Michael Nahm

Michael Nahm is a German biologist and parapsychologist whose psi research has focused on terminal lucidity, near-death experiences, cases of the reincarnation type, physical mediumship, hauntings, and other riddles of mind and evolution.

Life and Career

Michael Nahm credits a broad-minded high-school biology teacher for encouraging his interest in philosophy and biological questions such as the origin of life and genetic mutation. In the 1990s he discovered the works of Rupert Sheldrake and, enthralled by Sheldrake's pushing of the limits of established science, began attempting experiments himself on dogs mysteriously knowing when their owners would return, waking a person from sleep telepathically and other topics. Nahm credits Sheldrake for fostering in him the 'confidence that one can contribute to researching so-called anomalies also privately without belonging to the in-group of responsible experts, and without affiliation to a relevant academic institution'.[1]

Nahm completed his studies in biology with examinations in zoology, botany, genetics and palaeontology, and a diploma thesis on the roosting behaviour of migratory songbird species. His doctoral dissertation discussed the physiological responses of beech trees to drought stress. He went on to conduct international research projects in forestry science.

Writing a book on unsolved riddles of evolution[2] triggered a permanent strong interest in parapsychology for Nahm, as he realized that paranormal phenomena posed the greatest challenge to the reigning materialistic and neo-Darwinian paradigm of biological processes, including evolution.[3] This led him to investigate a wide range of anomalous biological phenomena, his lines of inquiry altering over time, although he has developed a holistic approach to evidence for post-mortem survival, as he describes in a 2011 paper.[4]

For many years this work was avocational, but in 2018 he accepted an appointment at the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP) (Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health) in Freiburg, Germany, where he is now able to pursue his parapsychological work professionally in an academic institution.

Nahm sees parapsychology not as a rogue child on the margins of science, but actually as the key to gaining a full understanding of biology. While reductionist materialism works for studying classical physics and the simplest biological processes, and what some term 'organicism' is appropriate for more complex living systems, he explains in an interview:

> When it comes to studying even more complex living systems, including human beings, the unfolding of consciousness, psi, postmortem survival, or possibly evolution as a whole, I think that ultimately, only a kind of neo-vitalistic and dualistic approach is appropriate. Finally, when we look at the

fundamental levels of reality with a metaphysical slant, we might apply a holistic and monistic approach in which the dualistic properties present on lower levels of biological organization are regarded as complementary and as originating in an initially unified source at the heart of being.[5]

Parapsychological Research

Terminal Lucidity

The term terminal lucidity was coined by Nahm with Bruce Greyson in 2009. It is currently defined as an unexpected surge of mental clarity in dull, unconscious, or mentally disabled patients shortly before death.[6]These unexpected episodes of lucidity can occur in people without or with brain conditions such as dementia diseases, tumors or strokes. Nahm is probably best known for this work, having written several papers[7] and a book about the topic.[8]

Nahm has also contributed to research in a related phenomenon that he and co-authors have termed 'paradoxical lucidity'. This refers to instances of unexpected lucidity displayed exclusively by people with severe neurological brain damage, but that don't necessarily occur before death.[9] Where patients with severe neurological damage display an unexpected surge of mental clarity, the two types of lucidity overlap, and such episodes may be regarded as 'paradoxical terminal lucidity'.[10]

Nahm concludes that these phenomena, if confirmed by more rigorously controlled research, challenge standard neurological models of memory function and consciousness, carrying potentially profound implications for the treatment of severe brain conditions and for elucidating the nature of the human mind. In order to advance studies in these directions, he has advocated taking seemingly unusual and exceptional experiences into account.[11]

Near-Death Experiences

Nahm's research of the literature of near-death experiences (NDEs) has resulted in numerous publications. In the aforementioned 2011 paper, he draws attention to the relationships and similarities between NDEs and unexplained physical changes during NDEs, reciprocally confirmed out-of-body experiences/crisis apparitions, shared NDEs and shared dreams, common content in NDEs, death-bed visions, reincarnation cases with intermission memories and after-death communications through mediums, terminal lucidity and some other phenomena related to death, showing how these phenomena all point at a single process.[12]

In 2020, Nahm co-authored a paper which used the existing NDE literature as well as an online survey on autoscopy in NDEs – seeing one's body from a viewpoint outside it, usually above – to test the hypotheses that brain oxygen deprivation makes it impossible for NDEs to be experienced in real time and therefore they must be reconstructed after the brain has at least partially recovered. The findings suggested otherwise, and the authors recommended that future discussion and research on NDEs explanations should focus on two possible models: a neurophysiological model allowing for real-time NDEs, or one which allows that

'NDEs occur in relative independence from the prevailing neuro-physiological processes in the brain'.[13]

Nahm found that NDEs reported in ancient Rome share some features with current Asian cases, such as the subject learning their NDE was being caused by the wrong person having been designated to die, as well as featuring xenoglossy and an apparently correct precognitive prediction in one case.[14] (See also Medieval Near-Death Experiences.)

