

Debate: Death is not Final – #AfterDeath

Posted by [Dave Gamble](#) on May 8, 2014

Now here is a really interesting (for me) debate from Intelligence squared.

Debate Topic: Death is not Final

If consciousness is just the workings of neurons and synapses, how do we explain the phenomenon of near-death experience? By some accounts, about 3% of the U.S. population has had one: an out-of-body experience often characterized by remarkable visions and feelings of peace and joy, all while the physical body is close to death. To skeptics, there are more plausible, natural explanations, like oxygen deprivation. Is the prospect of an existence after death “real” and provable by science, or a construct of wishful thinking about our own mortality?

When: May 7th in New York

Who – [Full details here](#)

For - These are some of the big promoters for life after death ...

- Dr. Eben Alexander, Neurosurgeon & Author, *Proof of Heaven*
- Dr. Raymond Moody, Medical Doctor & Author, *Life After Life*

Against - Some well-known skeptics here

- Dr. Steven Novella, Academic Neurologist, Yale School of Medicine
- Sean Carroll, Physicist & Writer

Pre-debate positions

FOR THE MOTION

Despite claims that it is produced by the brain and bound by the laws of physics, human consciousness remains a mystery.

Throughout history, individuals have witnessed—often after a near-death experience (NDE)—another realm beyond this life. While it cannot be adequately explained by science or described by language, the myriad historical records and modern-day accounts suggest that death is not final.

Previously established by respected philosophers, from Plato to William James, mind-body dualism and the immateriality of the soul have been further supported by recent studies on the afterlife. NDEs, as well as psychic phenomena, provide strong evidence that consciousness exists independently of the body and thus independently of physical life.

From the writings of mystics centuries ago, to the medical records of NDEs reported today, glimpses into this other realm share a core set of characteristics that, together, indicate a universal definition of life after death.

- [Articles & Publications: Dr. Raymond Moody](#)
- [Articles & Publications: Dr. Eben Alexander](#)

AGAINST THE MOTION

Humans, with bodies and brains composed entirely of atoms, are part of the natural world and subject to its laws. Individual life and consciousness are not immaterial and thus cannot extend beyond physical death.

The belief in an immaterial soul, existing in realms independent of the body, contradicts the basic laws of physics and goes against the foundations of modern science.

There is no empirical evidence for life after death. NDEs, the centerpiece of recent research, are purely anecdotal, descriptive accounts, which, despite some commonalities, are not evidence of a universal experience but rather reflect the subject's cultural background.

NDEs are simply altered mental states akin to the complex brain phenomena that occur in delusions, hallucinations, oxygen deprivation, and drug-induced experiences. In addition to being highly unlikely, there is no evidence that NDEs occurred while the subjects' brains were inactive.

- [Articles & Publications: Sean Carroll](#)
- [Articles & Publications: Dr. Steven Novella](#)

Notes I gathered during the debate as it happened

Intro by John Donovan... it has an audience of millions apparently ... and is also being broadcast over NPR radio.

Oh dear ... they are talking about why they picked this topic (yawn) ... oh come on guys, we came to hear the debate, not a debate on why you picked this topic to debate.

Finally, we get to meet the folks doing the debate.

John is babbling again. (Oh come on John, you are supposed to moderate this, not debate it all by yourself.)

(as an aside, they have an on-line poll ... which is about 51/49 at the moment)



And finally we get brief intros to ... Eben & Dr Moody on one side ... then Sean and Steven on the other.

It's the first audience vote ... (we don't get the results yet)

Opening Statements

Eben starts first ... “I’m a really smart guy and I would have been sitting over on the other side six years ago, but I have a book to sell about my near death experience that I really want you to buy ... so here I am now on this side” – that’s basically it, but it came wrapped up with medical babble ... then ... ascended to love and joy, etc... my doctors have no explanation for my recovery. I have no idea how this could have happened just inside my brain ... (admits he was not familiar with the NDE literature before all this) ... gets cut off ... he has timed out.

Sean is up (yea). Makes the point that human beings are not always rational. Explains that what we are being asked to accept that the souls are real and yet observes that nobody ever comes back with really interesting stuff. Points out that the NDEs tend to reflect the cultural bias of those having the experience. The souls tend to come back with stuff of no real value at all. Our brains are fooling us all the time, they are more like little theatres ... it can be very vivid and yet also not real. Memories ... we know the laws of physics that the chemicals obey ... so how does this work with no brain? Science says that life is a process ... when you put the flame out on a candle it does not go anywhere, it is simply gone. Being rational, it is easy to see that nothing is going on, but on an emotional level it can be hard.

Dr Moody is up. Has been interviewing folks with NDEs since 1965 ... (yes, another guy with a book to sell ... and his “evidence” iswhat people with NDEs have been telling him). Apparently it is not (in his mind) a scientific question (which is perhaps a confession that he has in fact got no objective evidence at all) ... claims that bystanders also take part in these NDEs and their brains are not under the stress of dying ... and he knows this to be true because (Oh wait, he does not know that, he simply has to take their word for that). [Yes, I’m being a tad biased here ... but then the aroma of bullshit does that to me]

Steven is up (yea ... [its Mr SGU](#)). If you vote for this, then you are essentially taking an anti-science stance, we are very confident that the mind is the brain ... everything you think/feel is demonstrated to be because of what is going on in the brain. If you damage

the brain, you damage the mind, if you turn off the brain, then you turn off the mind. He has tons of examples ... this is his specialist area. (Is talking us through a specific example ... and how damage to a specific part of the brain affects how our image of reality is constructed). There is no limit to the degree we can mess with your mind by messing with your brain. We have a mountain of evidence that the mind is the brain ... do we have evidence that this connection can be de-coupled? Nope. We do not have one single documented instance of mental activity without any associated brain function. Every single element of an NDE can be reproduced with chemicals.

