

years that she knew him. His experiences were all secondhand. That also comes across clearly in *Natural and Supernatural*. It is a book written by a seeker, by someone hoping that he can interpret history to prove to himself and others that the supernatural does exist. To paraphrase C.D. Broad, perhaps Brian Inglis now has the answer to his quest ... or perhaps he doesn't.

*Michael Epstein*  
*National Capital Area Skeptics*  
8006 Valley St., Silver Spring, MD 20910

**Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experiences** by Susan Blackmore. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1993. 289 pp., \$23.95.

How do you like your near-death experience (NDE) books? If you have an aversion toward authors who are true believers, then *Dying to Live* is not for you, for Blackmore is a true believer in the impossibility of realities other than material ones. Her arguments are with religionists, those other true believers who argue that NDEs are evidence for personal survival beyond death.

In the illustrious company of such scientists as Stephen Hawkins or Richard Dawkins, Blackmore believes that epistemological questions have been settled by empiricism and that this philosophical perspective will soon settle the ontological ones, as well. In other words, philosophical problems regarding the nature of 'reality' are amenable, and probably resolvable, through advances in medicine and psychology.

Unlike other materialists, Blackmore is not content to simply explore and examine the neurophysiology of the NDE for what light may be shed (no pun intended) on the problems of mechanism and mediation of personal experience. Rather, Blackmore believes that she can extrapolate from these speculations to conclusions that sweep away any suggestion of an afterlife, of dualist conceptions of self, even of the very notion (after Dennett) of self itself. It is an audacious, provocative, obviously overstated case, but a jolly good read anyway.

Blackmore believes that the explanatory choices are between the 'afterlife hypothesis' or the 'dying brain hypothesis' (she is apparently unaware of or uninterested in any other choices). She ends her book supporting the 'dying brain hypothesis'. Most readers will not be surprised at the main evidence for this. Most of the central details for this argument have remained unchanged for some time — a combination of popular ideas about death denial, the frailties of human imagination, an update on the latest theories of temporal lobe dysfunction, endorphins and so on.

Important additions to Blackmore's particular arsenal and support for these are: Dennett's theory of self as illusion; some interesting visual puzzles apparently demonstrating the brain's need to find meaning and patterns in the 'meaningless' and 'random'; a computer-generated exercise which shows that tunnel sensations can be produced by experiences other than traveling in real

tunnels (!); and an entertaining and imaginative attempt to link Dennett's idea of the self as illusion to a similar Buddhist one.

The problems of naive philosophical empiricism, or epiphenomenalism, the socially constructed nature of realities, and the methodological pitfalls of unexamined assumptions (because the assumptions of one's adversary tend to preoccupy one so) do not preoccupy any significant space in the book. These very latest of problems, of regular concern to anthropology and philosophy, history and philosophy of science, the sociology of knowledge, or contemporary postmodern social theory, do not appear in Blackmore's text. It is as if these contemporary debates and concerns have no relevance to the NDE. This is a pity, because they obviously do have some relevance. This is because just as Blackmore's neuroscience texts seem to form yet more arguments for the illusory nature of self, the latest postmodern arguments about reality are coming to the same conclusion — about empiricism.

Nevertheless, if you are one of those readers who believes that arguments about God, or the afterlife, or the nature of self, are only so many experiments, observations or arguments away, then this book is for you. Of its type, *Dying to Live* provides, I think, the best resource for materialist arguments that currently exist. You will dazzle and impress skeptical friends, and you will make large problems for religionists, particularly those religionists who feel that 'God's plan' can be discerned in the material. Blackmore's book is the most up-to-date catalogue of misgivings about the dualist concept of self and the religionist's desire for the afterlife vis-a-vis experiences near-death.

I regret that I cannot be more positive about *Dying to Live* and that comment should not be read as 'crocodile tears', a false regret. Of its type, as I have said, Blackmore's is a fine book, if not a little anachronistic in social-science terms. But I am regularly disappointed by the fact, particularly in the study of the NDE, that we rarely move beyond that question with the ever-elusive answer — is the NDE evidence for life after death?

I believe that this question was formulated in its current form and expression in the late nineteenth century and in the idiom of those early times. The materialist scientific view of the world was growing strong and part of the polemic of that world view was to resist speculation about the unseen since such speculation was viewed as a religious habit, and a poor one at that. However, that resistance itself continues to run into problems: to think only of the past prejudice of the scientific community toward a whole range of ideas from bacteria to tectonic plates. And the prejudice always seems to come, not from the state of scientific theory itself, but rather from the personal and social understanding of what is, or is not, possible.

In an age of quantum mechanics and chaos theory, a time when uncertainty is a central philosophical, cultural and scientific question, surely we can get beyond the binary notion of: if not this, then it *must* be that. The significance of the NDE is not in its evidence for an afterlife or for some materialist idea of death but rather its social and personal meaning. Understanding of how the

physical interacts with the cultural and the environmental to produce those meanings is an interdisciplinary task. But if anyone thinks that neuroscience can manufacture an answer to that question by going at it alone, then that is reductionism of the most naive kind.

So when Blackmore asserts that there can be no alternative realities, that the self is not part of 'fact', and draws only from the insights of neuroscience, she contributes not to science, but to ideology and personal belief. At best she reifies current thinking about consciousness, believing in a linear and unbroken path of progress, a quaint idea with little historical support. At worst, Blackmore confuses theory for fact. In this unfortunate way, the text of *Dying to Live* is something more than a limited exploration of current theories of consciousness. It is the credo of a true believer.

*Allan Kellehear*  
*School of Sociology & Anthropology*  
*La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia*