been functioning. **That explanation would not explain the robust, richly interactive nature of his recollections.**

Harris points to the fact that Alexander remembered his NDE "suggests that the cortical and subcortical structures necessary for memory formation were active at the time". **Harris dismisses the possibility that memory as a function of consciousness may also be—as Alexander contends—independent of the brain.** If the memories are stored outside Alexander's brain, they are "presumably somewhere between Lynchburg, Virginia, and heaven".

Finally, Harris completely misreads Alexander's account of coming to recognize that the beautiful girl on the butterfly wing was his deceased sister Betsy, whom he had never met because he had been adopted. **Harris**

characterizes this as "wishful thinking" and "self-deception leading to a distortion of memory":

"While in his coma, he saw a beautiful girl riding beside him on the wing of a butterfly. We learn in his book that he developed his recollection of this experience over a period of *months*—writing, thinking about it, and mining it for new details. It would be hard to think of a better way to engineer a distortion of memory."

If Harris had read a little more carefully, he would have realized that Alexander's memories were vivid at the time he regained consciousness and that he wrote down every detail of his journeys in the six weeks after his recovery. The memories were "right there, crisp and clear". **Then four months after his recovery, he received the photograph of his deceased sister.**

"She looked so strangely, hauntingly familiar. But of course, she *would* look that way. We were blood relations and shared more DNA than any other people on the planet...."

The next morning, after reading a story about a child NDEr who met her deceased brother but wasn't aware she had a brother, **Alexander recognized that his deceased sister was the beautiful girl on the butterfly wing.**

<http://www.skeptiko.com/upload/skeptiko-189-sam-harris-eben-alexander.mp3>

Read it:

Welcome to Skeptiko where we explore controversial science with leading researchers, thinkers, and their critics. I'm your host, Alex Tsakiris, and on this episode of Skeptiko we're going to do something a little bit different. As you may have heard, Dr. Eben Alexander has a new book out. The book's titled Proof of Heaven and Dr. Alexander is going to appear on Skeptiko next week in an interview we recorded a couple weeks ago.

It's about an hour-long interview all about the book, all about his amazing near-death experience and how it changed him from being a very skeptical, traditional neurosurgeon to become someone who is very interested and ultimately convinced by the reality of near-death experience science. So you're going to hear from Dr. Alexander next week.

But in the meantime, on October 8th, Newsweek Magazine published an article on the book and dedicated their front cover to this very provocative picture of this hand reaching up to Heaven. It's all about the book and Dr. Alexander's experience. Great news, right?

Well, great news for everyone unless you're a skeptic and an Atheist and really against this kind of science. So it only took a couple of days for the skeptics to marshal their response and they came out in unison. Really all of them delivering many of the same talking points.

What I want to do today is break down some of those responses because I've actually had an email exchange with a couple of those respondents. Sam Harris, who of course is a very well-known author and Atheist. I'm also going to review the response from our old friend, Dr. Steven Novella, host of The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe. And Huffington Post blogger and best-selling Atheist author, Dr. Vic Stenger. So I have quite a bit to cover. Stick around. It's going to be interesting. And at the end I'm going to publish a written response that I have from Dr. Alexander.

So let's get right to it. The first response to the Newsweek Proof of Heaven article that I ran across was from Dr. Vic Stenger, who is very well-known in the Atheist community; one of the new Atheists. You're going to hear a lot from Dr. Stenger coming up in a couple of weeks when I publish the interview that I had with him. Fascinating, fascinating stuff. You'll really get a feel for where he's coming from. I think the interview's going to be quite controversial and I think you'll really enjoy it.

Dr. Stenger has also written a response on the Huffington Post to the Newsweek article on Dr. Alexander's book. I'm just going to highlight one quick point from it because it really jumped out at me. Once you hear the interview with Vic, you'll really be able to put this small quote into a larger context of where he's coming from. Now, he's a smart guy. A Ph.D., particle physics, good writer, comes across well. But when you really push him he kind of really goes way out there.

