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Consciousness beyond life

Submitted by [Dr B](#)

4th August 2012

Consciousness beyond life

My book review for the book by Pim van Lommel on Near Death Experiences.

Pim van Lommel

By [Dr B](#) on 4th August 2012, 01:54 PM

Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of Near-death Experience. HarperOne, New York,
By Pim Van Lommel

Reviewed by; Dr Jason J Braithwaite

In 2001 Dr van Lommel and colleagues published a paper in the high-impact medical journal "The Lancet" reporting a prospective investigation of Near Death Experiences (NDEs). In this paper they argued that their evidence demanded a new theory of consciousness – one that gives provision for consciousness surviving physical brain death. This was, in essence, an argument for dualism – that the mind is not a brain-driven phenomenon and that we all survive bodily death. This book is the English translation of an attempt at a more in-depth discussion of the original paper. It also seeks to provide a contemporary over view of NDEs per-se. I am sure that since the attention enjoyed by the first paper, many psychical researchers will have been eagerly awaiting this contribution.

Firstly, let me start this review by saying that I share Dr Van Lommel's fascination for NDEs and his passion that they should be scientifically investigated. I also share some of his frustrations about previous studies and research on NDEs. However, from reading both his 2001 paper and the present book it is both obvious and unfortunate that we part intellectual company at this early point.

For many reasons, this book never failed to underwhelm me, frustrate me, and at times, infuriate me. My personal reading of it was that the author displayed a whimsical affinity with the facts of science, the facts of neuroscience in particular, and struggled to provide a logically sound and cogent argument for his spectacular conclusion. This is unfortunate as it has been a while since a truly comprehensive discussion of NDEs, in a book, has been offered and such an addition would be welcomed by audiences from all perspectives. I do not have the space here to deconstruct the many claims in the book that I would like to and besides, I have provided a comprehensive critique of the original paper elsewhere {Braithwaite, J.J. (2008) Towards a cognitive neuroscience of the dying brain. The [UK] Skeptic, 21(2), 8-16} . There is no further evidence in the book to warrant this previous discussion dated in any way. I was genuinely disappointed as this was clearly an opportunity lost by the author. For this review I will begin with some general points and then relate to more specific issues in specific chapters and pages.

Let us begin with the title and book cover as this gives us an immediate flavour of the argument the book wants to push. The

title makes a bold statement “Consciousness beyond life” – however this is surely misguided. At the very least it should add a question mark and read “Consciousness beyond life?” Unless of course, the author wants to claim that the debate is over. This would be a very closed-minded approach and not one I think the author would want to make. For me, the title is a vast over-statement of the case presented within the pages of the book. Even if the reader is sympathetic to the interpretations presented by the author, I am sure they would agree it is a controversial area and the debate is far from over. Why pay so much attention to the first three words of the book? Because it is this type of unjustified over-statement that litter its pages, and it gives us an accurate taste of what is to come.

The jacket cover goes on to tell us how the findings have received high international acclaim (something as a cognitive psychologist and neuroscientist working in a leading international university department I was unaware of). However, all became clear when one notes that all the comments on the back cover were from newspaper journalists – not mainstream scientists. I guess it depends on what you mean by ‘international acclaim’ but the clear implication from this and other introductory comments is that the findings have resonated within research circles and have caused a fundamental shift in how science views the relationship between mind and brain. I can inform the reader this is not the case and both the original paper and book fail to challenge or even penetrate the fundamental principles of neuroscience. As such, I foresee no major paradigm shift in neuroscience towards the authors view, or because of it, in the near future. This also has nothing to do with some form of villainous caricature of science being ‘closed-minded’ or resistant to change – it is because the author provides no real case or reason for accepting his view. The arguments presented are without sound premise and the evidence recruited is far more consistent with more parsimonious brain-based models that make fewer assumptions.

