

Letters to the Editor

The Theory of Essence

To the Editor:

I carefully read Kenneth Arnette's third paper on the theory of essence (Arnette, 1999), in which he referred to some of my comments (Krishnan, 1999) on his second paper (Arnette, 1995). I am afraid that I now cannot help come to the conclusion that there is no entity that answers to his description of the essence.

Before proceeding further, let me point out that, contrary to Arnette's claim (1999, p. 76), I have not said that the essence is material. What I have said, stating reasons, is that all the constituents of the universe are composed of the same order of stuff and therefore, all phenomena should be explicable in terms of interaction of entities belonging to it. It is inconsequential whether we call it matter or something else, because we lay down the criteria for considering what matter is, and there is nothing unalterable about those criteria (Krishnan, 1996). Today I would put the issue in this way: As there is only one order of stuff, we may call it what we like—matter, spirit, God, or something else—provided we keep in mind that conventional meanings of these labels do not apply. I might add that since I have pointed out that we do not know exactly what matter is (Krishnan, 1999), it should be clear that I could not have said, or meant, that the essence is material.

According to Arnette (1992, pp. 16–17), the essence is the same as what is popularly called the soul or spirit in some cultures. There is no agreement among the believers on questions about its characteristics, origin, and so on; however, they all seem to hold that it is the factor that is ultimately responsible for animating a person and, being the source of life, it is everlasting. I assume that Arnette also accepts this view because he has said that it is the “seat of consciousness” (Arnette, 1992, p. 17) and it is indivisible (Arnette, 1995, p. 95). (Anything indivisible obviously does not break up and perish.)

This traditional view of the essence gives rise to a number of questions. For example, how does the essence come into existence? Arnette did not answer this question, but described only where it comes from, that is, “other universes” (Arnette, 1999, p. 87). But is there

more than one universe in reality? I raise the question because the word "universe" is usually used in the sense of "all that is." However, if Arnette was employing the word in any special sense, he should reveal that sense and explain the criteria he used for distinguishing one universe from another, as well as how the characteristics or laws of the place of the essence's origin shape its properties.

It is unclear what to make of Arnette's claim (1995, p. 87) that the essence comes to "this universe" to join with a body. Did he mean that the body comes into being before the arrival of the essence, that is, independently of the animating factor? If so, what is the role of the essence in the life of a person?

Equally enigmatic is the suggestion that body-essence interaction is through their respective electric fields (Arnette, 1995). If the body can produce an electric field in order to interact with the essence, does that not mean that it can function without the essence?

Yet another problem is the proposal that the essence is indivisible (Arnette, 1995, p. 95). As pointed out earlier, that suggests that the essence is eternal, unlike any other object known to us. Said another way, essences and the rest of the objects in the universe are composed of two different orders of stuff. But this cannot happen, as there is only one order of stuff. Arnette (1995, p. 96) seemed to agree that the universe is monistic, in the sense I have explained monism, for he wrote that although essence and body are "extremely different," they have something in common. Entities with some common properties cannot be said to belong to different orders of reality.

The foregoing comments are, I think, enough to show that Arnette did not provide verifiable answers to the issues of how the essence comes to be, what it is composed of, and what purpose it serves. We have therefore to conclude that it does not exist. It follows that the explanation of all phenomena that Arnette attributed to essence-body interaction is to be found in body-based processes themselves. This is consistent with the monistic nature of the universe as I have interpreted it, and also with the proposal made by several scientists in recent years (for example, Jantsch, 1980; Prigogine, 1980) that living systems are self-organizing systems.

Finally, I think that Arnette (1999, p. 78) has been rather too hasty in stating that near-death experiences have no survival advantage. I have pointed out how many of the elements of the NDE could be viewed as survival mechanisms (Krishnan, 1985), and so far as I know neither Arnette nor anyone else has shown that my arguments are without substance.

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Response to Krishnan

To the Editor:

I thank V. Krishnan for his continued attention to my theory of essence. I would like to address briefly a couple of questions he raises in his letter. First, on the meaning of “universe,” I agree that the best definition of this word is “all that is.” However, often the term “universe” is used to denote the spacetime that is observable from Earth. This usage is admittedly somewhat confusing, as it allows us to speak about several examples of “all there is,” which, of course, is nonsense. I actually prefer the term “spacetime,” as it allows for more than one to exist. Thus, I, along with many theoretical physicists, see our observable universe as one of many possible spacetimes.

