

# Consciousness Across Cultures

## A Catalog of Non-Ordinary Human Experience

**Project:** [Return to Consciousness](#)

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**Authorship Note:** Co-authored with AI as a disciplined thinking instrument—not a replacement for judgment. Prioritizes epistemic integrity and truth-seeking as a moral responsibility.

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### Abstract

This essay presents a systematic catalog of consciousness-related phenomena reported across cultures, historical periods, and social contexts — phenomena that do not fit cleanly within reductive materialist models and that mainstream inquiry has largely excluded from serious consideration. The catalog documents and organizes recurring classes of human experience that have been taken seriously by philosophical, spiritual, medical, and cultural traditions throughout history. By making visible the breadth, structural coherence, and cross-cultural independence of these reports, it establishes that the evidential landscape relevant to consciousness is far larger than dominant frameworks acknowledge. The essay does not argue for any particular metaphysical conclusion. But it does argue that the accumulated pattern of exclusion is epistemically consequential — that what has been systematically ignored constitutes explanatory territory any adequate framework must address, not mere curiosity to be set aside.

**Keywords:** non-ordinary experiences · cross-cultural phenomenology · anomalous cognition · transformative states · evidential scope · consciousness studies · epistemic exclusion

### Methodological Preface

#### Purpose and Scope

This catalog documents recurring classes of human experience that dominant scientific and philosophical frameworks have excluded from serious consideration. Its function is prior to explanation: establishing what must be explained before asking how.

Cataloging is not neutral. When an evidential landscape this broad — death-related experiences, anomalous cognition, transformative states, cross-cultural convergences on the nature of consciousness itself — has been systematically excluded, making it visible is an epistemic intervention. The catalog's claim is not that any particular phenomenon proves any particular

metaphysics. It is that the accumulated breadth, structural coherence, and cross-cultural independence of these phenomena define a scope of explanatory responsibility that honest inquiry must acknowledge.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

A phenomenon is included if it meets four structural criteria:

- **Cross-cultural recurrence:** Reported independently across multiple cultures, historical periods, or social contexts.
- **Phenomenological coherence:** Recognizable structural features persist across reports, despite variation in cultural framing.
- **Non-ordinary status:** The experience involves content, information, or phenomenological features discontinuous with what baseline waking consciousness normally provides.
- **Significance attribution:** Treated as ontologically or existentially significant by at least some traditions — religious, clinical, anthropological, or philosophical.

These criteria identify recurring patterns, not truths. Inclusion means a class of experience has been consistently reported with recognizable features. It does not mean any interpretation of that experience is correct, and cultural interpretations are documented but not endorsed.

### **What This Catalog Does and Does Not Do**

This catalog maps scope. It does not weigh evidence, tier cases by reliability, or adjudicate between explanatory frameworks. Those tasks belong to the companion essay *Anomalous Phenomena and Consciousness*, which selects representative cases from the scope established here, evaluates their evidential strength, and tests how well physicalist, dualist, and idealist frameworks account for them. The division is deliberate: CAC establishes *what must be explained*; APC evaluates *how well current frameworks explain it*.

This catalog also differs from *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly et al., 2007) and *Beyond Physicalism* (Kelly et al., 2015), which develop an alternative model of the brain-consciousness relationship — one in which the brain filters or constrains consciousness rather than producing it — with far greater evidential depth than is possible here. Those works argue against production models of consciousness. This catalog does something different: it establishes the full scope of what must be explained, so that evidential analysis can proceed with an honest sense of the terrain.

### **The Relationship Between Description and Explanation**

Description is methodologically prior to explanation. Before explaining a phenomenon, we must recognize it as requiring explanation. Premature dismissal forecloses inquiry as effectively as premature acceptance.

Ball lightning illustrates the principle. For centuries, reports of luminous spheres during thunderstorms were dismissed as folklore — not because they had been investigated and explained, but because they seemed anomalous relative to prevailing models. Only when researchers began cataloging reports did ball lightning become an accepted object of study. Explanation came after recognition.

This catalog does not claim all included phenomena will follow a similar trajectory. Many may be explained within conventional frameworks. The principle is simpler: you cannot explain

what you refuse to recognize. Systematic description creates the evidentiary base that explanation requires.

### **Shared Cognitive Architecture**

One competitor explanation for cross-cultural recurrence deserves explicit acknowledgment. Human beings share cognitive architecture — the same perceptual systems, neurochemistry under stress, grief responses, tendencies toward pattern recognition and meaning-making under uncertainty. Shared brains under shared stressors may produce convergent phenomenology without requiring cultural transmission, let alone non-physical explanation.

This is a serious hypothesis, and the catalog does not dismiss it. Many phenomena documented here may ultimately be explained along these lines. What the catalog establishes is the *scope* of what such an explanation must cover — and that dismissing phenomena before engaging the explanation is not the same as having explained them.

### **Two Kinds of Phenomena**

The phenomena in this catalog divide, roughly, into two kinds with different epistemic stakes.

Some are primarily *phenomenological* — non-dual states, transformative experiences, contemplative traditions, the cross-cultural diagnosis of ordinary consciousness. These make claims about the structure and range of human experience. Cataloging them asks: *does this class of experience exist as a recognizable pattern?*

Others are primarily *evidential* — veridical NDE perception, crisis apparitions, mediumistic information, reincarnation memories verified against records. These make claims that, if accurate, would constitute evidence for anomalous information transfer or survival. Cataloging them asks a further question: *does this class of experience contain information that could not have been acquired by normal means?*

The catalog treats both kinds as warranting recognition, but establishing that a phenomenological pattern exists does not establish that it contains anomalous information. Where evidential claims arise, the catalog notes them and their contested status rather than adjudicating their strength.