Let us be clear from the start. The author is not a neuroscientist and nor is he a physicist. Like the vast majority of professional pro-paranormal NDE researchers, he is a cardiologist with medical qualifications. The reason I make this point is that the majority of the book tries to concentrate on neuroscience, and more unfortunately, physics (in the forms of quantum mechanics). I think this goes some way to explain why I found the book so poorly informed on matters of mainstream science and neuroscience and why I became so frustrated with it. This is not an unimportant point when one realises that large sections of the general public often place more weight (uncritically) on popular books written by people with qualifications. One can see the logic of this, but it falls down when the expert in question arguably writes on matters that are vastly outside their areas of direct qualification and expertise. Would the reader trust a neuroscientist to comment on or carry out heart surgery? I would hope not and with good reason.

The main failings of the book, as a piece of useful and informative science, can be summarised as (i) a failure to correctly characterise science / neuroscience and how it does what it does. This can also be seen in the author’s attempts to rebut the position of mainstream neuroscience (where he creates more than one straw-man argument); and (ii) a failure to provide a reasoned and evidence case for the fundamental assumptions underlying the author’s position.

Let me evidence both my comments. In terms of scientific debates, it is intellectually respectful to try to understand a position before arguing for or against it – otherwise the only thing you are arguing for or against is your own confusion. This has nothing to do with the real debate. With topics as complicated as consciousness and as emotive as NDEs (where the treasured concept of the afterlife hangs in the balance) this requires time, effort and some expertise of relevant knowledge. As scientists we are intellectually obligated to engage in this process to ensure, as much as we can, that the debate remains a relevant and worthwhile one. Even when we cordially, though strongly disagree with each other – we are required to consider high-quality evidence and how it has been employed relative to the conclusion it has been taken to support.

Throughout the book the author completely fails to accurately characterise science as an endeavour, and more specifically mischaracterises the essence of the scientific counter-arguments to the paranormal interpretation of the NDE (point (i) above). For example “The materialist hypothesis is supported by scientific patterns of thought and paradigms that he and many other scientists and philosophers deem absolutely unassailable and are therefore reluctant to challenge. Scientists often struggle to free themselves from prevailing paradigms. And such dogmatic convictions seem to beget prejudice” (page 260). Firstly, comments like these (and there are many in the book) are not justified with clear citations and examples from the literature. As such they clearly reflect the sweeping statements and value judgements of the author and little else. Secondly, it is simply untrue that science works in this way as a process. Science, and only science works on the basis of provisional truth in that what we held true yesterday could be shown to be untrue today, and today’s truth could be shown to be untrue tomorrow. This is the most open-minded stance any system of understanding can take. Everything we know should expect revision, refinement, or replacement. Unassailable ideas? I think not. However, the core ‘principles’ of science have been established over decades, even centuries – so it often takes a long time for them to erode (if necessary) but it will happen if it is warranted by the evidence. It is the job of science to challenge its own knowledge constantly – otherwise scientists are effectively redundant! Paradigm shifts of the central principles of a particular science might be a slow process, frustratingly slow at times, but it does happen, it has happened and it will happen again. But it will never happen as a result of non-evidenced statements like these. Additional examples of this form of argumentation can be seen in Chapter 12 (specifically from p262) which contains multiple straw- man type attacks on the scientific method. None of these are fair, accurate or even legitimate views of how science really works. They are not a faithful representation of science at all.

Comments of this sort festoon all chapters. For example, p15 of the introduction provides a wonderfully unjustified sweeping claim. “When empirical scientific studies discover phenomena or facts that are not consistent with current scientific theories, these new facts must not be denied, suppressed, or even ridiculed, as is still quite common” (Introduction Page XV). Interestingly, there was no example provided to support the statement of denial, suppression or ridicule from published science

and no evidence that it is commonplace either. This remains a completely unjustified (no citations) and sweeping statement that is a good example of the style in which the book is written.

