

# book reviews

## **The kingdom of infinite space: a fantastical journey around your head**

**By Raymond Tallis. Atlantic Books, London 2009. 352 pp. £9.99**

Always cerebral, Britain's outstanding medically qualified intellectual Raymond Tallis becomes positively cephalic in his latest book as he journeys around the head. Tallis, since retirement has freed him from the burdens of the NHS and the deadening obligations of clinical academe, reaches new heights in his latest book. No one equals his intellectual range, mastery of language or sharp wit. He seems to be inventing a new genre, a dizzy cocktail of science, medicine and philosophy. As he entertains with a succession of erudite digressions on everything from earwax to the manganese content of tears, it is easy to forget that serious philosophical questions are being considered. While delighting in the intricate mechanisms of our senses, Tallis confronts and engages the reader with the timeless questions of personal identity, embodiment and the nature of consciousness.

Approaching that most familiar of objects, 'your head', Tallis quickly uses his literary talent to make us look afresh at this amazing object in a manner that would have made his intellectual hero Paul Valery feel proud. For the medical reader revisiting basic physiology and medical familiars from a different viewpoint makes an exhilarating read. While his arguments have clarity, the exuberance of the language occasionally reaches the verbal equivalent of a Max Wall silly walk – 'thimblefuls of darkness sipped in blinks' 'like a large-mandibled insect nibbling the leaves of time, a reminder of the final denudation, when warmth, joy, presence and being are pruned to nothing'. Also be prepared to have a dictionary at hand, Tallis's vocabulary is a match for anyone.

Each of the 16 chapters is an inquiry into how the functions of the head throw light on the nature of human existence, particularly the puzzling phenomenon of consciousness. While the tone is of popular science and philosophy, serious original thought builds on the philosophy of Heidegger, Sartre and Wittgenstein to arrive at new philosophical insights. Reading this book can be disturbing as it brings into question some of our basic assumptions. Sometimes Tallis is guilty of the 'Whizdom' that he accuses the American philosopher Robert Nozick, particularly in his dismissal of religious thinking, but for the most part his arguments are hard won. He reminds us that however much we may progress in our scientific understanding there are unfathomable mysteries at the core of our existence. Tallis brings a medical angle to his thought and his book will be enjoyed by anyone who reflects on life's bigger questions.

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## **The art of dying**

**By Peter Fenwick and Elizabeth Fenwick. Continuum, London 2008. 251 pp. £10.99**

*"Suddenly she looked eagerly towards part of the room, a radiant smile illuminating her whole countenance. "Oh, lovely, lovely" she said. When asked what it was that she saw, she replied, "Lovely brightness, wonderful beings". A moment later she exclaimed: "Why it's Father! Oh, he's so glad I'm coming; he is so glad. It would be perfect if only W [her husband] would come too."*

This account, by his obstetrician wife of a young woman dying in childbirth, prompted Sir William Barrett to research such occurrences for *Deathbed visions* (1926), the first book devoted to the topic. Since then scores of other examples have been recorded. When neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick and his wife Elizabeth decided to publish on their own professional interest, they received several hundred replies from the public about what they have called end-of-life experiences. These experiences form the substance of the enigmatically named *The art of dying*: do they mean a good death or the possibility that in death art eclipses science?

What the authors are considering can be divided into three categories: deathbed visions, deathbed coincidences, and near-death experiences; circumstances vary but each have features in common. Probably no more than 10–20% of people experience these phenomena, but evidence gathered by the Fenwicks from staff in nursing homes, hospices and coronary care units leaves little doubt as to their authenticity: hard-headed professionals and people who insist they are naturally sceptical accept these extraordinary events without being able to explain them. Some people are so overwhelmed that they keep the incident private, because they are 'too embarrassed to tell anyone in case they think [they] are mad'. Existing pathology, toxic confusional states, medications, cultural and religious leanings have repeatedly been ruled out as causes.

Deathbed visions are quite unexpected: a bright light often accompanies the visitor, a close relative or friend in the prime of life – 'How nice of you to come!' – and the atmosphere is warm and comforting. Pain and suffering vanish, there is no fear, and death is welcomed as a journey to a beautiful garden. Onlookers have frequently emphasised the lucidity of the dying – 'She seemed to come alive' (note the irony) – and even sufferers from years of Alzheimer's disease will regain the ability to talk rationally. Witnesses declare that the impact is such that they no longer have any fear of death.

Deathbed coincidences are, if anything, even more bizarre. They are the occasions when a close friend or relative suddenly becomes aware in dreams or on waking at night that a loved one, who they may not have seen for years or who may live miles away, is dying. They note the time and immediately fall asleep as though the message was expected. They may even forget the episode until they are contacted to say that death occurred at the very time they recorded. Human beings are not alone: stories abound of inanimate objects and birds and animals being sensitised by death. Clocks, especially for some reason grandfather clocks, stop, bells ring, electric systems fail; birds, like crows and owls, and animals, in particular cats and dogs, seem especially susceptible. A cat called