### **Asymmetric Standards**

One asymmetry is worth naming. When a neuroscientist describes a near-death experience as a “dying brain hallucination,” this is routinely treated as neutral methodology. It is not — it is an ontological claim that the experience has no referent beyond neural activity, presented as description. When this catalog documents the same experience as a recurring, structurally coherent class of human report, it makes a weaker claim: the phenomenon exists and warrants investigation. Yet the catalog is more likely to be accused of metaphysical overreach than the neuroscientist is. This asymmetry, explored in the companion essay [\*Asymmetric Methodological Restraint\*](#), is one mechanism by which an evidential landscape this large remains invisible.

# I. Death-Related and Peri-Mortem Phenomena

## Near-Death Experiences

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are reported in approximately 10-20% of cardiac arrest survivors and occur across ages, cultures, and religious backgrounds. Research by Pim van Lommel, Sam Parnia, Bruce Greyson, and others has documented their clinical prevalence and phenomenological features with increasing rigor.

### Common structural features include:

- Ineffability—the sense that language cannot capture the experience
- A feeling of peace, painlessness, or positive affect, often described as more real than ordinary waking consciousness
- Out-of-body perception, sometimes including claimed accurate perception of resuscitation procedures or environmental details
- Movement through darkness or a tunnel toward light
- Encounter with deceased relatives, religious figures, or unidentified “beings of light”
- Life review—rapid, often panoramic recollection of significant life events, sometimes experienced from multiple perspectives including those of people affected by one’s actions
- Encounter with a boundary or “point of no return,” beyond which the experiencer cannot go and still return to life
- Reluctant return, often described as being “sent back” or told it is “not yet time”
- Lasting transformative effects, including reduced fear of death, increased altruism, and reordered life priorities

### Contested phenomena within NDEs:

Certain elements reported in NDEs have attracted particular research attention because of their potential evidential implications:

*Veridical perception during clinical death.* A subset of NDE reports include claimed accurate perception of events or details that occurred while the patient was reportedly unconscious—sometimes in different rooms or at distances from the body. The AWARE studies (Parnia et al.) have attempted to test such claims systematically using hidden visual targets, though results to date remain inconclusive. Individual case reports, such as the frequently cited “Maria’s shoe” case and the Pam Reynolds case, continue to be debated regarding their evidential value — with skeptics raising questions about the timing of experiences relative to unconsciousness, retrospective reconstruction, and the difficulty of establishing the precise moment of perception.

*Encounters with deceased persons unknown to the experiencer.* Some NDE reports include encounters with individuals the experiencer reportedly did not know were dead, or with relatives who died before the experiencer was born. Such cases, if accurately documented, would present challenges for purely expectation-based explanations — though establishing that no normal information channel existed requires careful investigation of each case.

### Explanatory landscape:

Physiological hypotheses include hypoxia, hypercarbia, REM intrusion, temporal lobe dysfunction, and endogenous release of DMT or endorphins. Psychological hypotheses invoke expectation, depersonalization, or reconstructive memory. Critics of purely reductive explanations note that some NDEs are reported under conditions (cardiac arrest, flat EEG) where complex, coherent experience is difficult to account for on standard production models — though skeptics

tics counter that the precise timing of experiences relative to cardiac arrest is rarely established, and that residual or returning brain activity cannot be ruled out in most cases.

The catalog does not adjudicate between these positions. It notes that NDEs constitute a cross-culturally recurrent class of experience with consistent structural features, reported with particular intensity and coherence precisely when the brain is most compromised. That last observation — heightened experiential richness under degraded neural conditions — warrants attention regardless of how it is ultimately explained.

### **Terminal Lucidity**

Terminal lucidity refers to unexpected episodes of mental clarity, energy, and communicative ability shortly before death in patients with severe and previously irreversible neurological conditions—including advanced Alzheimer’s disease, brain tumors, strokes, and schizophrenia.

These episodes have been documented in medical literature since at least the 19th century and were systematically reviewed by Michael Nahm and colleagues. They typically occur in the final hours to days of life, sometimes after years of cognitive incapacity.

#### **Characteristic features:**

- Sudden recovery of memory, recognition, and personality
- Coherent speech and meaningful communication
- Reconnection with family members
- Awareness of impending death and desire to say goodbye
- Brief duration (minutes to hours) followed by death

#### **Theoretical significance:**

Terminal lucidity raises questions for models in which cognitive function is strictly produced by intact neural tissue. Patients who have lost the capacity for memory and recognition due to documented brain damage sometimes recover these capacities fully — albeit briefly — without any corresponding neural repair. Whether this reflects limitations in our methods for assessing damage, unexplained neural plasticity, or something about the brain-mind relationship that production models do not capture remains open. The catalog notes the phenomenon without adjudicating its interpretation.

### **Deathbed Visions**

Deathbed visions are perceptions reported by dying persons in the hours or days before death, typically involving the presence of deceased relatives or religious/spiritual figures.

Large-scale studies by Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson in the 1970s surveyed thousands of deathbed observations by physicians and nurses across the United States and India. Despite vast cultural differences, structural features showed remarkable consistency.

#### **Common features:**

- Apparitional presence of deceased relatives, often those the dying person had not been thinking about
- “Transition” or “escort” function—the figures appear to guide or welcome the dying person
- Positive affect—peace, joy, or willing surrender to death

- Visions occurring in patients who are not medicated, febrile, or hallucinatory from other causes
- Independence from prior expectations or religious beliefs

### **Cross-cultural consistency:**

Osis and Haraldsson found that while the identity of figures varied with cultural context (deceased relatives vs. religious figures), the *structure* of the experience—visual perception of a welcoming presence arriving to assist transition—remained stable across cultures.

