

Response to Editorial “Should IANDS Endorse a Post-Physicalist Worldview?”: Why IANDS Should Not Endorse a Specific Worldview

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ABSTRACT: In this editorial response, I explain why I believe the International Association for Near-Death Studies should maintain a position of neutrality with regard to endorsement of post-physicalism or any specific worldview.

KEYWORDS: paradigm shift, post-physicalism, post-materialism

From their very beginnings, the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) and the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* have welcomed a variety of opinions. Our only organizational positions have been (a) that near-death experiences (NDEs) are important phenomena that have profound implications both for experiencers and for humankind, (b) that more research is needed, (c) that experiencers should be supported, and (d) that both healthcare workers and the general public should be educated about NDEs. IANDS—and particularly the *Journal*—have always gone out of their way to welcome contributions from a variety of viewpoints, including various religious and spiritual traditions, from fundamentalist orthodoxies to nondenominational spirituality, and various philosophies, from idealism and dualism to physicalism.

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In the first issue of the Association's newsletter in 1979, President John Audette spelled out the reason for creating the organization:

The Association advocates the objective and systematic study of near-death episodes and near-death experiences and deathbed observations without assuming an 'official position' regarding their ultimate significance. . . . Individuals within our Association subscribe to different points of view with respect to the meaning of near-death phenomena. Some believe that near-death research findings indicate a survival of bodily death; others argue that the findings are attributable to other factors, i.e., dream-states, depersonalization, universal archetypes, etc. . . . There is room within this organization for differing opinions . . . Simply put, we are interested in the unrestrained acquisition of knowledge about near-death phenomena. (Audette, 1979)

Echoing this open-minded approach, the inside front cover of the very first issue of this *Journal* in 1981 stated clearly that "the *Journal* invites contributions from professionals and lay persons, whatever their background or orientation. . . . The *Journal* as such has no commitment to any particular position on or interpretation of near-death experiences (and related phenomena) and specifically encourages an exchange of a variety of perspectives on these issues." For the 27 years that I served as Editor of the *Journal*, I strived to include diverse opinions, often seeking out contributions from scholars known to hold divergent perspectives. On several occasions I devoted entire issues to an initial target article followed by several commentaries from knowledgeable respondents, as Jan Holden (2023) has done in this issue. I believe that this inclusive policy enhanced the quality of our discussions of near-death experiences (NDEs) and helped us refine our understanding of these phenomena, as well as our research and clinical approaches to them. Because of that open-mindedness, IANDS and the *Journal* have won hard-earned respect as the premier reliable and credible sources of information, and our educational offerings to clinicians and the general public are valued.

As Holden (2023) noted in her Editorial in this issue, a few years ago, the IANDS Board of Directors reinforced that inclusive approach by adopting a neutrality statement to convey its openness to diverse opinions and its non-affiliation with any particular point of view, stating that "IANDS members from around the world have diverse views on many topics. As an organization, IANDS is neutral and does not align itself with any particular social, religious, or political ideology" (<https://iands.org/1367-iands-neutrality-and-respect-for-diverse-opinions.html>).

I see no reason at this point to abandon that impartial stance and endorse any one particular interpretation of NDEs. In fact, I believe that doing so would stifle productive discourse and abdicate the *Journal's* position as the primary source of objective scholarly information about NDEs and related phenomena.

Holden (2023) wrote that recent developments in near-death research and related fields have suggested to her that it is time to reconsider IANDS's neutrality. She noted the treatises by numerous authors challenging the currently mainstream physicalist worldview, and the research suggesting that physicalism is inadequate to explain NDEs and other transpersonal phenomena. That much is true. However, there has also been a recent surge in research purporting to bolster a physicalist understanding of NDEs, focusing on new evidence of brain activity around the dying process and on comparisons between NDEs and psychedelic drug experiences. And this spate of research reports has been accompanied by treatises by numerous authors reasserting the adequacy of a physicalist worldview (e.g., Albantakis et al., 2023; Fritz et al., 2024; Mashour et al., 2024; Peinkhofer et al., 2019; Seth & Bayne, 2022).

