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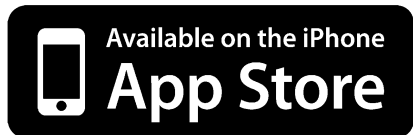
A NEW THEORY OF
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JANUARY 2015





strange days

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I SING THE MIND ELECTRIC

MARINUS ANTHONY VAN DER SLUIJS explores esoteric and electromagnetic explanations for near-death experiences

In a recent book, the Dutch thanatologist Maureen Venselaar (pictured below) has carried the fledgling study of near-death experiences (NDEs) forward in a number of promising ways. She claims to have identified 10 new characteristic traits of near-death experiences, including the sensation of travelling 'faster than light', the sense of being attracted by a type of 'magnet', the observation of a vortex or 'hourglass', and the observation of the Earth or astronomical bodies from an extraterrestrial perspective. She argues that photons released by cells under distress, such as impending death, are the physical carriers of the mind or 'consciousness' that appears to vacate the body. And she proposes that trademark elements of the near-death experience, such as the journey through a tunnel, find a natural explanation in astronomical entities such as black holes and wormholes.

Some of these thought-provoking ideas converge with conclusions I had privately reached in the course of the past few years, but have so far only partly been able to publish. The 'psychonaut' theme, in which the disembodied consciousness of the near-death experiencer finds itself rising above the Earth's atmosphere and even into space, is a subject I have explored from the vantage-point of classical sources in an unpublished article entitled 'Cosmology in Ancient Near-Death Experiences'. In addition, Venselaar's recognition of light – in the form of photons – as the vehicle of the disembodied mind dovetails with my suspicion that consciousness, both inside and outside the body, is to be correlated with the electromagnetic spectrum, of which visible light is a part. One line of evidence for



DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN 'NATURAL' AND 'SUPERNATURAL' DO NOT HELP

this statement is that the nervous system, including the brain, functions by means of electromagnetism anyway. Another, that electricity and magnetism seem to be the common denominator, often overlooked, in a surprisingly long list of 'paranormal' and fortan phenomena.

Perhaps the weakest element in Venselaar's otherwise commendable research is her unflinching belief in the physical reality of black holes, multiple universes, wormholes, dark matter and similar staples of Big Bang cosmology, relativity theory and quantum physics. Such exotic concepts have long enthralled writers at the academic fringe. Venselaar's compatriot Pim van Lommel, a cardiologist who has conducted an invaluable study of near-death experiences among people successfully resuscitated from heart attacks, similarly resorted to quantum theory in his attempt to make sense of the phenomenon.

Some view the belief that purely mathematical notions such as the above populate the real Universe as an intellectual dead end. Instead, one might wish to pursue the hypothesis of an electromagnetic 'soul' in the light of actual, observed knowledge concerning

the Earth's rich electromagnetic space environment, as explored by plasma physicists. The following is a playful thought experiment along the latter lines.

FIVE PRELIMINARIES

This approach is best prefaced with a few disclaimers – no less than five.

Firstly, for the present purpose the terms 'soul', 'mind' and 'consciousness' are used indiscriminately to refer to that portion of a biological organism which is self-aware and contains its thoughts, including memories and will.

Secondly, it operates on the understanding, now promoted by several specialists, that the mind may exist external to the body. On this view, the brain or the nervous system facilitates, but does not generate consciousness. Presumably, it blocks a range of signals as much as it enables another.

Thirdly, the worn distinctions between 'natural' and 'supernatural' or between 'material' and 'spiritual' do not help. They preclude an open investigation insofar as the conclusions that the mind is not natural and not material are already embedded in them. By contrast, the default assumption that all experienced and known reality is natural and physical proves to be quite adequate – as long as it is remembered that physics involves matter as well as forces and fields.

Fourthly, if evolutionary theory is to be taken seriously at all, any explanation of consciousness must consider how it applies across the realm of living beings. Too often, discussions of near-death experiences focus on human beings as if these are the only species to possess a degree of consciousness. But just as the solid, liquid and gaseous components of human bodies share their developmental history with other mammals, so a possible spiritual component is likely to possess phylogenetic roots.

And finally, traditional terms such as 'hereafter', 'afterlife' and 'netherworld'

carry temporal and geographic implications which are not necessarily adequate, but may be mythological in origin. For all one knows, the spiritual world may simply exist 'here' and 'now'.