And here is one of his primary critiques of Dr. Alexander in the email exchange that I had with him.

He said, “Hell, he’s a surgeon, not a neuroscientist. Why should he know?”

Now keep in mind here that Dr. Eben Alexander is not only a neurosurgeon but received several fellowships from Harvard University, taught and researched neurosurgery at Harvard Medical School for 15 years. His curriculum vita is about as long as your arm. So I don’t know if this is just ignorance on Vic’s part or if he’s just blinded by this, oh-my-God, we have to respond to this near-death experience stuff in the strongest way possible. But it’s just a foolish thing to say.

As a matter of fact, we’re going to talk in a minute about Sam Harris, who has a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA but isn’t a practicing neuroscientist. And we’re going to talk about Steven Novella, who is a neurologist at Yale. So both of those guys are really highly qualified but I have to tell you if you really step back and look at it, Dr. Alexander’s qualifications for assessing the medical condition and the likelihood that this near-death experience happened the way that he said it does, his qualifications put him in a much better position for assessing that.

I mean, this guy deals with these kinds of patients all the time and he understands the procedures that you go through. He understands what’s likely to happen, what’s not likely to happen. He’s reading the research; he’s publishing research on it. So that’s not to disrespect Novella or Harris; they’re certainly very qualified.

And we have to take seriously their critiques, but it does draw into contrast just how far out of line Vic Stenger is when he says this. It’s just kind of curious and I think it further demonstrates how the skeptical Atheist mindset is so, so much like the Fundamentalist Christian mindset. It has a set of beliefs. It has this knee-jerk reaction to it, and it just can’t get outside of itself to look at the obvious foolishness of some of these statements. At least that’s my take from this, “He’s a surgeon, not a neuroscientist. What should he know?” Yeah, what should he know?

So let's move on to the second critique of this article in Newsweek, and it comes from our old friend, Dr. Steven Novella, who as I just mentioned is a clinical neurologist at Yale and he's also the host of a very skeptical podcast called The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe. Now, a lot of people really like Steve. He has this really nice bedside manner persona that comes across and he's obviously a very smart guy. If you've followed Skeptiko for very long, you know that Dr. Novella has been on this show a couple times and I've appeared on his show once.

You'll also know if you've dug into those shows that while like I say he's a really smart guy, he's very, very light on near-death experience science. I mean, he just doesn't know the research. If you want proof of that, go back to the last time that he was on Skeptiko. I mean, he not only failed to back up a couple of his assertions but at the end of that interview, we left it with let's come back on and have a debate.

Steve was going to provide this big list that he had of all of the NDE research that proved his point. When I pre-empted that by publishing, Here's the research that I think you're going to publish and here's how it's been responded to by the near-death experience researchers that we've had on the show, Steve disappeared. I've followed up with him multiple times on that and I know he's busy and all that, but really, when you piece the whole thing together what you see is somebody who's really not dug into the research and really doesn't know—there's really no other way to say it—what he's talking about when it comes to near-death experience science.

That's not to say that he doesn't know what he's talking about when it comes to neurology. I'm sure he's really qualified and he's just a really smart guy in general but, as you'll see, in his blog posts here he can be a little bit sloppy sometimes. Here's what I mean. This is from his October 8th blog post titled "Proof of Heaven?" Steve states:

"While his (Dr. Alexander's) experience is certainly interesting, his entire premise is flimsily based on a single word in the above paragraph. While. He assumes that the experience he remembers after waking from a coma occurred while his cortex was

completely inactive. He doesn't even seem aware of the fact that he's making that assumption or that this is the central premise to his claim as he does not address it in his article."

