

Survival of Bodily Death
An Esalen Invitational Conference
February 11 - 16, 2000

Hylic Pluralism and Survival
Michael Murphy

Before giving his presentation about hylic pluralism, Michael Murphy briefly described the "Golden Age" of survival research, which flourished between 1882 and 1911. During this remarkable window in history, Fredrick Myers's Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death was published, and William James gave a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh that were later published as the classic The Varieties of Religious Experience. Looking back on this period, Murphy is particularly impressed with James's commitment to "radical empiricism," which involved a willingness to investigate any and all phenomena on their own terms. Myers and James were uniquely open-minded investigators of our human experience. In their honor, the mission of this conference series is to continue their groundbreaking work and reinvigorate both radical empiricism and survival studies by putting them into a new evolutionary and global context.

Hylic Pluralism: The levels of embodiment

Throughout the course of his life Michael Murphy has been intrigued by the possibilities for higher human life and embodiment. In his magnum opus, The Future of the Body, Murphy documented a variety of peak human experiences in a diversity of settings that point to possibilities for greater life. With this background, Murphy discussed the possibility that physical death may not be an end to life but rather a doorway to a more luminous and evolved form of embodiment. Drawing upon the book Vehicles of Consciousness: The Concept of Hylic Pluralism by the Dutch scholar, J. J. Poortman, Murphy addressed the survival issue from a novel perspective. For years the standard task of survival research has been to explore whether a "spirit or soul" survives bodily death. But the implicit notion in this framework is that there is just one body for our spirits to inhabit. Changing the whole nature of the conversation, Murphy instead proposed that there may be several bodies that one's spirit is capable of inhabiting. Our life in this physical body may be one of many kinds of embodiment.

Murphy summarized a number of Poortman's terms for the reader's reference:

Hyle All grades of matter from coarse to fine (From the ancient Greek word for "matter")

Pneuma A finer forms of matter (From Greek meaning "breath, air, and soul")

Immaterial Soul The transcendent, imperishable soul

Ochemata The vehicles or sheaths of the soul (singular: ochema)

Psychohylism Tenet that the soul is never without a material aspect

Hylic Pluralism Belief that there are several grades of matter

The Three Pneuma

Murphy introduced Poortman's work by noting that the Greek term "hyle," was first used by Aristotle to mean "matter," and thus "hylic pluralism" proposes that there are several grades of matter ranging from the coarse matter composed of atoms up through finer grades of "matter" that are currently not detectable through our normal sense faculties. Murphy indicated that throughout the history of world philosophy and religion, there have been numerous references to finer forms of matter. He pointed out that one of the goals of Poortman's work was to collect the many references to such "fine matter" in various cultures. After extensive research drawing upon a range of sources, including the ancient Neo-Platonic philosophers, Proclus and Plotinus, as well as esoteric texts such as the Corpus Hermeticum, and Eastern sources such as the classic Hindu Upanishads, Poortman created a three leveled classification system to distinguish these finer forms of matter:

1) Physiological pneuma: is a finer, invisible materiality that is still directly connected with the ordinary body of coarse matter.

2) Psychological pneuma: is the link between the immaterial soul and the coarse body. Poortman noted that different traditions have called it by a variety of names: ochema, subtle body, rarefied vehicle, astral body, ethereal body. This "body" is capable of surviving physical death and living a limited disembodied existence, but it is not immortal.

3) Sublime pneuma: is the imperishable and immaterial soul, sometimes called the radiant body, spirit body, or augoeides ochema.

According to Poortman, the texts of the great philosophers and mystics contain a variety of terms that bear a resemblance to the three pneumas. Poortman's categorized a vast array of cross-cultural terminology according to this three leveled scheme.

Poortman's six metaphysical frameworks

During the course of his work, Poortman noticed that the central reason that different philosophers and mystics through the ages have had different views of the three pneuma and hylic pluralism is that they have operated within different metaphysical frameworks. In order to straighten out these metaphysical positions, Poortman distinguished six such frameworks and how each one views the three pneuma:

1) Alpha: Monistic materialism. Only physical matter composed of atoms is real. This position denies the possibility of the psychological and sublime pneumas and thus rejects any form of hylic pluralism. The well-known scientists Steven J. Gould and Steven Weinberg are contemporary proponents of this position.