In relation to the second point, the whole rationale being pursued in the book is logically flawed. The author asserts and then repeatedly re-asserts (against scientific accounts) that science cannot explain how clear, vivid, and complex cognitive experiences can take place when the human brain is dead and inactive. For example; "... one would not expect hallucinations when the brain no longer functions because they require a functioning brain". (p115) and in a later section a related point "For me, the biggest challenge is to find an explanation for the fact that an enhanced consciousness can be experienced independently of the body during the temporary loss of all cortical and brain-stem function" (page 263; my emphasis) .The fundamental problem for the author is that he never actually gets around to demonstrating that NDEs occur without a functioning brain. In other words, that such a situation has ever actually happened in any NDE case. It is merely assumed and we are merely expected to believe it. The author never provides any convincing evidence that any comprehensive cognitive processes occurred at a clear and objectively verifiable, measurable, point in time. It is just a sweeping and unfounded assumption – based on nothing more than (i) incomplete anecdotal accounts and (ii) the assumption that as the NDE and brain inactivity may occur within the same patient during a surgical procedure – then they must have co-occurred at precisely the same point in time. The really frustrating thing is that not only is this issue fundamental to his whole argument, van Lommel had around 358pages of main text to justify this fallacy, and never once did it receive any form of comprehensive discussion or argument. It is just assumed and all interpretations flow from this position. The original paper from 2001 avoided this issue and the book does nothing to address this major error of reason.

There are further factual inaccuracies. In relation to hallucinations and why they cannot apparently explain NDEs the author states "Unlike an NDE, they contain no universal elements" (p130). Its not clear what the author means by 'universal elements' here but if it is meant that hallucinations do not have common features in them then this is quite simply untrue. One example it that computational models by Bresloff, Cowan and colleagues have been specifically developed to model common (i.e., universal) elements in low-level sensory hallucination (tunnels / spirals / kaleidoscopic imagery) and common elements have also been known to occur in complex imagery as is clearly argued Siegal (1977) a paper published over 34 years ago (i.e., floating sensations, OBEs, vivid landscapes, people, apparitions, etc). Indeed, the whole notion of Kluver's stage 1 form constants was based on many people reporting very similar things from drug studies (as well as self-experimentation). Deja-vu has the common element of familiarity across people, persecutory hallucinations have the common element of, well, persecution. OBEs have the common element of being 'out-of-body' and tunnel experiences are described the world over with striking similarity (see Blackmore, 1993).

My hunch is the author may mean the NDE is unique in that all the common elements of the NDE co-occur together in one person and this does not happen with hallucinations. By this version of the account, it is the collection of separate elements makes up a universal theme for the NDE. However, this again is far from accurate. NDEs vary a great deal and often only share a thematic similarity to each other. The core NDE does revolve around certain components – but not every patient reports them all (Blackmore, 1993; Jansen, 1996). Also many hallucinatory episodes can also be broken down in the way the core NDE has to reveal universal properties within them. For example, OBEs are often found to be accompanied by associated aura like, feeling nauseous, feeling dizzy, ringing in the ears or a buzzing sound, coming out of the body, being out of the body, looking around the environment, and then suddenly finding oneself back-in their body. It's just an issue of resolution in the description. All general hallucinations can often be broken up into core components that are typical of it and the NDE is no different. Placed in this context it is difficult to fully understand what the author truly means here – but based on these two attempts at interpreting the statement – it is clearly a vastly inaccurate statement and no argument at all against a hallucinatory model of NDEs.

Chapter 6 is perhaps one of the most woefully inadequate discussions (and it is up against stiff competition from other chapters for that accolade). Here the author attempts to discuss, dismiss and discredit scientific accounts for the NDE which do not see the experience as evidence of an afterlife. However, all the author really does here is show a particularly odd understanding for the full context in which many of the brain-based accounts were proposed or how science uses and employs what is known as the "comparative model". The analysis presented by the author would have us think that whenever researchers are looking at behaviours in rats, pigeons, and monkeys, that it is believed by the researcher to be literally identical to the human brain. Or that when scientists produce computational models that they are arguing this is 'exactly' as it happens in the human brain and they are both utterly identical in every way. This is the logic used when the author seeks to dismiss studies of patients with epilepsy, the G-LOC experiments, and more. Nothing could be further from the truth in terms of comparative psychology. For example, computational scientists seek to use their models as a framework and even a metaphor for understanding brain function. This helps to generate testable predictions and inform on how certain processes might be carried out in the human brain. It is not typically seen as being an 'exact' model of the real human brain as such models cannot capture the full complexity of the brain – something openly acknowledged within the field. It merely provides a comparative model which can inform theory. The models revolve around central principles that we can recreate. The author does not understand the subtle links between how psychological science uses the comparative method to illuminate scientific theory and as such he argues against a version of science that does not exist and arguments that were never made.

