

# On Heaven's Edge

On the Reality of the  
Human Mind

Wiebe Oost

Author: Wiebe Oost

Coverdesign: Wiebe Oost

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Translation Patrick Bygate/Wiebe Oost

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## CONTENTS

### PREFACE

6

#### 1. THE PROBLEM

*What is a human being? Just flesh and blood? Or is there more?*

#### 2. WHAT SCIENCE SAYS.

*The human mind is an illusion*

#### 3. THE ARGUMENTS

*We don't find anything... so there ain't nothin'*

#### 4. THE OBJECTIONS

*But, your worship, I couldn't help it!*

#### 5. THE REVERSE SIDE

*Free minds!*

#### 6. WHAT IS THAT, AN NDE ?

*Explaining the unexplainable*

#### 7. ABOUT DIMENSIONS

*It could well be that there is more than meets the eye*

#### 8. ABOUT LIGHTBULBS AND STRINGS

*The physics of the smallest particles*

#### 9. THE AUTONOMOUS I

*Your unexpected aspect.*

#### 10. THE CONSEQUENCES

*A different life*

#### 11. FINALLY

### REFERENCES

## **PREFACE**

This booklet deals with a fascinating subject, albeit one that is taboo for a great many people. Is the world of our daily experience all there is – or is there an extended version? Put concisely:

*What does it mean when you die?*

Your body does not function anymore, that is clear. But is that the end of your personality? Dick Swaab, a Dutch neurobiologist, wrote a book with the title: "We are our brains" ("Wij zijn ons brein", in Dutch, Contact, 2010, an English translation is in preparation), so it comes as no surprise that his answer to the above question is a resounding "Yes!"

There are, however, some 24 million people walking the earth who have a very different opinion on this matter. Not because of their conviction, but from their experiences. They had a so-called Near Death Experience (NDE) which radically changed their view on life and death.

Instances of the phenomenon are already very old, but it has received more attention in the last few decades. This was primarily due to the books by Richard Moody (Moody Jr., R.A. (1975/1976): *Life after life/Reflections on Life After Life*, Mockingbird Books, Covington, USA) and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (Kübler-Ross, E. (1969): *On Death and Dying*, Macmillan (New York), reissued by Routledge (1973), 272 pp. ISBN-10:0415040159, ISBN-13:978-0415040150). Meanwhile a plethora of books has been published on the subject, mainly by cardiologists, writing largely about the experiences of their patients. However, these books remain generally in the descriptive phase, describing only specific instances of the phenomenon and its

statistics. Some people have made attempts to explain it in terms of our present-day biophysical knowledge, but none of their suppositions so far have covered all aspects of the phenomenon (see chapter 6).

In this booklet I will use a different physical angle of attack to try to come to grips with the NDE phenomenon. In eleven short chapters I'll share this quest with you. My final conclusion is that scientific circles generally discarded the so-called dual model (we have a body *and* a mind) which, in the end not only gives the best description of how you and I stick together, but also permits a description of NDE's that is in accordance with *all* known facts – in contrast to the explanations given by researchers with all too strong materialistic notions.

NDE's teach us that body and mind can temporarily separate from each other. But the deeper phases of those experiences also indicate that, although this separation becomes permanent at the time of our death, this doesn't mean the end of your mind, your awareness or, as I will call it, your 'self'. With that statement we enter a domain where through the ages religions have had their say. I could not resist the temptation to look for traces of NDE's in existing religious concepts. In an appendix, chapters A<sub>1</sub> till A<sub>4</sub>, I give a summary of the ideas existing on this subject within five world religions and compare them with the experiences of people who had an NDE. When the word 'religion' arises the word 'mystery' is not far away. That is, of course, mostly correct: in his eulogy on love in his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul writes that 'we know in part' and in other religions one finds the same kind of statement. But there is danger