### **Shared Death Experiences**

Shared death experiences (SDEs) occur when persons physically present with or emotionally connected to a dying individual report experiencing elements typically associated with the dying person's transition—despite being healthy themselves.

Documented by Raymond Moody and others, these experiences include:

- Perception of the dying person's consciousness leaving the body
- Shared out-of-body experience or perception of the room from an elevated vantage point
- Perception of light, tunnel, or otherworldly environment
- Encounter with deceased relatives of the dying person (not the experiencer's own deceased)
- Life review—sometimes reported as witnessing the dying person's life review from outside

SDEs are phenomenologically notable because they are reported by healthy individuals who are not themselves near death, under hypoxia, or experiencing physiological compromise. If accurately reported, they would complicate explanations that attribute NDE-like experiences purely to dying-brain physiology — though the evidential base remains largely anecdotal, and the emotional intensity of being present at a death may itself produce altered states susceptible to suggestion and retrospective interpretation.

## **II. Apparitional and Post-Mortem Encounter Phenomena**

### **Crisis Apparitions**

Crisis apparitions involve the perception of a person—typically a relative or close friend—at or near the time of their death or severe crisis, by someone at a distance who has no normal means of knowing about the event.

The Census of Hallucinations conducted by the Society for Psychical Research (1894) documented hundreds of such cases. Edmund Gurney's *Phantasms of the Living* (1886) remains a foundational compilation. More recent surveys have confirmed that such experiences continue to be reported at roughly consistent rates.

### **Typical features:**

- Visual, auditory, or tactile perception of the person, often with unusual vividness
- The percipient has no prior knowledge of the crisis
- The timing corresponds closely with the actual death or crisis event
- The experience is often brief and conveys a sense of farewell or urgent communication

### **Evidential considerations:**

Cases are considered evidentially strongest when the percipient documented the experience (in writing, to witnesses, or in a diary) before learning of the death through normal channels. The Census of Hallucinations concluded that such experiences occurred at rates above what chance coincidence would predict, though the methodology of late 19th-century survey research — including self-selection of respondents, retrospective reporting, and the difficulty of establishing accurate base rates for both hallucinations and deaths — has been questioned by later commentators.

### **Bereavement Apparitions**

Bereavement apparitions are perceptions of deceased individuals reported by the bereaved, typically occurring in the weeks, months, or years following death.

Studies suggest these experiences are reported by 30-60% of widows and widowers. They are associated with positive adjustment and reduced grief rather than pathology.

### **Common features:**

- Sense of presence without visual perception
- Visual or auditory perception of the deceased
- Tactile sensations (touch, embrace)
- Olfactory perceptions (scent associated with the deceased)
- Dreams experienced as qualitatively different from ordinary dreams—more vivid, coherent, and with a sense of genuine contact

### **Clinical significance:**

Contemporary grief research increasingly treats bereavement apparitions as normal aspects of the grief process rather than as pathological hallucinations. The Continuing Bonds framework (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman) argues that ongoing felt connection with the deceased supports healthy adaptation.

Whether such experiences reflect genuine post-mortem contact, psychological coping mechanisms, or some combination remains open. The catalog notes their prevalence, phenomenological consistency, and positive psychological correlates.

### **Recurrent Location-Bound Phenomena**

“Haunting” experiences involve repeated perceptions of anomalous phenomena associated with specific locations—typically buildings—rather than with specific percipients.

### **Characteristic features:**

- Multiple independent witnesses over extended periods
- Perceptions clustered in specific areas of the location
- Apparitional figures, sounds, or physical disturbances
- In some cases, historical research reveals correspondence between perceived figures and former inhabitants

### **Phenomenological range:**

Location-bound phenomena range from subtle (unexplained sounds, feelings of presence, cold spots) to dramatic (apparitional figures, physical movement of objects). The former are far more commonly reported than the latter.

### **Explanatory approaches:**

Skeptical explanations invoke suggestion, misperception, infrasound, electromagnetic anomalies, carbon monoxide exposure, and social reinforcement. Anomalist researchers note cases where these factors appear insufficient to account for the consistency and specificity of reports.

### **Poltergeist Phenomena**

Poltergeist cases involve reported physical disturbances — movement of objects, unexplained sounds, electrical anomalies — typically centered on a particular individual (often an adolescent under psychological stress) rather than a location. The focal-person pattern is consistent across independent reports: disturbances occur in their presence, are time-limited, and cease when the person is removed or psychological issues are addressed.

However, this domain shares the evidential problems of physical mediumship: strong incentives for deception, conditions hostile to controlled observation, and a history of exposed fraud. Conventional explanations — conscious or unconscious trickery, misattribution, suggestion — currently dominate. The catalog includes poltergeist phenomena because they constitute a historically recurrent class of report, not because they represent strong evidence for anomalous physical effects.

## **III. Mediumship and Communication Phenomena**

### **Mental Mediumship**

Mental mediumship involves the claimed reception and transmission of information from deceased individuals through a living intermediary. This practice has been documented across virtually all cultures with records of religious or spiritual activity.