I must admit that I breathed more than a sigh of disappointment when I encountered the first main chapter on Quantum Mechanisms and consciousness (Chapter 11) – and became disillusioned by the permeation of the ideas proposed in that chapter, into the following ones as well. By the author's own admission, quantum mechanics cannot prove any of the ideas he discusses or proposes which made me wonder – so why bother then? This is made all the more frustrating when you realise

that from Chapter 11 onwards these ideas dominate the discussion in the book at the expense of dealing with any of the real counter-points from neuroscience, or the published rebuttals that have been available either before the first edition of the book (published in Dutch) or between translations (where updated additions could have been added).

The discussion on QM is also utterly irrelevant. In the present context it is ultimately nothing more than a non-falsifiable metaphorical narrative where all manner of things might be possible (according to the author) as opposed to sticking to what might be the most probable evidenced by what we can falsify experimentally. As such, it amounts to little more than non-falsifiable, non-evidenced speculation. Let us not forget, the author never really makes the argument for, or provides convincing evidence for, consciousness existing without neural activity or that current models of brain function are insufficient. So what is effectively happening here in this chapter is that the author is trying to provide an explanation for an effect that has not been shown to exist. It is a conclusion bereft of reasons. How seriously should we take such an explanation that has travelled through this perilous journey?

Moving on, there is no real accepted theory as to how QM effects of the very, very, small, impact on the very, very large macro level or indeed, in the context of brain function, that they have any implication for it. Despite his strong conviction in these accounts, the author provides no link here either. Theoretical accounts have certainly been proposed and some were touched upon (i.e., Penrose, 1989; Hameroff & Penrose, 1996) but all of these, without exception, have been thoroughly critiqued within mainstream neuroscience and have not received even small endorsement from the wider community. The author cites some of the papers that propose speculative QM accounts – but cites nothing of the critical reassessments that have taken place since their publication. For example, although Penrose (known for promoting a view of QM effects in consciousness) was used as supporting literature, in Chapter 11, there was no mention of the critique by Gush and Churchland (1995) and others that followed this lead (see also Dietrich, 2007). As a consequence the debate on this issue is far from accurate, representative, or contemporary. The reader would come away from this book alone with a far from balanced understanding of the crucial wider debate of QM on consciousness.

The real issue here is not just that QM is used as a nebulous form of umbrella idea, but whether or not it is warranted in the current context by the evidence and whether or not it actually adds anything of specific use to the scientific debate (over and above that of other accounts and frameworks). On both counts here, the answer is clear - no. More generally, when paranormalists speculate wildly on QM my impression is that this often means they don't really have an explanation so they try to make their ideas 'hide-out' in the fuzzy world they create of the non-falsifiable. By recruiting QM in the context of NDEs what one is really doing is liberating oneself from having to come up with an explanation – one that can be evaluated in an objective, testable framework. As Churchland (2002) puts it, "Pixie dust in the synapses is about as explanatorily powerful as quantum coherence in microtubules" (Churchland, 2002; p197).

As a consequence of these shortcomings, the book is severely let down from Chapter 11 onwards. I sincerely hope that this approach is not a sign of things to come in NDE circles as this would predict a future debate with an increasingly less relevant and explicit relationship to dominant macro-level models in the field – which have major implications for this research. Ignorance of highly plausible existing macro-level accounts is no defence when one considers the magnitude of the claims being made. It is not the issue of QM per-se, but the honest realisation that such models are not currently widely accepted in the mainstream and as such it is far too early to speculate on how useful such frameworks will ever turn out to be. Couple that to the controversy of a spiritualistic interpretation of the NDE, and what one has is an account twice as controversial – not twice as helpful. It is functionally equivalent to using one mystery (that of QM) to explain another (NDEs). On a more minor point, throughout the book I found the referencing and citation style very frustrating as a lot of statements are merely made, as if fact, when in reality they merely hang in the air with no justification. This is not a very effective or convincing style of writing.