Well now, of course Steve's at a disadvantage here but I'm going to stop apologizing for Steve. I do it all the time when he says these stupid things and then I wind up apologizing for the guy. I'm not going to do it here. Steve, you should have read the book. I read a prepublication version of the book and Dr. Alexander addresses this directly, in great detail. Or at the very least, Steve, you should have dropped him an email as a professional courtesy. I'm sure he would have, as he did to me, provided a written response to your embarrassingly simplistic claim about the extent to which the guy analyzed his medical conditions and the likelihood that what you're proposing happened.

Back to the blog post. Later Steve writes:

"Of course his brain did not instantly go from completely inactive to normal or near-normal waking consciousness. That transition must have taken hours if not a day or more."

So this then is Steve's explanation for what happened. And then Steve writes:

"Alexander claims there's no scientific explanation for his experience but I just gave one."

This is really interesting in a couple of ways. First it's interesting because again, if Steve had read the book he'd find that one of the most amazing things about Dr. Alexander's experience is that his physician is in the other room with his wife talking about whether they should terminate use of the ventilator and they go in and Dr. Alexander pops out of his coma. He starts reaching for the ventilator tube and starts pulling on the tubes and then his eyes wake up and he starts talking. And in his book you'll read a letter from his physician that not only says this but says that it's absolutely stunning and an amazing medical miracle that something like this could happen. So that's one part of it.

Steve just doesn't know what he's talking about. But the other part of it that I think is really interesting because it gets to the heart of the skeptical Atheist response here is that why do Steve and these other Atheists because Sam Harris really makes the same point—why do they think that they only have to offer a scientific explanation? Why aren't they obligated to offer a better scientific explanation? Because hey, by any measure this is an extraordinary medical case. Steve seems to miss that.

Steve seems to miss that an E. coli spinal meningitis infection is rare. And for it to take hold of someone out of the blue this quickly is even rarer. For someone to spend six days in a coma and wake up is rarer still. All medical knowledge confirms this. But what's even rarer is for someone to regain consciousness and have a crystal-clear memory of everything that happened while they were in coma, and for them to go do independent research on near-death experience science and confirm that their experience fits perfectly with thousands of other accounts.

So the real question is why in light of all that does Steve feel it's adequate to provide such a silly explanation for what happened? An explanation that any neurologist, any neurosurgeon, any neuroscientist would laugh at unless they knew that they had to defend it because not to defend it would open the door to the reality of near-death experience. So check me out on that. See if you can find a case of someone spontaneously waking up out of a coma after having an E. coli spinal meningitis infection and then having a crystal clear, vivid memory of what happened during their coma. I think I believe Dr. Alexander when he says there's no medical history of that ever happening.

Finally, Steve wraps up his blog post with this:

“Alexander, in my opinion, has failed to be true to the scientist he claims to be. He did not step back from his powerful experience and ask dispassionate questions.”

Again, I don't know how to counter this other than to say it's completely wrong. It's exactly what the book is about. If you read the book you'll find that's exactly what the guy did. He dispassionately stepped back from his experience. He didn't

know anything about near-death experience. He didn't read anything about near-death experience. He went and documented his account as best he could.

Then he did as much research as he could as a neurosurgeon, as a neuroscientist, to try and come up with a conventional explanation for this. He talked to many of his colleagues, many of the brightest and well-respected people in the field. He tried to come up with an explanation for this and the best explanation that he could come up with related back to near-death experience science. So again, Steve is being sloppy in his analysis and he winds up being completely wrong.

Okay, finally we come to well-known Atheist and author, Sam Harris, who does have a Ph.D. in neuroscience although he's not actively working in the field. Now, Sam Harris is an interesting guy because on one hand he's this fire-breathing Atheist that for many folks who go for that kind of stuff really admire him for. But in the last few years he's been found back-pedaling on the party line at times and he's taken a lot of heat for this. For example, even in his post which is very, very critical of Dr. Alexander, he writes:

"As many of you know, I'm interested in spiritual experiences of the sort Alexander reports."

Hmm. Even more interesting is this:

"I remain Agnostic on the question of how consciousness relates to the physical world."