Nahm has also addressed the similarities and differences between typical Western NDEs and Muslim NDEs, as well as the experiences described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead.[15] Regarding the latter, he concluded that, for historical and phenomenological reasons, much of the contents can barely be regarded as revelations of universal truth, as is sometimes argued by adherents of Tibetan Buddhism.[16]

Normal Cognitive Functioning in Compromised Brains

Neuroscience posits that human mental functions are generated by brain structures, notably cell layers and tissues in the neocortex. Nahm and co-authors discuss cases in which significant physical deficiencies are found in the brains of individuals who outwardly perform normally or who even display special abilities. These include cases of hydrocephalus – in which accumulating cerebral fluid pushes the brain to the extreme margins close to the skull – and hemispherectomy – in which an entire hemisphere was removed because of conditions such as epilepsy. Nahm and co-authors also consider the abilities of 'savants' who display remarkable talents in the presence of compromised brain function. Explanatory models based on extreme brain plasticity and non-reductionist accounts of consciousness are discussed.[17]

Evolution and Reincarnation

In an afterword to James G Matlock's *Signs of Reincarnation* (2019) Nahm discusses the importance of childhood reincarnation evidence for understanding evolution. He argues that, since such evidence tends to contradict standard materialism, a more holistic view of evolution needs to be available. Nahm describes an organismically-oriented and vitalist view, where evolutionary processes tap into a fundamental fabric of reality – the same foundations that drive the evidence for past lives.[18]

Animal Homing Ability

Despite extensive scientific interest, the homing abilities of animals remain largely mysterious. In a 2015 paper, Nahm discusses the work of two hitherto little-known researchers that include remarkable instances of dogs who repeatedly returned to their owners or home from unknown locations. One archive details the research of Edwin H Richardson with messenger dogs in World War I. The other concerns more systematic experiments performed by Bernhard Müller between 1953 and 1962 involving 75 dogs. Both authors refute normal sensory explanations for their observations. Nahm finds little consensus among animal experts for bird and

mammal homing and argues that some underlying psi component should not be ruled out.[19]

Physical Mediumship

Nahm has a longstanding interest in physical mediumship and published about several past and present mediums.[20] In particular, he reported on the activities of German physical medium Kai Mügge and the Felix Experimental Group (FEG), describing his observations during 21 sittings over a period of more than four years. The phenomena typically included unusual movements of a table, raps on the room walls and the ceiling, luminous and psychokinetic phenomena, and the appearance of putative 'ectoplasm' and apports. He concluded that most if not all of the phenomena that occur while Mügge rests in alleged trance were fraudulently produced. [21] Additionally, Nahm has established that the supposed table levitations are most likely performed with a simple trick.[22]

Hauntings and Poltergeists

Nahm has recently published a detailed case study about haunting and poltergeist phenomena that started in 1835 and continued almost daily for several months inside a well-secured prison in Weinsberg, Germany.[23] He has also contributed to a richly illustrated book about such phenomena that has been recorded in the city of Freiburg since the eighteenth century.[24]

Sudden Hair Whitening

Nahm discusses the phenomenon of sudden hair whitening occurring within hours or days of emotionally traumatic experiences. Since developed hair has no metabolism, it should be impossible for such changes to occur through normal biological processes. He discusses 212 cases in the last 200 years, of which 46 are well-documented and authenticated by physicians. Nahm finds evidence for an anomalous process that may be need to be accounted for by non-causal modelling. [25]

End-of-life Experiences

Besides terminal lucidity and NDEs, there are many other so-called 'end-of-life experiences' (ELEs). Nahm has participated in studies surveying ELEs in humans, and, together with Rupert Sheldrake, has published the first systematic paper introducing ELEs in vertebrate animals, particularly pets such as dogs and cats. The authors found many similarities between human and non-human ELEs. They concluded that this might be a sign of a common physiology underpinning such experiences, also that it might increase the recognition that animals share an inner life similar to that of humans during all life phases.[26]