AN ELECTROMAGNETIC EXPLANATION FOR NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Supposing that the disincarnate 'soul' is indeed electromagnetic in nature, perhaps existing on the wavelengths of visible light, it would be reasonable to infer that it interacts with the ambient electromagnetic circuitry. While the Earth's crust conducts telluric currents and sustains a complex magnetic field, the upper atmosphere conducts currents and their attendant magnetic fields which ultimately join the Earth to the Sun. The dominant constituents of this intricate network reside in the ionosphere, roughly 100-150km (60-90 miles) above the surface. These are the equatorial electrojet, which encircles the Earth close to the magnetic equator, and the two auroral electrojets, which guide charged particles through the oval-shaped regions where the auroræ – the northern and southern lights – are formed. Each auroral oval forms the base of a polar cusp, which is ringed by a system of vertical currents called 'field-aligned currents' or 'Birkeland currents', along which charged particles travel between the ionosphere and – via the magnetosphere – the solar wind. Higher up in the magnetosphere, the Birkeland currents give way to a pair of giant plasma vortices, which deliver charges in bursts through portals which rapidly open and close – so-called Flux Transfer Events.

If it may be assumed that the consciousness vacating the body upon an out-of-body experience or a near-death experience is contained in an electromagnetic field, charged particles or photons, perplexing though that may seem to be, several tell-tale features of the near-death experience appear to fall into place.

The celerity with which the entity feels it is travelling may relate to the speed with which these particles move. Further out, on the interface between the Earth's magnetosphere and the solar wind, incoming charged particles often attain relativistic speeds – speeds approximating the speed of light. Reports from near-death experiencers are adequately explained with the notion of 'an extremely high' or perhaps even a relativistic speed; to conclude that the speed is equal to that of light, let alone infinite, seems premature and unwarranted.

The sense of being strongly drawn to something like a magnet is, of course, seamlessly explained if that is exactly what happens. Charged particles do not roam freely, but their movement is primarily dictated by the laws of electromagnetism. The particles contained in Birkeland currents have no choice but to proceed along the lines of the magnetic field.

The 'being of light', so often encountered in near-death experiences, may well be an expression of one's higher self, 'guardian angel' or 'dæmon', as Kenneth Ring and