in the use of the word 'mystery' as a characterization of religious experience. It puts religion at a distance from one's everyday life, and has no relation with here and now. I will try to show you in this booklet that, although death is a firm boundary for direct knowledge, there is every reason to believe that it constitutes a fluid connection between the physical world of our everyday life and the mysterious one of religions (not specifically the Christian version!) For some people this will be difficult to swallow. Nowadays the worlds of religion and science have grown so far apart the mere idea that they still meet in the end is nonsense to most people. Nevertheless that folly appears to be a concrete reality, meaning that people who experienced an NDE have stood at Heaven's edge. I have - of course - done my level best to make the story as clear as possible. Several people who read the manuscript nevertheless remarked that it was 'pretty spicy stuff'. To help you, if you share that opinion, I have provided all chapters (except nr. Eleven) with a summary, hoping to make it easier for you to get to grips with the matter. But if you wish to know the how's and why's of my ideas it is inevitable that you read the main text...

I wish you much enjoyment, both in reading this book and in digesting the ideas it contains !

Bilthoven, March 2020

Wiebe Oost

## 1. THE PROBLEM

### ***What is a human being? Just flesh and blood? Or is there more?***

What is a human being? According to biologists it's a mammal. In doing so we're talking about the biological properties of the species to which you and I belong, but what is: "you"? Or: "I"? Descartes drew the only firm conclusion you can make in this respect: "I think, therefore I am". But the question remains: "What is "I"? That has to do with your brain. But what is there in that brain that makes you aware of yourself? Descartes wrote about a kind of small man, a "homunculus". Nowadays we know much more about the human brain than Descartes. Does that mean that we now have a better idea about the connection between our brain and our awareness? What can brain researchers tell us about it?

"What are you, if I may ask?"

There is good chance that, if I were to ask you, you would name your profession. We evidently assume that our occupation determines that we *are* what we usually *do*.

Strange. You get another job and suddenly you are something else. Whereas furthermore nothing has changed. You still have an appetite for the same kind of food and drink, still like the same kind of music and still love, respectively hate, the same people. You gave a very unsatisfactory answer.

What then should you have answered?

How about: "I am a human being"? That's at least something that will stay with you for your whole life. People would sometimes, especially when they are in love, like to be the most extraordinary things (if only the property of the object of our love), but no, not a chance, you'll always stay a human being. The only

way to become non-human is to die.

To label yourself as a human being makes sense. It distinguishes you from the animals, the plants and all other things. You can specify it somewhat further by stating to which race you belong and whether you are a man or a woman, because that will generally also remain unchanged during your lifetime. But that finishes more or less our fixed characteristics. You're a human, otherwise you couldn't read this story.

OK, but what is that: a human being?

Biologists have an answer to that question: a human being is a mammal. Well, well, that makes me stand dumbfounded! A ...mammal? When I'm standing in front of the bathroom mirror I see two measly male nipples, but is that my most specific characteristic? Maybe it's somewhat different for a woman but, nevertheless, choosing the way we rear our offspring is the most specific characteristic of us humans, ... that idea can only arise in the mind of a biologist!

That concern for posterity is, of course, just one aspect of our species, a biologist too can tell you much more about the specific characteristics of homo sapiens sapiens, as we are called officially. Twice "sapiens" because some 40,000 years ago (others say 150,000 years ago, who cares!) something appears to have changed in our genes. Other specific human characteristics are, as a biologist can tell you, that we usually move around on our hind legs (with all the consequent disasters for your back), although some apes sometimes do that as well. And together with a certain kind of mole-rat we have the thinnest body hair of all mammals, apart from the few monstrous



dogs and cats that we have bred until they had practically lost both their outer- and underwear. The most specific characteristic of the human species, however, is that we have such a big and complicated brain. That's reflected in the name of our species: homo sapiens means the reasonable human. And reason, everybody knows, has to do with your brain. So homo sapiens sapiens is nothing less than the reasonable reasonable human. Even though that's hard to believe if you see what's happening around you...

With that we're still talking about the biological properties of the species to which you and I belong. But what *is* that: "you"? Or: "I"?