Intros are over and on to round 2

Round 2

(John ... the supposed neutral moderator comes across as being a tad biased here for the motion.)

John is asking Eben : Your opponents are arguing that your experience was all in your brain.

Eben: I've spoken to lots of medical people about this ... my neo-cortex was very badly damaged, so the NDE must have been real because I cannot find other possibilities (he really wants you to buy that book).

John turns to Sean and asked him to respond to that.

Sean suggests that Steven would be better to respond. Points out that Evan is essentially throwing out all the laws of physics.

Eben: It is all about taking physics to the next level.

Sean: Consciousness is confusing and Quantum mechanics is confusing ... so he is suggesting they are the same!!! (gets a laugh for that)

Dr Moody: (Is spouting what sounds like new age babble ... that boils down to “I don’t know”)

Steven: Eben has no basis for what he is claiming ... your brain constructs a narrative out of your pre-existing beliefs.

Eben: ... and yet what really happened ... (He keeps banging out about what he thinks happened and is not addressing the points being raised) ... claims his brain was flat.

Steven: he did not address the point of when did those memories actually form ... no scans were being done, he simply cannot state with certainty what he is claiming.

Eben: claims that NDEs cannot be reproduced through stimulation ... people coming back with astonishing stories.

Steven: but those cases are not documented ...they look more like the cold readings you get from psychics ... the attempts to put actual controls in place (such as playing cards on ceilings) all fail.

Topic change: about us being so easily fooled

Sean: when you look at how the universe works, the claim that the information in our brains persists is enticing ... we can be so easily fooled.

Dr Moody: Agrees with him up to a point ... is suggesting that there is a state of being that operates beyond what we know ... higher dimension ... (and he knows this how?).

Sean: There is no evidence and no reason to accept this claim.

Dr Moody: (and yet still with no evidence ... he believes)

Sean: How would you falsify that?

Dr Moody: You know Sean, you are right ...

John steps in to press the issue ...

Dr Moody: (Proceeds to deliver details of an NDE story ... claims others also experienced ghosts ... but admits this is not proof)

Steven: we want to know what is really really true, not what we want to be true. People do have these memories and experiences, we get this level of evidence for UFOs and bigfoot, we don't accept those, so why should we accept this?

Dr Moody: The brain does not generate consciousness

Steven: We do not have to know how, but we know that it does.

Eben: We simply have no known mechanism for consciousness.

Steven: it is not a complete unknown, lots of research being done, but we do clearly know that the brain produces the mind.

Audience Q&A

Q: If a person took a strong drug and experienced a delusion, would you accept it as real?

Dr Moody: Appears to imagine that people can take a substance and gain access to another reality (WTF!)

Q: silly question

gets dismissed, moves on to next

(reminder from the moderator that their books are on sale in the lobby ... yes really!)

Q: Why is it always heaven and never hell?

Eben: Hellish NDEs are rare 3% ... suggests souls don't have enough umph! ... suggests hell is real (another WTF from me on that one)

Q: What is the one thing that would change your mind?

Steven: Good solid evidence ... for example seeing the card on the top shelf and reporting it ... that would convince him to take it seriously.

Sean: yes, there are millions of bits of evidence that could convince him, suggests getting a ghost in the room to lift a glass, but it never happens. "Sure, I don't want to die, but you don't always get what you want".

Q: What is your definition of final (If death is not final, then how do they define final?)

Question gets dropped by moderator

Q: Dr Moody suggested we are on the verge of understanding this other dimension ... what do you mean?

Dr Moody: Is quoting David Hume ... we need new facilities of the mind to understand .. (that babbles on, but he is really really not making sense or getting to a point)

Q: How can you be so sure about your position when you base it upon what we now know?

Steven: All we can say is what the evidence now tells us ... we have lots of compelling evidence that the mind is the brain, and no evidence against that. But if evidence changes all that, he will happily change his mind.

Sean: There are some things that will never go away ... we know this table is made of atoms ... we will have a deeper understanding, but that basic fact will remain.

Q: We have been hearing lots about personal experiences – what about psychics?

Sean: The claim is in utter and complete violation of the laws of physics and the way everything works.

Steven: 100 years of parapsychology has not produced 1 jot of credible evidence yet.

Eben: claims there that is tons of evidence (this guy is a complete kook)

(Is asked for an example)

Claims that mediums can communicate and demonstrate amazing things

Steven: This is simply not true, the author of the book (that Eban quoted) did shoddy work and was fooled by cold readers.

Q: We have energy when we are alive, where does it go when we die?

Sean: Its like putting out a candle

Eben: Claims Carl Sagan believed in past lives (That is utter bollocks)

Steven: Points out (politely) that it is utter bollocks.

... and round 2 is done.

Round 3 – closing statements ... 2 minutes each, then a vote.

Eben: (More claims) ...we need a deeper model of consciousness. Is claiming the mind is not part of the brain.

Steven: Every culture used to believe in a life energy ... 19th 20th century we have discovered how things work, and no longer need this life energy concept ... as for consciousness, we don't fully understand exactly what produces it, but we are making progress.

Dr Moody: Claims that the concept of life after death is counter intuitive ... (except for the fact that many humans have always believed it, so clearly what he is saying is not true) ... and we get a few more weird claims.

Sean: Is telling us a story about the realisation that we are all going to die. The evidence is that death is final and that is OK

Final Audience Vote



Its a win for Steven and Sean ... YEA ... fabulous job guys.

... and that's a wrap.

Hitting "publish" for these rough notes now asis ... will tidy them later and add link to the on-line video of the debate, so check back to watch it all at your own pace.