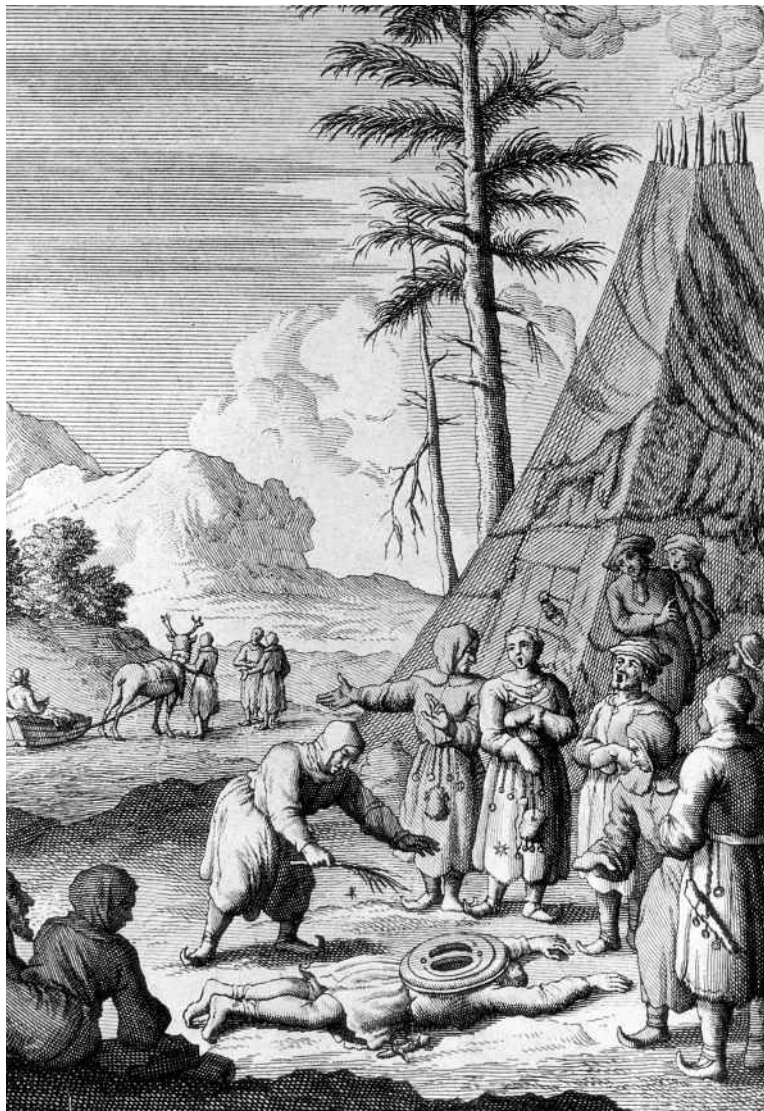


Anthony Peake have argued. If so, perhaps this is really an electromagnetic field associated with the organism as a whole, which may even form the latter's blueprint. The 'lower self' gains awareness of this associated field as soon as malfunctioning or suppression of the nervous system allows it to detach itself from the body.

And the 'life review' (see FT159:34-40), which is often presented to the experienter by the 'being of light', might be a process analogous to the downloading of computer files from one disk onto another. Perhaps collapse of the nervous system enables the transfer of information stored in the consciousness of the organism to a wider electromagnetic network, which connects the organism first to its immediate terrestrial environment, but ultimately to the entire Solar System, if not further. As this information is copied, the system's self-awareness causes it to be a necessary witness of the process. If the transfer amounts to an exchange of charge between the environment and the native field of the organism, the concept of an electric discharge may be an apposite description of what is going on. When both sides have reached a state of electrical equilibrium, the 'soul' may experience a sense of oneness with the Universe.

Bits of 'consciousness' floating along local and then geomagnetic field lines may be inclined to follow the trajectory of the auroral current system, travelling towards one of the Earth's magnetic poles. Ions and electrons actually spiral around their guiding magnetic field lines. Moreover, Birkeland currents or magnetic 'flux tubes' exhibit a well-known propensity for vorticity; they often take the form of a single or a double helix, juxtaposed or intertwined. Surely conveyance along such currents would give particle-sized participants an experience strikingly similar to reports of near-death experiences – a 'free fall' up or down a whirling, tornado-like tunnel.

Eventually, the near-death experienter arrives at a place of magical beauty, typified by mellifluous sounds, congregations of other souls, a palette of indescribable colours and remarkable, often vertiginous structures. If any known natural phenomenon would qualify to account for such descriptions, it might be the polar aurora, produced by the interaction of local atmospheric nitrogen and oxygen with incoming electrons and ions, at the intersection of streams of particles flowing incessantly between the lower



LEFT: A Sami Shamanic ceremony in Lapland: Northern traditional societies believed the polar lights were the souls of the dead. BELOW: Yggdrasil, or the World Ash, a Norse representation of the Axis Mundi, linking all the realms of the heavens and the Earth.

atmosphere and the Sun, in both directions. Amazement at the diverse tapestry of colours is typical even among living observers of the aurora; a disembodied mind receptive of light on many other wavelengths might be astounded upon its perception of the aurora, for auroral emissions also occur at ultraviolet, infrared and other wavelengths. Enunciations of a dazzling geometry of dynamic shapes are common to both near-death experiences and eye-witness accounts of auroræ. And, bizarre as it admittedly sounds, there appears to be an uncanny logic to the impression that the auroral lights contain myriad units of incorporeal consciousness exchanging information.

TRADITIONS OF THE SOUL AND THE POLAR AURORA

Traditional societies generally display a marked interest in the posthumous vagaries and itineraries of souls. For one thing, the

idea that the aurora consists of 'live souls' concurs with the near-unanimous opinion of traditional cultures at higher latitudes that the polar lights are the 'souls of the dead', engrossed in games, battles or other pastimes. Whereas animistic religions regarded almost any rock or plant as a spiritual being, few – if any – natural phenomena were so ubiquitously and emphatically identified with the abode of posthumous souls as the *aurora borealis* and *australis*.

Furthermore, shamans and other visionaries worldwide often claim to have witnessed 'ropes', 'pillars', 'trees' or other devices enabling them to access the spirit world. The properties attributed to such columns are practically indistinguishable from the *axis mundi* of traditional cosmologies, which is in some cases explicitly located at one of the poles and is frequently linked with the notion of migrating souls. Elsewhere, I have argued that the multifaceted mythology of the *axis mundi* finds its ultimate roots in observations of intense auroral light. Do the spiritual experiences of such 'sky columns' testify to an actual connection with the polar aurora?