Second, on the meaning of “dualism,” I have explained my definition of this term in my third article (Arnette, 1999). I agree that the distinction between “physical” and “nonphysical” is vague and that those terms are best disposed of. I also agree, in perhaps a different sense than Krishnan intended, that there can be only one order of “stuff.” My most honest and deepest view is that consciousness is the most basic stuff, and that everything else flows from that: matter,

energy, and other substances that are different from matter. So I agree with Krishnan that the differences between essence and body are differences in properties; but the basic point that makes my theory of essence dualistic is that I believe the mind survives the physical death of the body.

Finally, I agree with Krishnan's statement that there is a "surviving factor" that contains a record of information. But I believe this factor to be the very consciousness of the individual, and I believe that data from near-death experiences (NDEs) demonstrate this. Krishnan's questions and ideas about exploring the nature of this factor are directly in line with the future direction of my thought and research. I intend to combine NDE data with data from another anomalous experience: after-death communication (Guggenheim and Guggenheim, 1995). From my perspective, these communications are direct contacts between living people and departed essences. I think that we can indeed learn a lot about the postmortem state of existence through these experiences.

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Review of *On the Other Side of Life*

To the Editor:

In the Winter 2000 issue of the Journal, Emily Williams Kelly reviewed my book, *On the Other Side of Life*. Here, I would like to respond to some of her criticisms because I think they are either

unfair or unfounded and thus may fail to give the reader an accurate assessment of this volume.

Let me begin by asserting that I wrote this book because I wanted to *read* such a work, namely, a cross-disciplinary exploration in the form of dialogues that could inform me about the standpoint of science and philosophy regarding near-death experiences (NDEs). Over several months, I conversed with distinguished scholars in the fields of psychology, physics, biology, neurophysiology, theology, and philosophy; and because of the perspicacity and intellectual range of my interlocutors, I believe they did help to articulate new and useful concepts for the theoretical and philosophical understanding of NDEs.

Now, in fairness to this book, it should be noted that I began the research and writing for *On the Other Side of Life* fully ten years ago. As far as the data are concerned, NDE research has certainly provided many findings since then, which of course would have been taken into account were the book to be written today. Still, as far as the views are concerned that were proffered by the eminent personalities I interviewed, I do not think they have lost any of their value because they address many of the perennial factors that need to be taken into account in any comprehensive explanation for NDEs, such as the nature of NDEs, brain functioning, and consciousness itself, as well as the relation of quantum physics to NDEs. The meaning and the mystery of NDEs have certainly not yet been entirely unveiled and will not be for a long time, if ever.

Kelly wrote that she found herself “becoming increasingly uncertain and uneasy about the extent of Valarino’s exposure to or knowledge about near-death research” (p. 124). I would like to stress that, apart from the fact that the book has been written some years ago, the *place* where I wrote it is not insignificant either. I live in Switzerland and NDEs were poorly known in my country some ten years ago. Although I had access to Anglo-American NDE literature and was in contact with some researchers at that time, as a newcomer to the field I did not then know the large circle of NDE researchers and NDErs whose collegial friendship I enjoy today. The NDE knowledge I have acquired in this past decade is, I trust, present in my latest NDE book, which I finished only a month ago.

As for the interviewees, Kelly wrote that they were “for the most part, too uninformed about the phenomenon of NDEs to keep the discussion anchored in the reality of what we currently know about NDEs” (p. 123). I do not think that the NDE expertise of Kenneth Ring, with whom I

conducted the longest of the six interviews (75 pages), can in any way be questioned, so I will not comment further on that point other than to raise a quizzical eyebrow at the use of Kelly's adverb, "apparently" (p. 124), in connection with his prominence in the field. As far as the other five interlocutors are concerned, it is true that they are not NDE specialists themselves, although they have a good understanding of the phenomenon. On the contrary, they were chosen precisely for the eminence they had achieved in *their* specific fields so that the reader could benefit from their insights about the NDE phenomenon from the perspective of their own professional specialities.

Kelly objected that "Not only Monsignor Vernetto, but Girard, Vincent, and Chauchard seem to be committed Christians to some degree" (p. 124). Except for Jean-Pierre Girard, who is Swiss, all these persons are French and more than 90 percent of the French population belongs, however nominally, to the Catholic faith. That is hardly a problem in itself inasmuch as all of them stated very clearly what their beliefs were and, because of their intellectual integrity, these beliefs definitely did *not* interfere with their scientific reasoning and reflection. Therefore, the reader is hardly being exposed to any covert influence attempt in this regard. My only regret concerning the choice of my interlocutors is the fact that none of the skeptical scholars I contacted agreed to be interviewed. This was a pity because I had been very eager to include a wide spectrum of perspectives on the NDE in my book.