### **Structural features:**

- The medium enters an altered state (trance, light dissociation, or receptive attention)
- Information is received and communicated—verbally, in writing, or through impressions
- The information purportedly derives from deceased individuals, often identified by name and with specific verifiable details

### **Research history:**

Early psychical research (1880s-1930s) subjected mediums to extensive controlled testing. Cases such as Leonora Piper, Gladys Osborne Leonard, and Eileen Garrett produced large bodies of transcripts analyzed for evidential content. Cross-correspondences—where multiple mediums independently produced fragmentary messages that only made sense when combined—have been cited as methodological challenges to simple fraud or telepathy explanations, though skeptics argue that the patterns may reflect selective interpretation of ambiguous material, unconscious coordination, or the investigators' own pattern-imposing tendencies.

Contemporary research by Gary Schwartz and Julie Beischel has employed blinded protocols to test evidential mediumship under controlled conditions. Proponents cite statistically significant results; critics raise concerns about scoring methodology, rater bias, the difficulty of achieving

true blinding with subjective content, and the degree to which “cold reading” strategies can produce apparently specific information. The results remain scientifically contested.

### **Physical Mediumship**

Physical mediumship — claimed materializations, object movement, and “ectoplasm” production — flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The history of this domain is largely one of exposed fraud; conventional explanations dominate. The catalog includes it for historical completeness: physical mediumship was a major cultural phenomenon that shaped both popular spiritualism and the early development of psychical research. Its inclusion reflects historical recurrence, not evidential parity with other domains in this catalog.

### **Psychography and Automatic Writing**

Psychography (automatic writing) involves written production occurring without the writer’s conscious control—often at high speed, in scripts or languages unknown to the writer, or with content the writer claims not to have originated.

#### **Documented cases:**

The case of Patience Worth (produced through Pearl Curran, 1913-1937) generated millions of words of poetry, prose, and drama in a voice and vocabulary distinct from Curran’s own, including archaic English forms. The Brazilian medium Chico Xavier produced over 400 books through automatic writing, including materials in technical domains (medicine, law) outside his education, sometimes in languages he did not speak.

#### **Interpretive range:**

Psychological explanations invoke dissociation, cryptomnesia, and access to subliminal knowledge. Anomalist interpretations posit genuine external agency. The catalog notes the phenomenon without adjudicating between positions.

### **Channeling**

Channeling is a broader category encompassing claimed communication with discarnate entities—not necessarily deceased humans, but also guides, higher selves, or non-human intelligences.

#### **Structural features:**

- Altered state of consciousness in the channeler
- Shift in voice, manner, vocabulary, or personality
- Content presented as deriving from an external source
- Teachings often of spiritual, philosophical, or cosmological nature

#### **Examples in modern context:**

The Seth material (Jane Roberts), *A Course in Miracles* (Helen Schucman), and the Ra material (Carla Rueckert) represent influential examples from the 20th century. Earlier, the Spiritualist movement produced extensive channeled literature.

#### **Phenomenological significance:**

Whatever the ultimate source, channeled materials consistently exhibit features distinguishing them from the channeler's ordinary personality, knowledge, and style. The *phenomenology* is consistent; the *interpretation* remains contested.

## **IV. Reincarnation and Memory Phenomena**

### **Spontaneous Past-Life Memories in Children**

The systematic investigation of children who spontaneously report memories of previous lives was pioneered by Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia and continues under Jim Tucker and colleagues.

#### **Research methodology:**

Researchers document children's statements about previous lives *before* verification attempts. They then investigate whether claimed memories correspond to the life of a deceased individual the child could not have known about through normal means. Cases are evaluated for the specificity, accuracy, and verifiability of claims.

#### **Characteristic features:**

- Early onset (typically ages 2-5)
- Spontaneous, unsolicited statements
- Specific, verifiable details about the deceased person's life, death, family, and location
- Emotional and behavioral correspondences (phobias related to mode of death, skills or interests matching the previous personality)
- Gradual fading of memories as the child ages

#### **Strong cases:**

Over 2,500 cases have been documented. Cases classified as "strong" by investigators involve multiple verified details, minimal apparent opportunity for normal information acquisition, and sometimes identification of the previous personality from among large populations. Cases from cultures without strong reincarnation beliefs are considered particularly interesting because cultural expectation is less likely to explain the initiation of reports — though critics note that even in such cultures, children may be exposed to reincarnation concepts, and that investigator and parental expectancy effects, selective memory, and post-hoc verification can inflate apparent accuracy.

### **Birthmarks and Birth Defects**

A subset of reincarnation cases involves birthmarks or birth defects that correspond to wounds, injuries, or distinctive marks on the body of the claimed previous personality.

Stevenson documented over 200 such cases in *Reincarnation and Biology* (1997). Correspondences include:

- Birthmarks matching bullet entry/exit wounds (verified against medical or autopsy records)
- Limb defects matching amputations
- Multiple birthmarks matching multiple wounds

#### **Methodological significance:**

Physical correspondences offer a different evidential category than verbal reports. A birthmark exists as physical fact independent of testimony, and the correspondence between birthmark location and documented wound location (in cases where autopsy or medical records exist) is not subject to the memory distortions or suggestion that complicate verbal accounts. However, birthmarks are common, the human body has a limited number of probable wound locations, and retrospective matching between marks and records may be subject to confirmation bias. The evidential weight of individual cases depends heavily on the specificity of correspondence and the quality of independent documentation.

## **V. Shamanic, Trance, and Ritual Phenomena**

### **Soul Journeying**

Cross-cultural shamanic traditions describe the capacity of the shaman's consciousness to travel beyond the body—into otherworldly realms, to distant locations, or into the bodies of patients—to gather information, retrieve lost soul parts, or interact with spiritual beings.