So, would I recommend this book to my students, fellow academics and interested researchers? Predictably, the answer is no, and this is not because I simply disagree with the conclusion. There are far more comprehensive accounts available from both skeptical and more sympathetic perspectives that provide a far healthier and balanced overview of the literature (previous works by Susan Blackmore (1993) and Mark Fox (2003) spring to mind). In addition, there is nothing new in the book that is not touched upon in the original Lancet article. So although it has taken around nine years since the original article for the book to arrive in English, it does not fully engage with the wider views (and rebuttals) that have been expressed in print against the original article over the preceding years. Oddly, I do not feel the paranormalist interpretation of the NDE has been helped in any way by the original article or the present book and I feel that many readers (whom may well be sympathetic to the general conclusion of the authors) may not necessarily welcome the additional controversy this work will attract. Ironically, this may set the debate for both skeptical and sympathetic interpretations back a decade as we now have to engage in the lengthy process of explaining a whole new set of basic misunderstandings rather than move forward together trying to seriously understand these fascinating experiences. My personal evaluation is that based on the above discussion, this book can be legitimately ignored.

Finally, if the reader feels compelled to engage with van Lommel's offering then I suggest both caution (based on the comments above) and intellectual antidotes in the form of the counter-arguments posed by Prof Chris French in a response (in the same edition of the Lancet that published the van Lommel et al. paper – which makes it all the more odd that the issues raised were not adequately discussed), by Keith Augustine's philosophical essays (available at www.infidels.com) and if not too pretentious, my own humble essay published in the Skeptic magazine (Braithwaite, 2008). At the very least, such an approach would mean the reader cannot be accused of not being in possession of the necessary information on which to reach a potentially well informed conclusion, irrespective of what actual conclusion they reach.

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By [comixman](#) on 5th August 2012, 08:12 AM

Thanks Dr B for this review. In my experience in discussing NDEs with friends it is a greater impediment to skepticism than religion, UFOs, conspiracies etc. Asking someone to accept the end of consciousness is to ask them to give up immortality.

As an aside I personally know someone who was in full cardiac arrest for 45 minutes. With the advent of hypothermia post arrest and excellent care she survived without brain damage and is back at work. Fortunately she gave up smoking after this event. Something we had been urging her to do for years. I asked her if she had any recollection of that time period. For her it is a complete blank. No memories until waking up in the intensive care unit. When I tell my believer friends this they have an explanation. She is in denial of the experience and may need hypnosis or something to bring it to consciousness. Oh well.

I expect more NDE stuff to come out since a few recent books have been commercial successes.

By [Dr B](#) on 5th August 2012, 12:29 PM

Thanks for your kind words. There are a lot of misconceptions about the NDE propagated mainly by the die-hard believers who have already decided what they think on the matter

Hardly open minded.

By [baron](#) on 30th August 2012, 08:48 AM

I scanned your review and it seems to reflect my views. His constant digs at science became tedious and his waffling about things quantum smacked of an effort to justify his speculation. He insisted that NDE could occur in the absence of brain function yet this was not backed up by any evidence, and precious little anecdote. He even admitted as much yet continued to rely on this assumption as the core validator of NDE.

By [Dr B](#) on 25th July 2013, 03:04 PM

absolutely! totally agree. I cannot believe he gets away with it....

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In *Consciousness Beyond Life*, the internationally renowned cardiologist Dr. Pim van Lommel offers ground-breaking research into whether or not our consciousness survives the death of our body. If you enjoy books about near-death experiences, such as those by Raymond Moody, Jeffrey Long, and James Van Praagh; watch television shows like *Ghosthunters In Consciousness Beyond Life*, van Lommel shows that our consciousness does not always coincide with brain functions and that, remarkably and significantly, consciousness can even be experienced separate from the body. ...more. [Get A Copy. Amazon.](#)