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Mysteries of Consciousness

Does an Afterlife Obviously Exist?

Philosopher Jens Amberts argues that life after death is "empirically certain."

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Reviewed by Tyler Woods



KEY POINTS

- **4 to 15 percent of the general population have had a near-death experience (NDE).**
 - **Those who've had NDEs overwhelmingly agree that the afterlife is real, in fact more real than ordinary life.**
 - **Skeptics are just as likely as anyone else to have an NDE and become convinced of the reality of life after death.**
 - **A new philosophical book argues that it is irrational not to believe the testimony of so many previously skeptical, well-qualified investigators.**
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Imagine a room completely sealed off from the outside world. This room is so carefully sealed and shielded that no instruments or signals of any kind can penetrate its walls to obtain information about what's inside. Every so often, some lucky

tion, but when they leave, the only information they can take with them is their memory of what they witnessed. They can't carry any sort of physical evidence at all.

Most of us would agree that, if enough people went into this room and enough of them came out of it agreeing about what was inside, their joint testimony would justify the rest of us in believing that the room contained what they said it did, even in the absence of physical evidence. Now, it's true that, if the contents of the room were quite strange—say, if its contents appeared to contradict the accepted laws of physics—we might need a particularly high number of testimonies from particularly well-qualified investigators to convince us that the room's contents were indeed as strange as reported.

But if enough reliable observers came away convinced that the room's contents contravened the accepted laws of physics, then we would be justified in relying on their testimony and adopting their belief about the room's contents as our own. In fact, this is a lot like what we do when we rely on scientists' published testimonies about the outcomes of groundbreaking experiments.

In his new book *Why an Afterlife Obviously Exists*, budding Swedish philosopher Jens Amberts argues that life after death is the equivalent of this tightly sealed room but that we nevertheless have an enormous number of reliable witnesses who have investigated that room and reported their overwhelming agreement that our consciousness does survive death. The existence of an afterlife is an empirical question, says Amberts, and the weight of available testimony is so

result of ignorance, irrationality, or both.

Four Facts About Near-Death Experiences (NDEs)

The testimony to which Amberts refers is that of people who have had near-death experiences (NDEs). These are people who temporarily die or come close to death and, after reviving, describe having had extraordinary experiences like floating out of their bodies, viewing the scene from above, meeting deceased loved ones or other spiritual beings, and experiencing a beautiful, light-filled realm where they learned (or remembered) an astonishing amount about their life and its relationship to the rest of the universe. Amberts bases his argument for the existence of the afterlife on four well-established and non-controversial facts about these experiences and those who've had them. (I've slightly rearranged the order of his premises below, for ease of exposition.)

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First, there is the fact that decades of NDE research have not uncovered any psychological, physiological, or sociological

predicts how deep their NDE will be. Crucially, *NDEs don't happen only to people who have a prior belief in an afterlife*. Rather, “the percentage of subtle, deep, and profound NDErs who were uncertain about or skeptical of the existence of an afterlife prior to their NDE is...roughly the same as the percentage of people who are uncertain about or skeptical of the existence of an afterlife in the population as a whole” (Amberts, 2022, p. 23).

Second, there is the fact that the overwhelming majority of those who've had an NDE become convinced of the existence of an afterlife, regardless of their previous skepticism on the topic. Before their NDEs, the percentage of people who believed in life after death ranged from 22 to 38 percent, depending on the study. After their NDEs, 76 to 100 percent of these same people believe in life after death (van Lommel, 2010, p. 55). Statistics collected by NDE researcher Jeffrey Long show that the “deeper” the NDE (according to the Greyson Scale), the greater the percentage of those who come away certain of the existence of the afterlife. Among those with the deepest experiences (25-32 on the Greyson Scale), 100 percent came away agreeing with the statement, “An afterlife definitely exists” (Amberts, 2022, p. 120).

Third, NDErs frequently report that their NDE was *more real than everyday life*. And again, the deeper the NDE, the more prevalent the perception of the NDE as “realer than real.” As an example of the kind of thing NDErs report, consider this testimony Amberts quotes from a woman who was an atheist before her experience. She reports, “The minute that I kind of ‘woke up’ on that hillside in heaven I knew that that was more

us when we're in it, but once I was there in...I'll call it 'heaven'...I realized that's more real, that felt more real, and it made much more sense to me than anything here... In heaven, it's so clear, so real, so rational, so logical, but yet emotional and loving at the same time. Immediately I knew that was real and this was not. Immediately." (We Don't Die Radio; Amberts, 2022, p. 65)

Another NDEr says, "It's like living in a two-dimensional black and white world here, compared to multicolor, multi-sensory VR immersion there... [After coming back, even sunrises] were ugly for a while" (Shaman Oaks; Amberts, 2022, p. 68). An NDEr who's an artist explains, "There are three primary, three secondary, and six tertiary colors in the visible light spectrum. Here [in the NDE], I was seeing a visible light spectrum with at least 80 new primary colors" (Williams, 2019; Amberts, 2022, p. 67).

