

Comment on Keith Augustine's Article

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ABSTRACT: This commentary responds to Keith Augustine's article on the hallucinatory nature of near-death experiences (NDEs). It draws attention to his misreading of an important point made in my book *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience* (Fox, 2003) regarding claims made by some NDErs to have traveled into outer space, reinforces the need for a thorough consideration of the epistemological complexities involved in asserting or denying a "common core" to NDEs, and ends by supporting the point made by Augustine that there is a pressing need for more crosscultural studies of the "core" phenomenon itself.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences; cultural variation; epistemology.

Keith Augustine has done a fine job of drawing together a large amount of existing material in pursuit of his thesis that near-death experiences (NDEs) are essentially hallucinatory in nature. I am delighted that he has made use of extracts from my own work to further his case and with one possible exception – a point at which he appears to misunderstand what I was trying to argue – he has reproduced what I wrote fairly and accurately.

I offer a few points in response. First, I'd like to clear up his misunderstanding of the conclusions I drew in my book about the number of persons within the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) Study who talked about the darkness as being "outer space."

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Augustine writes: “Fox skews what is actually reported by NDErs by concluding that many of his RERC respondents ‘describe an encounter with some sort of darkness motif in terms seemingly suggestive of a visit to outer space,’” claiming that I seemed to assume in advance that “outer space” was a descriptor for what was really some kind of underlying, shared experience of “darkness.” Thus, he writes:

Fox is speaking as if he *knows* ahead of time what these different people have experienced. But of course assuming that these reports are describing the same thing regardless of what they actually say begs the question – for that is the very issue of contention. Fox asserts that the episode of darkness is what is encountered, but that it is being described as “space” – but *how does he know it was not space that was actually encountered?* Of course, he doesn’t know; he just assumes.

Actually, a closer reading of my book reveals that I assumed no such thing. In fact, I was supercautious about the conclusions I drew about that particular RERC Study finding precisely because I did not want to be misunderstood about such an unusual point. Shortly after the quote that Augustine reproduces from my book, I went on to write:

Clearly, any suggestion that whilst near-death or in other contexts persons – or aspects of persons – can literally leave the earth, either to view it from space, or to observe other planets, stars or galaxies from a point of view apart from it, sounds simply absurd. Yet this would appear to be what at least some persons – past and present – have asserted, and it was certainly one of the most striking and unusual findings of the entire RERC study. (Fox, 2003, p. 278)

I would not have been so cautious here if I had made up my mind beforehand that it was *not* space that some NDErs had reported. For all I knew then, and for all I know now, it may indeed *be* space that NDErs “visit.” I really have no idea, and I certainly agree with Augustine that we cannot assume in advance where NDErs actually go and what they actually encounter – if indeed they go to and encounter anything at all. In fact, my original caution about drawing conclusions at this point led me in my book to end the “outer space” discussion by suggesting that more cases of NDEs where journeys to outer space are described might in the future yield useful information and allow us to draw firmer conclusions about this fascinating issue.

Apart from that one small gripe, I feel that Augustine has used my work fairly and accurately. I was a little surprised that he did not consider the epistemological complexities surrounding the issue of whether or not there is any kind of “common core” to Western NDE

reports. It is a crucial area, and one well-explored within philosophical theology, as I attempted to show in chapter three of my book. Augustine does not really engage with this at all. If he had, he might have found himself – as I did – drawn to the very real possibility that a common core is at least philosophically permissible, even though it may not be supported crossculturally. In my next book I devote a chapter to an exploration of a small but significant number of cases that I found in the RERC archive of persons having NDEs and submitting them to the archive *before* the publication of Moody's 1975 *Life After Life* (Fox, 2008). I had not uncovered these when I produced the original RERC study, and sure enough they contain the very core motifs of episodes of darkness, light, encounters with others, and out-of-body experiences that came to dominate NDE model-building in the post-Moody era. Augustine may be right in asserting that we do not find that core crossculturally. But we certainly do in the West, and it cannot be accounted for wholly in terms of culturally produced expectations of what dying and death might be like.

As things stand, Augustine is left in a bit of a bind. He has to acknowledge that there is a degree of consistency in Western reports of near-death experiences: the sheer weight of evidence demands that he does this. On the other hand, his analysis of existing crosscultural data leads him to the conclusion that the majority of elements of the Western “core” NDE are missing in nonWestern accounts. He pleads, rightly, for more anthropological studies of NDEs in a greater variety of nonWestern cultures with larger sample sizes. I look forward to the emergence of such studies, which may yet yield evidence that there is more commonality between and across cultures than existing studies have so far shown.

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