I agree with Holden's (2023) opinion that a post-physicalist worldview is currently the best model for understanding NDEs. I personally find the physicalist treatises, particularly those that resort to "promissory materialism," to be scientifically vapid and to offer little hope for future conceptual advances in understanding NDEs. I have seen the evidence to support a post-physicalist interpretation of NDEs grow over the years, whereby I currently think it is the best way to understand the phenomenon, and I spelled out this evidence in a peer-reviewed academic journal article (Greyson, 2010). I also coauthored the Edward Kelly et al. (2006) book and contributed the chapter on NDEs in the Kelly and Marshall (2021) book, both of which Holden cited as challenging the prevailing physicalist worldview. Furthermore, the recent research touting surprising findings of brain activity during the dying process has failed to show such brain activity occurring in people who report NDEs—or, indeed, any other conscious experience (van Lommel, 2004, 2006, 2013, 2023). I have a number of publications, some coauthored with Holden, pointing out the shortcomings of recent research that purports to bolster a physicalist explanation for NDEs (Greyson et al., 2012; Greyson & Long, 2006; Greyson & van Lommel, 2024; Greyson et al., 2022a, 2022b; van Lommel & Greyson, 2023). However, I also believe strongly that my opinions—and Holden's—are not the only possible logical ones. Although my view is that physical-

ism is scientifically inadequate, I know as a scientist that our current understandings are simply *our best guesses given the current state of knowledge* and that future research findings contradicting our current positions may persuade us to change our minds—which, as Holden stated, characterizes the most advanced level of reflective judgment.

Holden (2023) mentioned that she had endorsed the Galileo Commission Report, “Beyond a Materialist Worldview: Towards an Expanded Science” (Wallach, 2019). Although I agreed with most—but not all—of the items in the Galileo Commission Report, and my name appears at the end of the report as an adviser in its development, I declined to endorse it, because I believe that science progresses—and should progress—by rigorous investigation and not by issuing manifestos.

Holden (2023) argued further that by using a reflective judgment model, IANDS can endorse a post-physicalist worldview in a manner that would convey that IANDS remains open to arguments and evidence in favor of physicalism. I fear that that is an unrealistic vision. The question is not whether IANDS *remains* open to contradictory positions—and I believe it can—but, rather, whether it can *convey* that impression in a position endorsing one particular worldview. My concern is that endorsing one particular worldview will undermine IANDS’s hard-earned reputation as the best source for unbiased information about NDEs and replace it with a reputation as just one more organization focused on a single interpretation of NDEs. Again, I appreciate Holden’s vision of emphasizing that IANDS taking a post-physicalist stand explicitly *includes* openness to other viewpoints and conflicting evidence; but I suggest that endorsing one worldview makes such inclusiveness much harder to achieve than she envisions.

Finally, Holden (2023) justified her position by noting that more than 90% of respondents in a recent sample of IANDS constituents believe in a post-materialist worldview—although she noted that her sample of usable responses represented only 4% of IANDS members and friends invited to respond to her survey. However, I am concerned with appealing not only to IANDS constituents but also to the non-IANDS-affiliated scholars and others who currently seek out IANDS and the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* for the best unbiased current information about NDEs.

Let me note as an aside that the question as to whether NDEs are described in a physicalist framework is not the same question as to whether they are described as spiritual experiences. There is no reason why an experience cannot have both physical and spiritual aspects. For example, singing hymns in church or watching the sun set

over the ocean can be both physical and spiritual experiences. These experiences—and NDEs—could be described in terms of either a physicalist or a post-physicalist worldview without invalidating the opposing worldview. The two worldviews are different ways of looking at the experience, but they are not contradictory or mutually exclusive.

I applaud Holden (2023) for seeking out other opinions in response to her editorial, and I thank her for this enterprising effort; but I must respectfully disagree with her conclusion. I urge IANDS to retain its policy of not endorsing any one worldview, thereby continuing to encourage a diversity of opinions within the organization and in the pages of the *Journal*, as the best way to ensure a healthy dialogue that will advance our knowledge and conceptual understanding of NDEs and retain the *Journal's* reputation as the primary source of nonpartisan information about these phenomena.

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