For an answer to that question you may think about your external appearance. That's you. But the longer you deal with people, the less important that appearance becomes. How people think, how he (or she, of course, but I'm not going to repeat that time and again) reacts, his character, such things become ever more important. And the person who knows best... is you. Others, if they have known you for a long time, may have some notion of how you think and feel, but that never goes beyond a part of your personality. Only *you* are aware of your full self, only *you* experience yourself as a thinking being. The philosopher Descartes thought long and deep about what he really knew with certainty about himself and the world around him and he came to the conclusion: "I think, therefore I am". That is indeed the only conclusion you can draw with absolute certainty. You realize that you are a thinking being and that makes

you say with Descartes: "I'm indeed sure I exist, otherwise I wouldn't be able to think".

That's something you even don't know of the rest of humanity. Maybe they don't exist at all. Maybe they're a product of your imagination. Maybe all the world around you, even the universe is nothing but a dream. Maybe you're a "qwertyuiop" on the planet "asdfghjkl" who lies dreaming on his "zxcvbnm". Personally I don't think that's the case, but it could at least have been an explanation for the order of the letters on the keyboard of my PC - and neither you nor I can prove that it is wrong. You can, of course, pinch yourself firmly in your arm and say that you're not dreaming because you feel the pain, but that's nonsense: you dream in a neat coherent way, so you include that bruise in your dream.

But, anyhow: you exist. You experience your thoughts and emotions, you think, so you exist. Hurray for Descartes!

Oh yeah? Can you now really say: "I exist"? What *is* that then: "I"? With that question we still haven't progressed a bit.

I? Well, that's what you see in front of a mirror, isn't it? Not exactly, of course, because a mirror interchanges left and right, but we won't bother with that type of nitpicking. That there, in that mirror: that's you. You even don't have to be human to understand that. Even elephants turn out to understand that they're looking at themselves if you position them in front of a - pretty big, of course - mirror. In a test a white cross was taped to the head of an elephant and a mirror placed

in front of the animal (for the sake of simplicity the animal was led to the mirror). And, yes, almost immediately the elephant started to try to remove the cross from its real head. The animal had understood that she herself was the elephant in the mirror.

But if you are what you see in that mirror, do you then become someone else if the image in the mirror changes? If you, for example, should lose an arm or a leg in an accident - does that make you another person? At the moment of writing I'm the lucky owner of four well-functioning extremities, so I can't speak from experience, but I'm very much convinced that after such an accident I would be furious or very much distressed or maybe in a different mood again, but I would still experience myself as - myself. And the same goes for the case that I would, for example, have to undergo surgery to remove my appendix, so my personality doesn't reside in my internal organs either. Only when something happens to your brain you may - at least for your surroundings- become a different person. Your personality, everyone will agree, has to do with your brain.

There is the historical case of a certain Mr. Phineas Gage who in 1848, during the construction of a railway, had an iron pole of about a meter length and some four centimetres diameter going through his brain making a hole from the back of his head to the centre of his skull. He not only survived the accident without loss of cerebral functions, apart from the use of his left eye, but the physician who treated him noted that his personality, at least during the first few years after the accident, had indeed changed. Before

the accident Gage had been a strong, socially well adapted person who was highly esteemed, both by the people working for him and the people for whom he worked, whereas he had become a fidgety person who could easily fly into a rage after the accident. Friends and relations indicated that Gage was no longer Gage. Later, it seems, he became more balanced again. That raises the question whether his change of personality was due to an organic cause (the loss of part of his brain) or by the emotions due to the accident.

*Yet your brain, it appears, is not the only organ determining your personality. In his book "The Memory of the Heart" the American psychologist Paul Pearsall describes the intriguing stories of people who after a heart transplant operation showed some of the characteristics of the donor. A convinced vegetarian developed a taste for seasoned chicken legs, the favourite meal of the donor, and a woman who received the heart of a diseased prostitute inherited a tendency for extremely sensual behaviour...*

But if your personality 'sits in your brain': how then? What is there in your brain that makes you aware of yourself? The same Descartes of the "I think, therefore I am" said there was a sort of little man, a "homunculus", inside your brain who regulated everything. He also knew where that little man had his abode: in the pineal gland (epiphysis) in the centre of your brain. If you should take this statement literally it wouldn't resolve anything, because that homunculus would of course have a head and in that head would