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Amberts goes into some detail about why the perception of NDEs' being "realer than real" provides strong epistemic justi-

world is its “phenomenological coherency, rationality, structure, detail, epistemic quality, and consistency” (Amberts, 2022, p. 97). NDErs report that the afterlife they experience has vastly *more* of these qualities than our ordinary lives, so, if we are justified in believing that **the world we currently experience is real**, NDErs may have even more such justification for believing that the NDE world is real.

The final premise laid out by Amberts is the fact that millions of people—“probably even tens of millions of people,” he says—have had NDEs. In fact, Amberts’ figures are too modest. Surveys of the general population in various Western countries show between 4 to 15 percent of them reporting an NDE (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; Knoblauch, Schmied & Schnettler, 2001; Perera, Padmasekara & Belanti, 2005). Extrapolated to the world at large, this would mean that somewhere between 320 million and 1.2 billion people worldwide have experienced an NDE. That’s an awful lot of people—including an awful lot of former skeptics—who have been convinced through vivid personal experience of the reality of an afterlife.

Why Even Skeptical Non-NDErs Have Reason to Accept the Existence of an Afterlife

While there are certainly places where Amberts’ argument could benefit from expansion (for instance, by including some of the literature on the philosophy of testimony as well as more discussion of the relevance of the large percentage of people who temporarily die but do not remember having an NDE), the core insight he draws from his four premises is compelling:

are or can be indicative of an afterlife as we may be now, and at least some of them also shared the intensity of that skepticism, and at least some of them also shared whatever justifications we may think or feel that we have for that skepticism. And yet, the NDE thoroughly and justifiably convinced them that there really is an afterlife for experientially self-evident and realer than real attributes of the experience. (Amberts, 2022, p. 134)

If large numbers of people just as rational, knowledgeable, and skeptical as ourselves have been convinced by firsthand experience that an afterlife exists—and no such people who have had a profound NDE have been left unconvinced—isn't it irrational for us to ignore their testimony?

Amberts argues that it is, and that it's time for us to wake up from our insistence that there's "no way we can know" whether the afterlife exists or not. Hundreds of millions of people have been inside that room, and they agree there's something there.

References

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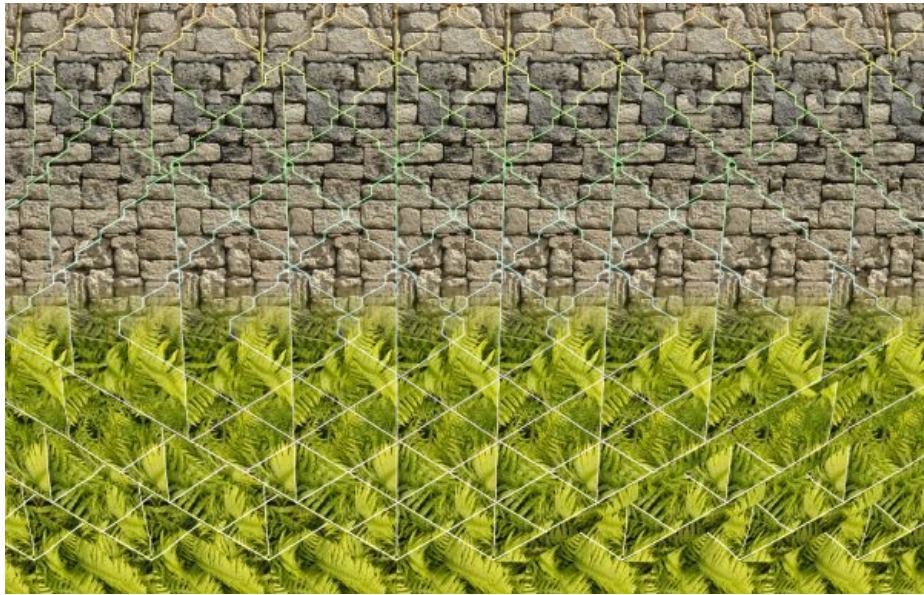
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Sharon Hewitt Rawlette, Ph.D., is a philosopher who investigates apparent "coincidences" for what they can tell us about the hidden workings of consciousness.

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