#### **Structural features across traditions:**

- Entry into altered state through drumming, chanting, fasting, or plant medicines
- Experience of leaving the body
- Travel through structured otherworldly geographies (lower world, upper world, middle world)
- Encounter with animal spirits, ancestors, or teacher beings
- Return with information, healing, or guidance

#### **Cross-cultural consistency:**

Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951) documented the structural similarities of shamanic practice across Siberia, the Americas, Australia, and elsewhere. Michael Harner's later work established that individuals from non-shamanic cultures can readily access similar experiences using traditional techniques.

### **Possession and Incorporation**

Possession states involve the experience (and external observation) of an individual's normal personality being temporarily displaced or overlaid by another identity—whether a spirit, deity, ancestor, or discarnate entity.

#### **Cross-cultural prevalence:**

Possession phenomena appear in virtually every documented culture: Afro-Brazilian traditions (Candomblé, Umbanda), Vodou, Zar cults in North Africa and the Middle East, Spiritualist practice, Pentecostal Christianity, and traditional practices across Asia and the Pacific.

#### **Phenomenological features:**

- Altered voice, posture, facial expression, and behavior
- Display of knowledge, skills, or personality traits not characteristic of the host
- Amnesia for the possession period (in some traditions)
- Recognition by community members of the possessing entity based on consistent characteristics

**Interpretive range:**

Explanations range from dissociative psychological mechanisms to genuine external agency. The catalog notes that possession states show consistent structural features across cultures and that possessed individuals sometimes display knowledge or capacities exceeding their normal repertoire.

**Collective and Shared Visionary Experience**

Some traditions cultivate shared visionary experiences in which multiple participants report perceiving the same non-ordinary content.

**Examples:**

- Collective visions during Santo Daime and União do Vegetal ceremonies (ayahuasca traditions)
- Shared apparitional experiences at religious sites (e.g., Marian apparitions witnessed by multiple individuals)
- Collective experiences in intensive meditation retreats
- Group séances where multiple participants report consistent perceptions

**Phenomenological significance:**

The occurrence of apparently shared non-ordinary content—where independent reports show structural correspondence—complicates purely individual-psychological explanations. Whether such sharing is attributed to telepathy, collective unconscious access, or social suggestion, it constitutes a phenomenon requiring explanation.

**Representative Perception in Systemic Constellations**

Systemic or Family Constellations, developed by Bert Hellinger in the 1990s and now practiced internationally across therapeutic, organizational, and educational contexts, involve a distinctive phenomenon: individuals selected to “represent” members of another person’s family or relational system spontaneously report emotions, physical sensations, spatial impulses, and relational dynamics that correspond to the actual circumstances of the people they represent—often including information unknown to anyone present.

**The practice:**

In a typical constellation, a facilitator invites participants—who may be strangers to the client—to stand in spatial positions representing members of the client’s family system. Without briefing or instruction beyond their role label (“your mother,” “your father’s brother”), representatives begin reporting experiences:

- Somatic sensations (heaviness, pain, warmth, nausea) localized in specific body regions
- Emotional states (grief, rage, longing, guilt) that feel foreign to the representative’s own psychology
- Spatial impulses (being drawn toward or repelled from other representatives)
- Relational knowledge (sensing who in the configuration is absent, excluded, or dead)

These reports frequently correspond — sometimes with apparent specificity — to biographical facts about the represented persons that the representative is said not to have known through

normal channels. The degree to which such correspondences exceed what social suggestion, role expectations, and generic family dynamics could produce is debated.

### **Phenomenological distinctiveness:**

Representative perception occupies a category not fully captured by other phenomena in this catalog. It differs from:

- *Possession*: Representatives retain full self-awareness and do not experience identity displacement. They typically report a dual awareness—their own identity alongside the represented person’s experience—rather than substitution.
- *Telepathy*: The information does not appear to originate from a specific sender. The represented person may be deceased, geographically distant, or unknown to anyone in the room. The content is somatic and relational rather than propositional.
- *Collective visionary experience*: No altered state is induced. Representatives operate in ordinary waking consciousness, in well-lit rooms, without ritual, substances, or trance techniques.

This last point is particularly notable. Whatever mechanism underlies representative perception, it operates under conditions that exclude the usual explanatory recourse to neurochemical alteration, sensory deprivation, or ritual suggestion.

### **Cross-cultural parallels:**

While Hellinger’s formalization is modern and European, structural parallels exist in other traditions. Indigenous practices across Africa, South America, and Oceania include rituals in which community members embody ancestors or relational roles to surface hidden dynamics within a family or clan. The Zulu concept of *ukubuyisa* (bringing back the dead) and various ancestral healing practices in West African traditions involve representatives or mediums receiving relational information through embodied experience. These practices share the structural feature of representative perception—access to relational knowledge through somatic participation rather than cognitive inquiry.

### **Interpretive range:**

Explanations include social suggestion and role-playing effects, unconscious micro-cueing from the client, projection of archetypal family dynamics, morphic resonance (Sheldrake), and access to a relational or collective field of information. Social suggestion and micro-cueing can account for some features—particularly in cases where the client is present and the family dynamics are broadly typical. They account less well for cases involving specific biographical details unknown to the client, accurate representation of deceased persons, or consistent results in “blind” constellations where the client is absent or representatives are not told whom they represent.

The catalog notes representative perception as a documented, cross-culturally recurrent class of experience with consistent structural features. Its occurrence in ordinary waking consciousness, without altered states or ritual induction, makes it a distinctive entry in the phenomenological record.