In another publication, Nahm, together with the late Carlos Alvarado, discuss accounts of perceptions of luminous phenomena - mists, lights and 'spirit bodies' - floating over persons close to death.[27]

Theory-building

Nahm has commented on the philosophical implications of psi phenomena, arguing for the need to develop a single overarching theory that integrates the commonalities of existing models. He suggests as an example of such an endeavour the so-called 'evolutionary synthesis' that was developed by evolutionary biologists in the 1930s.[28]

BICS Essay (Postmortem Survival)

Nahm was a runner-up in the 2021 Bigelow essay contest on evidence for postmortem survival, with an entry that draws attention to the stigma attached to such research within the academic community. Against the assumption that consciousness has been shown to be produced by brain chemistry, he points to the lack of any widely-accepted theory of how consciousness can emerge from physical structures and also the large body of parapsychological data pointing towards independence of mind from brain. Considering the different categories, he concludes that reincarnation cases involving small children provide the most compelling evidence.[29] Responding to a critique by NDE skeptic Keith Augustine.[30] Nahm criticizes Augustine's omission of high-level reincarnation evidence, along with what he considers to be multiple misstatements and misattributions.[31]

Critique of Psi Theory

Nahm has critiqued a model of psi proposed by physicists Edwin May and Sonali Marwaha,[32] which posits that precognition is the only form of psi, all other psi 'phenomena' being derivative of it (for instance, a subject who is acting as telepathic receiver in an experiment is actually precognizing the future target picture rather than using telepathy in the present moment). Nahm draws attention to phenomena that appear to resist this interpretation, notably apparitions of a deceased person reported by multiple witnesses and cases of putative reincarnation in children. He also highlights problems the theory runs into when explaining the specificity, timing and emotional salience of regular precognition experiences.[33]

Biology and Vitalism

In 2007, Nahm published a book on unsolved riddles of evolution and their relation to parapsychological phenomena,[34] He has continued to write on matters related to vitalism, which holds that phenomena of life and consciousness cannot be attributed solely to physical and chemical processes governing the behaviour of inanimate matter. With co-authors, he published a monograph on Driesch, a German biologist philosopher who was one of the most prominent proponents of the vitalist notion of biology and who also made influential contributions to parapsychology.[35] He has also written about the Austrian biologist Paul Kammerer, arguing that his claims to have found experimental proofs of Lamarckism, which aroused considerable controversy, have been grossly misrepresented.[36]

Plagiarism Exposure

In September 2021, Nahm published a paper revealing massive and longstanding plagiarism and data misrepresentation on the part of Argentinian parapsychologist

Alejandro Parra. Parra had been suspected of plagiarism and urged to cease and desist by colleagues as far back as 1991, but it was not until Nahm's carefully and extensively researched paper was published that his dishonesty was fully exposed, dating back even to his PhD dissertation. Contacted privately by Nahm prior to publication, Parra offered various excuses and even blamed his students for including stolen texts published under his own name, but continued to promote his books. Nahm concluded that none of Parra's work is to be trusted unless very carefully checked.[37]

Parapsychologist Etzel Cardeña, in a commentary in the same journal issue as Nahm's paper, pointed out how damaging Parra's fraud was in a field upon which sceptics frequently pounce with accusations of fraud. Consequences for Parra have been severe: the BIAL Foundation cancelled a grant to Parra, the Parapsychological Association, of which he had been president and board member, expelled him, his employer the Universidad Abierta Interamericana fired him from all positions, and the publication of at least some of his future books was cancelled.[38]

Nahm earlier discovered another plagiarism case during his researches of unusual brain-related findings. He noted that a Brazilian team of physicians, while reporting findings of a new hydrocephalus case in a mainstream medical journal, used previously published brain scans of a man with severe hydrocephalus that were freely available in the internet.[39]

Select Parapsychological Works by Topic

Nahm has published four German-language books and numerous articles in German and English about the above topics and others in psychical research. A complete list of his works may be found on his website here.

Books

Evolution und Parapsychologie [Evolution and Parapsychology] (2007). Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand.

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Papers and Chapters

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Endnotes

Footnotes

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33.^ Nahm (2019d), 39.
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35.^ Nahm (2021), 30.
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37.^ Nahm (2021).
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