Another of Kelly's criticisms concerns the two short testimonies I included at the beginning of the book in order to illustrate the theoretical description of NDEs I provided. She wrote that "the two experiencers interviewed seem odd choices . . . since neither of them had a particularly rich experience" (p. 124). I do not think there is such a thing as an *uninteresting or poor* NDE. I believe all of them are valuable and worth being looked at and they certainly have a deep importance and meaning for the NDEr. The "odd choices" were the following: a drug addict who was able to quit using drugs nine months after undergoing his NDE, after 20 years of heavy drug addiction (I was mostly interested in the aftereffects of this NDE), and a professor of medicine who, as a result of an allergy, suffered a heart attack following a bee sting and who certainly had the necessary intellectual discernment to analyze his NDE with the critical and trained mind of a scientist. Truly, I *do* think most readers would find these testimonies most worthwhile, even if Kelly failed to be impressed with them.

In Chapter 2, "Analysis of the NDE and Its Successive Stages, Illustrated by Experiencer Accounts," I broke the phenomenon down

into 31 components, and then commented on and illustrated them by reference to testimonies of people who have undergone NDEs. Those quotes are, in Kelly's words, "based almost entirely on Ring's book *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984) [Melvin Morse's *Transformed by the Light* (Morse and Perry, 1992) and Raymond Moody's *Life after Life* (Moody, 1975) are the only other works cited]" (p. 124). Indeed, I quoted exclusively from those books for a straightforward reason any author would understand: *On the Other Side of Life* has been published in 11 languages so far, including Chinese, and it simply was more convenient for copyright permission purposes to limit quotes to three books only. In any case, I can certainly reassure Kelly that I *did* read more than just those books, as the large bibliography (21 pages) will attest. And purely for reasons of space in an already long book, I chose to limit my bibliography to books and therefore did not include NDE-related articles in my very long bibliography; but that does not mean I did not read them!

Another of Kelly's somewhat captious criticisms concerned my discussion of the life review, whose general importance in the NDE scheme of things she seemed to question. In her remarks, however, she completely missed the point by *conflating frequency of occurrence with significance*. Obviously, how often a particular feature of the NDE occurs is merely a statistical parameter, and in itself says nothing about its importance either to the experiencer or to those of us who hope to learn from NDEs. (And even here, Kelly's own figures can be challenged; Bruce Greyson [1990], for example, found evidence for a life review in about a quarter of his NDE respondents.) In this connection, it may be useful to mention Ring's discussion of this phenomenon in our recent book (published after *On the Other Side of Life*), *Lessons From the Light* (Ring and Elsaesser-Valarino, 2000), where he devoted two entire chapters to the life review and clearly established its credentials as one of the deepest sources of ethical insight that stem from the NDE—which only confirms the essential argument I had striven to make in *On the Other Side of Life*.

I would like to refute another of Kelly's criticisms. She wrote that "For example, she perpetuates the popular belief that NDEs occur when a person is 'clinically dead'" (p. 125). On the contrary, on the first page of *On the Other Side of Life*, I very clearly declared: "This immediately gives rise to the question of what is meant by 'death,' which is indeed a difficult concept to define . . . Consequently, I have avoided using the term 'clinical death' and have kept to the more vague notion of 'near-death state.'"

Finally, I want to respond to Kelly's reproach that "Valarino's objectives seem much more evangelical than scientific" (p. 128). That is an easy rebuke to make, I suppose. Of course, I do hope that my way of presenting the near-death experience will be perceived by most readers as scientific in tone. Certainly, I can attest that all of my interlocutors (except Monsignor Vernet) are university professors and undertook their analyses of the nature, meaning, and implications of the NDE from a scientific point of view. However, on a personal note, I will just conclude by saying that after having studied NDEs for so many years now in a very intensive way, my own fascination with them only grows stronger, as does my belief that it is very important to talk and write about NDEs and to allow those interested to get more deeply acquainted with this transcendental experience. It is then ultimately their responsibility to find deep down in their hearts the meaning and personal implications of NDEs for their own lives. Of course, my book was written with this end in mind, and I trust that most readers will find it useful in that regard.

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