## **VI. Extraordinary Cognitive and Perceptual Phenomena**

### **Out-of-Body Experiences**

Out-of-body experiences (OBEs) involve the perception of being located outside one's physical body, often with the capacity to perceive the body and environment from an external vantage point.

#### **Contexts of occurrence:**

- Spontaneously, during relaxation, sleep onset, or stress
- During near-death experiences
- Under anesthesia or during medical procedures
- Through deliberate practice (e.g., Robert Monroe's methods)
- During meditation or trance states
- Under the influence of classic psychedelics (e.g., psilocybin, DMT, LSD), where reports of disembodiment, externalized perspective, or identification with awareness rather than the physical body are well documented in both clinical and ethnographic contexts

#### **Phenomenological features:**

- Perception of floating above or beside the body
- Vision of one's own physical body from outside
- Capacity for movement and perception independent of body
- Varying degrees of control and clarity

#### **Veridical OBEs:**

A subset of OBE reports include claimed accurate perception of events or details at locations where the physical body was not present. Such cases, if well-documented, would present challenges for explanations that treat OBEs as purely hallucinatory. The evidential status of these claims remains contested. Some laboratory studies (e.g., Charles Tart's work with "Miss Z") have provided suggestive but not definitive evidence, and critics note the difficulty of ruling out sensory leakage, prior knowledge, and retrospective embellishment in spontaneous cases.

### **Remote Viewing and Anomalous Cognition**

Remote viewing refers to the claimed capacity to perceive information about distant or hidden targets through non-sensory means.

#### **Research history:**

The Stanford Research Institute (SRI) and later Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) conducted research on remote viewing from the 1970s through the 1990s, partially funded by U.S. intelligence agencies (Project Stargate). Researchers Russell Targ, Hal Puthoff, and later Edwin May conducted controlled experiments using double-blind protocols.

#### **Research findings:**

A 1995 review commissioned by the CIA (the AIR report) found that some remote viewing experiments produced statistically significant results, though the reviewers disagreed about their interpretation. Jessica Utts concluded the statistical evidence was sufficient to establish an anomalous effect; Ray Hyman acknowledged the statistical departures from chance but argued that methodological issues had not been adequately resolved. The meta-analytic effect size was

small and consistent across studies, but critics note that small, persistent effects are precisely what publication bias, analytic flexibility, and subtle methodological flaws can produce.

**Phenomenological features:**

- Mental impressions—visual, spatial, sensory—of target locations or objects
- Better performance with targets having strong sensory or emotional characteristics
- No apparent decay with distance or shielding
- Results inconsistent with chance but not reliable enough for practical prediction

**Telepathic Experiences**

Telepathic experiences involve the apparent transfer of information between minds without conventional sensory channels.

**Categories:**

- Spontaneous telepathy—impressions, images, or feelings corresponding to events in another person’s experience, especially during crises or emotional intensity
- Experimental telepathy—controlled laboratory studies using sender-receiver paradigms, Ganzfeld protocols, or dream telepathy methods

**Research status:**

Meta-analyses of Ganzfeld telepathy experiments (Bem & Honorton, 1994; Storm, Tressoldi, & Di Risio, 2010) have reported small but statistically significant effect sizes. Critics raise substantive methodological concerns — including file-drawer effects (selective publication of positive results), inadequate randomization, sensory leakage, and the difficulty of fully blinding sender-receiver paradigms. Proponents counter that effects have been consistent across laboratories and experimenters, and that methodological improvements have not eliminated the signal. The debate remains unresolved, with neither side able to deliver a decisive demonstration or a decisive refutation.

**Phenomenological features:**

Spontaneous telepathic experiences typically involve sudden intrusions of content—images, emotions, knowledge—that later proves to correspond with another person’s experience. The *experience* is widely reported; its *explanation* remains contested.

## **VII. Transformative and Mystical States**

### **Unitive and Non-Dual Experience**

Non-dual or unitive experiences involve the dissolution of the ordinary subject-object structure of consciousness—the sense of being a separate self perceiving an external world. In such states, experiencers report:

- The collapse of the distinction between observer and observed
- Awareness without an experiencer, or awareness as its own object
- Identification with or dissolution into a larger whole—consciousness itself, the divine, the cosmos
- Profound peace, love, or insight
- Ineffability—the sense that language cannot capture the experience

### **Cross-cultural recurrence:**

Non-dual states are described with remarkable consistency across contemplative traditions:

- Advaita Vedānta: recognition of Atman (individual self) as Brahman (universal consciousness)
- Buddhism: experiences of śūnyatā (emptiness) and non-dual awareness
- Christian mysticism: theosis, henosis, or union with God (Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross)
- Sufism: fanā (annihilation of self) and baqā (subsistence in God)
- Taoism: merging with the Tao

The structural convergence across traditions with distinct doctrinal frameworks is striking. It may reflect something prior to interpretation — a feature of consciousness itself. Or it may reflect shared cognitive architecture: similar brains under similar contemplative conditions producing similar experiences, which are then interpreted through local frameworks. The catalog notes the convergence without adjudicating between these possibilities.

### **Awakening and Enlightenment**

Many contemplative traditions describe the possibility of stable, lasting transformation of consciousness—variously called enlightenment, liberation, awakening, or self-realization.

#### **Common features:**

- Permanent shift in the sense of self (from identified to non-identified, from contracted to expanded)
- Reduced or absent psychological suffering despite presence of physical pain
- Spontaneous compassion and ethical behavior
- Perception of phenomena as intrinsically complete or perfect
- Continued functional engagement with ordinary life

#### **Phenomenological markers:**

Contemporary research on “persistent non-symbolic experience” (Jeffery Martin) and awakened teachers across traditions documents structural commonalities, including: absence of internal narrator, reduced mental chatter, non-identification with thoughts and emotions, and shifts in perception of time and self-continuity.