Now that might slip by for most Skeptiko listeners and sound pretty benign but for the true hard-core believers in Atheism, if they're really paying attention, that's quite a statement. And again you get the sense that he has to tread very lightly here so as not to offend his fan base. But then, when he turns his attention on Dr. Eben Alexander and the near-death experience account, he gets right down to business and gives people what they want to hear. Here's what he says in his blog post titled, "This Must be Heaven:"

"Alexander's account is so bad and reasoning so lazy and tendentious (by the way, that's a word I have to admit that I not only had to look up but I had to press the

little audio button next to it just so I could make sure I pronounced it right). So anyway, lazy and tendentious that it would be beneath notice if not for the fact that it currently disgraces the cover of a major news magazine.”

So I read this. Now, first of all, having read Dr. Alexander’s book, again something that Sam Harris clearly hadn’t done, hadn’t read the book, and having interviewed Dr. Alexander twice—again, something Sam Harris has never done, never corresponded with him, never emailed him, or tried to get any kind of clarification. But anyway, since I had this background with Eben Alexander, I knew that Sam Harris was completely full of it. It’s complete nonsense.

I mean, lazy reasoning? Here’s a guy in Eben Alexander who spent months devouring every paper he could get his hands on that might explain what happened to him. I already went through and you’ll read in his book and hear in his interview all the things he did to try and understand what’s going on. I mean, if anyone is being lazy here you’d have to say it’s Sam Harris. He didn’t even read the guy’s book before firing off this incredibly incendiary blog post.

But leaving all that aside, the other thing I thought when I read this was, ‘Great. Let’s have a debate.’ I thought, ‘Here’s this highly-influential guy in Sam Harris who’s spouting off about NDE science when he clearly has no idea what he’s talking about.’ I thought, ‘What a great opportunity. Eben Alexander will tear this guy apart and I’d kind of like to see it, I have to admit.’

So I fired off an email to Sam Harris, told him that hey, I’d just finished talking to Alexander and that I felt pretty confident that I could get him interested in this debate. I said, “Do you have an hour to spare to maybe square off against this guy?” Well, wouldn’t you know, Sam Harris is a little bit too busy to debate, to face off with the guy that he so fiercely and personally attacked. But he did offer this in an email to me. Check this out. He says:

“There’s nothing to debate. He can’t reasonably claim that the relevant parts of his brain were “completely shut down.” It’s just not a factual statement and yet everything in his account hinges on making that claim. And even if I granted that

his brain was shut down, it's not shut down now. And there's absolutely no way for him to establish or even subjectively know that he didn't have this experience as his brain was coming back online."

Sound familiar? It's exactly the same thing you heard from Steven Novella. The explanation's exactly the same. But never-mind. And then he wraps it up by saying:

"End of debate as far as I'm concerned."

You've got to love the way he starts this—"There's nothing to debate," and ends it "End of debate as far as I'm concerned." Now, this is obviously over-the-top arrogance but it's more than that. As I alluded to earlier, it's a dead giveaway that Sam Harris is totally in the dark about near-death experience research. I mean, sure, Dr. Alexander's case is remarkable. It's a medical miracle that defies a conventional medical explanation. But what really makes his account so amazing is that it perfectly fits into a larger body of overwhelmingly compelling evidence that concludes that millions of people have had these profound, hyper-conscious experiences at a time when they had no brain. Or at the very least a severely compromised brain that isn't supposed to work in that way.

So if the fact that Sam Harris is afraid to face Eben Alexander in a debate, if that doesn't make you wonder about the strength of his argument, then the fact that he seems to be completely unaware of the over 65 peer-reviewed clinical experiments that corroborate Dr. Alexander's experience, well, that should be the clincher in establishing that this is just more political dribble that we're feeding the Atheist crowd stuff that they want to hear and wrapping it up in a way that sounds scientific or medical.