Remarkably, this may be exactly what Socrates meant to convey in the famous 'vision of Er', towards the end of Plato's *Republic*. According to this text, Er was "a

THE CURRENTS OFTEN TAKE THE FORM OF A SINGLE OR DOUBLE HELIX





ANDI GENTSCH

ABOVE: "A palette of indescribable colours and remarkable, often vertiginous structures": the Aurora Borealis, traditionally identified as the abode of posthumous souls.

warrior bold" who was left for dead on the battlefield, but unexpectedly returned to life at the instant he was placed on the funeral pyre, an unbelievable 12 days later. The spiritual experience he related bears the hallmarks of a genuine near-death experience. At the same time, the detailed description of Er's spiritual itinerary incorporates Plato's cosmology. Er reflected that he travelled amid a bevy of souls, towards "a mysterious region where there were two openings side by side in the Earth", through which the souls of disembodied people travelled upwards and downwards in space in accordance with the judgment passed on their lives in that place. After an interval of "seven days", "they were required to rise up on the eighth and journey on, and they came in four days to a spot whence they discerned, extended from above throughout the Heaven and the Earth, a straight light like a pillar, most nearly resembling the rainbow, but brighter and purer." A detailed description of this radiant pillar bears out that it served as the pivot of the cosmos, on which the complex movement of the stars and planets as well as the individual fates of living beings depended. On the one hand, it is evident that Socrates, via the mouth of Plato, was describing the Earth's rotational axis. On the other, the luminous pillar recurs in countless near-death and other spiritual experiences and may be equivalent to the proverbial 'tunnel'. One may be forgiven for casually speculating that Er's consciousness actually journeyed to the magnetic north pole, along magnetic field lines, where it witnessed a bundle of Birkeland currents in the form of a colossal radiant pillar. The 'two pathways' of up- and downward-flowing traffic, which feature widely in other near-death experiences as well as in the mythology of death, read like the opposing flows of in- and outbound particles along the polar cusps.

Plutarch in *The Divine Vengeance*

(563F-564A) reported as follows on a near-death experience *avant la lettre* attributed to a Thespesius of Soli, Cilicia, who had soared up into the air: "Passing over most of the spectacle, he said that as the souls of those who die came up from below they made a flamelike bubble as the air was displaced, and then, as the bubble gently burst, came forth, human in form, but slight in bulk, and moving with dissimilar motions. Some leapt forth with amazing lightness and darted about aloft in a straight line, while others, like spindles, revolved upon themselves and at the same time swung now downward, now upward, moving in a complex and disordered spiral that barely grew steady after a very long time." If anything, this curious scene is reminiscent of the manifold perturbations seen in the auroral curtains. To cite but one of many examples, an observer at New Haven, Connecticut, described an auroral corona seen on 25 January 1837 as follows: "Innumerable spindles, of silvery lustre, darted from the crimson folds of light that hung around the sky, and all pointed towards the common focus ..."

TANTALISING SPECULATIONS

These hazardous speculations may also tie in with a few separate avenues of thought, such as the idea that the upper atmosphere hosts living beings (see FT291:30-35), perhaps composed of matter in the plasma state; that celestial bodies themselves are living beings, though not in the sense of protein-based or genetic life (James Lovelock; Mae-Wan Ho); or that all living beings are hooked up to the same electrical circuit of the Earth (Robert Becker).

I will be the first to admit that a 'post-Platonist' scenario along these lines is speculative in the extreme, if not quite preposterous, and, though perhaps superficially compelling, a very long way removed from proof. It can barely even

be called a hypothesis. Even so, at least it represents an effort to understand near-death experiences in practical, down-to-earth terms of real and uncontroversial physics, unlike the tired, non-falsifiable and New Agey reliance on esoteric, science-fiction-like concepts such as black holes and wormholes.

Candace Savage, a Canadian writer on auroral physics, wondered: "Where science now traces the pathways of invisible particles in ineffable magnetic fields, members of traditional spirit-filled cultures thought they saw the progress of angels, departed ancestors and supernatural creatures. Which explanations are most accurate?" Just possibly, the answer may be: both. **FT**

RECOMMENDED READING

Anthony Peake, *Is there Life after Death? The Extraordinary Science of what Happens when we Die* (London: Arcturus, 2010)

Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death; A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980)

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