### **Conversion and Calling Experiences**

Some experiences involve sudden, life-reorienting transformation—what William James called “conversion” and what religious traditions often describe as a “call.”

#### **Structural features:**

- Sudden onset, often unexpected
- Profound sense of meaning, presence, or contact with the sacred
- Lasting personality and value changes
- Sense of having been “chosen,” assigned a task, or shown ultimate truth
- Resistance to reinterpretation as pathology or self-deception

#### **Classic examples:**

Paul's Damascus Road experience, Augustine's garden conversion, Pascal's "night of fire," and countless less famous instances share structural features across traditions and historical periods.

## **VIII. Symbolic, Meaning-Mediated, and Acausal Phenomena**

### **Synchronicity**

Synchronicity, as defined by Carl Jung, refers to meaningful coincidences—events that are causally unrelated yet connected by meaning in ways that defy probabilistic explanation.

#### **Structural features:**

- Two or more events without causal connection
- Meaningful relationship perceived by the experiencer
- Temporal coincidence
- Emotional impact or numinous quality
- Often occurring during periods of psychological intensity or transition

#### **Phenomenological character:**

Synchronistic experiences involve the perception that the external world has *responded* to inner psychological states—as if meaning were woven into the structure of events rather than imposed by the mind. Whether this reflects a genuine feature of reality, a cognitive bias (apophenia), or something else is precisely what divides interpretive frameworks.

#### **Theoretical significance:**

Jung developed the concept in collaboration with physicist Wolfgang Pauli, who saw connections between synchronicity and the acausal ordering principles suggested by quantum mechanics. Whether synchronicity reflects a genuine feature of reality or a cognitive tendency to impose meaning on coincidence remains open.

### **Archetypal Patterns in Dreams and Visions**

Recurring symbolic patterns appear in dreams, visions, and spontaneous imagery across cultures and individuals—figures and scenarios that Jung called archetypes of the collective unconscious.

#### **Common archetypes:**

- The shadow (the rejected or unknown self)
- The anima/animus (contrasexual inner figures)
- The wise old man or woman
- The divine child
- The hero's journey
- Mandalas and quaternity symbols
- Death and rebirth

#### **Cross-cultural distribution:**

These patterns appear with recognizable consistency across cultures without historical contact—in mythology, dreams, psychotic productions, and spontaneous imagery during altered states. This distribution suggests either:

- Universal neural/cognitive structures generating similar patterns
- Access to a shared psychic substrate
- Both of the above in combination

### **Individuation Crises and Symbolic Emergency**

The individuation process—Jung’s term for the progressive integration of unconscious content into consciousness—sometimes manifests as crisis: intense, involuntary symbolic experiences that can resemble psychopathology but carry developmental significance.

#### **Features distinguishing individuation crisis from psychotic breakdown:**

- Preserved capacity for reality testing
- Retained observing ego
- Symbolic content coherent with life themes and developmental trajectory
- Integration possible with appropriate support
- Transformative outcome

The companion essay *Consciousness Structure* develops this distinction in clinical detail. Here, the catalog notes that symbolic crises occur as a documented class of experience and require differentiation from pathology.

### **Alchemical Symbolism as Phenomenological System**

Western alchemy, often dismissed as primitive chemistry, also functioned as a symbolic map of psychological and spiritual transformation. Jung’s researches documented that:

- Alchemical imagery recurs spontaneously in modern individuals with no exposure to alchemical texts
- The stages of alchemical transformation (nigredo, albedo, citrinitas, rubedo) correspond to phases of psychological integration
- The symbolism of conjunction (sacred marriage), dissolution, and the philosopher’s stone appears cross-culturally

#### **Significance:**

Whether alchemy “works” as material transformation is not the relevant question here. The phenomenological question is why a consistent symbolic vocabulary emerged across cultures for describing inner transformation—and why this vocabulary continues to appear in spontaneous imagery.

## **IX. Traditions of Symbolic Transformation**

### **Esoteric Symbolic Maps**

Multiple traditions have developed detailed symbolic maps of consciousness transformation, treated as experiential guides rather than literal cosmologies:

- The Kabbalistic Tree of Life (sefirot as states or stations of consciousness)
- The chakra systems of Tantra (subtle centers corresponding to psychological and spiritual development)
- The stages of the bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism
- The Sufi stations (maqāmāt) and states (aḥwāl)

- Christian mysticism’s purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways

### **Cross-traditional structural correspondences:**

Despite doctrinal differences, these maps show structural correspondences:

- A sequence of stages from ordinary consciousness to realization
- The necessity of purification or ego-dissolution
- Intermediate states involving insight, energy, and visionary experience
- Final stages characterized by non-dual awareness and compassionate action

### **Ritual Technologies of Transformation**

Across cultures, specific practices are used to induce transformation of consciousness:

- Fasting and asceticism
- Rhythmic sound (drumming, chanting, singing)
- Breath manipulation (pranayama, holotropic breathwork)
- Movement and dance (whirling, ecstatic dance)
- Plant sacraments (ayahuasca, peyote, psilocybin, iboga)
- Meditation and contemplation
- Sensory deprivation

### **Phenomenological consistency:**

Despite vast cultural differences in framing, these technologies produce overlapping classes of experience—suggesting that consciousness has structured response patterns to specific interventions, patterns that transcend cultural construction.