And by the way, if you really want to get into the medical part of this and more formalized arguments that Sam Harris gives and then Dr. Eben Alexander refutes, I would direct you to the Skeptiko website where I posted a write-up that Dr. Alexander has given me in response to Dr. Harris' critique of the blog. So I emailed Sam Harris and we emailed back and forth and I said, "Hey, if I get a response from

Eben Alexander I'll publish that." And he was like, "Great. Go ahead and do it." So that's exactly what I'm going to do. If you want to wade through that you'll see these guys are talking about stuff that I don't fully understand and I could read it into the podcast but I wouldn't really know what I'm talking about.

But I'll tell you this—if Sam Harris wants to tangle with Eben Alexander, bring it on. And if you don't want to face him, please don't tell us that you're too busy, that you can write these blog posts that take you hours to do and you can't face off with the guy for an hour. What I think you'll find when you listen to Dr. Alexander next week and when you read the book and when you read the Appendix to the book where he gives the more detailed medical explanation for what went on, you'll clearly see who really holds the cards in this case and who's just blowing smoke.

That's going to do it for this intro to a very interesting interview with Dr. Eben Alexander and this kind of firestorm of controversy that's sprung up from his book, *Proof of Heaven*, which I totally understand is a very provocative title. You know they're trying to sell books so we all understand why they write titles like that but nonetheless, we could have all anticipated it would generate quite a response from the Atheist skeptical crowd.

Another point. You know, by the way, I keep saying Atheism, skepticism, synonymous. I mean, do you need any more proof? You have two of the big names in Atheism, Sam Harris, Vic Stenger. You have a big name in the skeptical movement, a JREF director or some kind of title that Steve Novella has. They're all singing out of the same exact hymnbook. So let there be no debate about whether or not those organizations are virtually synonymous.

Anyway, please check out Dr. Alexander's write-up. Please join us on the forum for a discussion on these topics. The place to reach us, of course, is at www.skeptiko.com. You can link up there to any of our almost 200 previous shows and to a Facebook email link to me, an email link to our forum, or a place where you can just leave a comment on the website. I'm sure we'll get lots of comments from this show. I know that these are very touchy, sacred items for a lot

of Atheists and skeptics and the only way we can make progress is by confronting these issues head-on and really hashing out different opinions.

So that's it for this week. As I just mentioned, we'll be back with the full interview with Dr. Eben Alexander next week. Until then, take care and bye for now.

WAS INFORMATION ABOUT THE NEUROSURGEON'S CREDIBILITY WITHHELD?

Professional issues that have gone relatively under the radar until now are also mentioned in the Esquire piece. According to Dittrich, Alexander's career has been colored by numerous lawsuits over the past decade. It is also alleged that the doctor attempted to hide surgery errors by altering patient records.

Over the course of the past 12 years, he has apparently worked at three separate hospitals, but his employment has ended without explanation at each location. Here's a sample surrounding [his departure from one of the hospitals](#) he once worked at:

In August 2003, UMass Memorial suspended Alexander's surgical privileges "on the basis or allegation of improper performance of surgery." (The specifics of the case leading to the suspension are confidential, though Alexander claims it resulted from "a very complex repeat operation I did around the brain stem of a patient in which the patient had more difficulty recovering after the operation I would say than I anticipated and than I led them to believe.") His suspension technically ended in November of that same year, but he never went back to work at UMass Memorial. He resigned. The following year he did a little freelance consulting for the Gerson Lehrman Group, a company that matches corporations with experts in various fields, and also filed an unsuccessful lawsuit against the Brigham and Women's Hospital, claiming it improperly withheld more than \$400,000 of his retirement and deferred-compensation plans. He had been more or less out of work for fifteen months when, in March 2005, he received a letter from the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine asking him to respond to a complaint form they'd received from a former patient who was upset that Alexander had stopped responding to phone calls. Alexander wrote a letter back, explaining that the complaint was invalid because he was no longer practicing and that, furthermore, he would soon be leaving the state altogether.