

SCIENCE WORLD REPORT

Near Death Experiences: Does the Brain Create Consciousness?

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Does consciousness exist outside the brain, pointing to a less observable world than meets the eye? Or are near death and out-of-body experiences simply signs of oxygen deprivation, showcasing a plausible occurrence easily explained by science?

Skeptics and believers met to discuss this question on [Intelligence Squared](#), a series of live debates that have hosted over 85 controversial topics. They argued in favor of or against the ultimate question: Is death--or the end of consciousness-- final?

The event was held on Wednesday at the Kaufmann Center in New York City and hosted by John Donvan, an author and correspondent for ABC News who's run the debates since 2008. All of these events give audience members the chance to vote on the topics before and after the show, as well as join in the discussion.

The event began with a prompt from Dr. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon and author of ["Proof of Heaven,"](#) who argued that death is not final.

Alexander detailed his recovery from a rare form of [bacterial meningitis](#) that shut down his [neocortex](#), or what some scientists might refer to as the seat of human consciousness. Yet throughout this time, Alexander said he recalled vivid memories during his rallying, in which an angelic being allegedly guided him.

In one word, Alexander referred to his experience as "astonishing," suggesting that his visions prompted proof of an afterlife and God's existence.

Yet skeptic, physicist and author Sean Carroll did not believe that Alexander's experiences showed proof of more than meets the eye.

He argued against the motion, pushing the idea that human thought and experience is not always rational.

"We are bundles of cognitive biases," he said. "And one of the strongest biases we have is that we go easy on propositions that we would like to be true."

In other words, many of our experiences may be partially determined by what we already know or are hoping to experience.

A [recent SWR article](#) discusses such an instance of human imagination, on the phenomena known as "face pareidolia" where people see religious symbols in random food items. It presents a plausible explanation for such perceived imagery on certain objects.

Pointing to similar circumstances, Carroll discussed the commonality of many near death experiences--an occurrence that allegedly happens to around 3 percent of the population.

"...when Christians have near-death experiences, they often say they've met Jesus," Carroll said. "When Hindus have near-death experiences, they meet Hindu deities."

In other words, our brains are "constantly fooling us," according to Carroll.

But is there more to these experiences than science alone can explain?

Dr. Raymond Moody, a medical doctor and author of "[Life After Life](#)" suggested that the possibility of an afterlife cannot be explained through scientific understanding -- yet.

"In 2014, the question of life after death is not yet a scientific question," Moody said.

"...reason is a much bigger category than science. Scientific method is about, say, 400 years old. Reason itself is about 2300 years old, a much bigger institution that includes history and philosophy and literary theory and the law in addition to scientific thinking. "

Moody also referenced thousands of near death experiences as proof of such occurrences.

Dr. Steven Novella, an academic neurologist from the Yale School of Medicine, concluded the round by taking on the scientific proposition that the mind is essentially what the brain does--otherwise explained by working neurons and synapses flitting around inside our skulls.

"We are constructing reality and images of reality all the time," Novella said, following a brief discussion on [Capgras Syndrome](#) and the brain's interpretation of reality. "It's a very active process. And when you -- when that process breaks down, then your construction of reality breaks down."

He also stressed that current records of near-death or out-of-body experiences do not tell us when the memories actually occurred and what state the brain was in during that time.

"Every element of a near-death experience can be duplicated in experiments, can be replicated with drugs, with anoxia, with lack of blood flow, by turning off circuits in the brain," Novella added.

"Every single component is a brain experience that we could now reproduce. And we're zeroing in on the exact circuits in the brain which produce them."

Questions in the audience prompted more discussions on near death experiences, interpretations of reality and the idea that the brain does not create consciousness.

As science captured the highest number of votes from the audience, with 46 percent in favor of death being final, 42 percent in favor of death not being final and the rest, undecided, many lingering questions remain.