## **X. Boundary Phenomena Between Pathology and Insight**

### **Visionary Experience Without Functional Impairment**

Not all non-ordinary experience constitutes pathology. Some individuals report ongoing visionary, auditory, or perceptual experiences that:

- Do not impair function
- Are not distressing
- Provide useful information or guidance
- Do not meet criteria for psychotic disorders
- May be associated with enhanced creativity or insight

The Hearing Voices Network and research on non-clinical voice-hearers documents that many individuals live productive lives while experiencing phenomena that would be pathologized in clinical contexts.

### **Spiritual Emergency vs. Spiritual Emergence**

Stanislav and Christina Grof coined “spiritual emergency” to describe intense experiences that resemble psychosis but carry transformative potential:

- Kundalini awakening
- Shamanic crisis

- Past-life emergence
- Psychic opening
- Peak experiences gone wrong
- Dark night of the soul

### **Distinguishing features:**

As developed in *Consciousness Structure*, the key differentiators are:

- *Integration capacity*: Can the experiencer metabolize the content?
- *Reality testing*: Is the capacity to distinguish inner and outer preserved?
- *Functional trajectory*: Does the person stabilize and integrate, or fragment further?

### **A Cross-Cultural Convergence on the Status of Ordinary Consciousness**

Across many of the traditions represented in this catalog—Buddhist, Christian mystical, Neoplatonic, Stoic, depth-psychological, psychoanalytic, and contemporary psychological—there is a strikingly consistent observation: what is commonly treated as “normal” waking consciousness is often understood, within those traditions, as constrained, distorted, fragmented, or developmentally incomplete.

This observation is not marginal. It is one of the most widely shared conclusions in reflective human traditions, even though the language, metaphors, and explanatory frameworks differ considerably.

### **Examples of this diagnostic convergence:**

- Buddhism’s identification of ignorance (*avidyā*) and craving (*tṛṣṇā*) as baseline conditions of ordinary mind
- Christian mysticism’s distinction between fallen and transformed selfhood
- Platonic accounts of life in the cave, mistaking shadows for reality
- Stoic emphasis on untrained impressions (*phantasiai*) and the need for disciplined assent
- Psychoanalytic accounts of defensive ego organization and repression
- Depth-psychological models of partial identification and alienation from the unconscious
- Contemporary psychology’s documentation of pervasive cognitive bias, affective distortion, and motivated reasoning

This convergence helps explain why many cultures treat non-ordinary experiences not as pathological deviations from a healthy baseline, but as potentially revelatory or corrective—glimpses of what lies beyond the ordinary configuration.

### **What this section does and does not claim:**

This catalog documents the convergent diagnosis without endorsing any tradition’s specific account of what lies beyond the ordinary. But when independent traditions across millennia and continents converge on the observation that baseline consciousness is itself a limited condition, the convergence warrants attention — whether it reflects shared cognitive architecture, something real about the structure of experience, or both.

The inclusion of this observation provides a natural closure to the catalog by contextualizing why non-ordinary experiences are so often treated as meaningful rather than merely anomalous. The catalog is not merely listing strange experiences; it is documenting a shared human reflection on the baseline itself.

## Conclusion

This catalog has documented ten classes of recurring human experience — death-related phenomena, apparitions, mediumship, reincarnation reports, shamanic and trance states, extraordinary perception, transformative experiences, meaning-mediated phenomena, symbolic transformation traditions, and the cross-cultural diagnosis of ordinary consciousness as itself a limited condition. Across these classes, structural features recur: cross-cultural independence, phenomenological coherence, resistance to simple categorization, and reported transformative significance.

The catalog does not prove that consciousness is fundamental, that survival is real, or that any phenomenon reflects contact with transcendent reality. What it establishes is different: **the scope of what any adequate framework must explain.**

That scope is larger than mainstream discourse acknowledges. These are not scattered anomalies but structured classes of experience with recognizable features, internal logic, and cross-cultural consistency — reported throughout recorded history, across every documented culture, under conditions ranging from spontaneous occurrence to deliberate cultivation. A class of experience reported independently across cultures without historical contact is not an artifact of any single culture’s beliefs. It is a feature of human consciousness itself, whatever that turns out to mean.

This convergence may reflect shared cognitive architecture — the same brains under the same stressors producing the same phenomenology. It may reflect something deeper about consciousness. It may reflect both. But when an explanatory framework must invoke a different mechanism for each domain — neurochemistry here, cognitive bias there, social construction elsewhere, coincidence when nothing else fits — the heterogeneity is worth noticing. The question is whether that patchwork reflects genuine diversity or papers over a pattern that a more unified account could capture.

Any framework claiming metaphysical neutrality while systematically ignoring phenomena at this scale is not practicing neutral methodology. It is practicing selective attention. The catalog names the cost of that selectivity.

What would weaken this catalog’s relevance? Evidence that the structural convergences it documents are artifacts of collection bias, that the cross-cultural independence is illusory, or that a unified conventional account successfully explains the full range without remainder. These are empirical questions, and the catalog makes them visible.

The baseline from which we measure “ordinary” and “extraordinary” may itself be part of what requires examination.

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[Return to Consciousness \(rtc\)](#) — The framework that makes sense of these phenomena

[Anomalous Phenomena and Consciousness \(apc\)](#) — Analysis of a subset of these phenomena

[Consciousness Structure \(cst\)](#) — Clinical application of phenomena cataloged here

[Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality \(mmn\)](#) — Why claims of neutrality mask unexamined physicalism

[Asymmetric Methodological Restraint \(amr\)](#) — The double standard this catalog names

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