2) Zeta: Absolute Idealism. At the opposite spectrum from the Alpha position, the Zeta position proposes that all being is completely immaterial. Matter and bodies are simply appearances and thus inherently unreal (maya). The various proponents of this position include the Irish Bishop and philosopher, George Berkeley and the mayavada schools of Vedanta. 3) Epsilon: Anthropological Dualism. This position is unique to the modern world, and its best known proponents are Descartes and Kant. In the 17th century Descartes proposed that soul and body (as well as spirit and matter) were different in essence. This position is diametrically opposed to psychohylism, in which the soul is never without a material aspect (a position maintained by Leibniz). Widening the rift that Descartes first proposed, Immanuel Kant described the radical separation between the world of phenomena (the-world-as-we-experience-it) and that of noumena (things-in-themselves). This position denies the existence of all three pneuma. 4) Beta: Epicurean Materialism. This position is similar to the Alpha position in giving priority to matter, but it differs by maintaining that the soul is comprised of a finer matter invisible to the naked eye. Its proponents included the ancient Greek atomists Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. The 17th century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, unlike his contemporary Descartes, also fits into this position. Hobbes maintained that God was an incarnate being, a body composed of fine atoms. This position accepts only the first pneuma.

5) Gamma: Immaterial Divinity. This is a transitional position between epsilon and the last position, Delta. It maintains that the One-ness of Divinity is completely immaterial, while the multiplicity of created reality is material. Emphasizing God's transcendence, the human soul is exclusively material while God is not. This position is apparent in the schools of Indian philosophy that describe the One Spirit, Purusa, and the multiplicity of created nature, prakriti. In the Christian tradition, the medieval theologian Bernard of Clairvaux was a leading voice for this position with his emphasis on God's transcendent and un-created nature.

6) Delta: Immaterial Soul. This position holds that the soul is one with the Divine and thus immaterial and immortal in essence. Being immaterial, the soul incarnates through the use of different leveled ochema, or vehicles, composed of fine matter. According to Poortman, three central features comprise the trichotomy of the Delta position: 1. The body of coarse matter 2. Several bodies of fine matter and 3. An immaterial aspect of the individual soul. Among the main proponents of the Delta position are the 3rd century metaphysician, Plotinus, who defined his Delta position in opposition to the beta position of the Stoics; the Renaissance esotericist, Paracelsus; and the Vedanta school in Hinduism.

Murphy's commentary

After presenting a summary of Poortman's work, Murphy asserted that the conundrum of survival might only be solved if the western worldview acknowledges that forms of subtle matter and energy are real and that they manifest as the "larger" body that surrounds the purely physical body. For several years, Murphy has been collecting a large data set of testimonials and experiences, ranging from ancient mystical accounts to the feats of modern athletes, that point to a view of hylic pluralism. For example, in the ancient Jewish Kaballistic texts, there is frequent mention of soul sparks, which Murphy believes could be emanations from the subtle body. Murphy has recorded many accounts by athletes who describe similar experiences Murphy hypothesizes that both mystics and athletes are allowing their own subtle bodies to manifest more fully through their physical bodies.

Providing another example of the subtle body's potential emergence in our world, Murphy described the story of the remarkable body-builder Frank Zane. Through the use of transformative practices such as mantra meditation and visualization techniques, Zane perfected his physical body to such a degree that he won the Mr. Olympia contest back-to-back in 1977, 1978, and 1979 with different pre-programmed configurations. Murphy hypothesizes that Zane's success may have stemmed from his subtle body effecting a type of downward causation on his physical body.

Reflecting upon Zane's life from the broad sweep of our evolutionary cosmos, Murphy remarked that our universe seems to be in the body-building business. The universe wants to bring new types of bodies into manifestation in the world. Each successive level of evolutionary emergence (from matter to life to mind) brings forth a new type of body. Murphy speculates that humanity may be on a pioneering cusp of evolution. Examples such as Frank Zane's seem to indicate that new forms of bodily existence are attempting to manifest in the world. A more luminous form of embodiment is groping to be born.

During his presentation, one of the more striking points that Murphy asked his colleagues to consider is that although so much of his own work has focused on the transformation of the physical body into a higher form of realization here on earth, we should not assume that after bodily death the process of transformation is complete. Rather, Murphy intuits that the transformation process might continue after death. If the evolutionary impulse runs through all things and all dimensions, then it behooves us to consider that we keep transforming in some sort of afterlife.

Murphy concluded his presentation by pointing out that in several different domains of contemporary inquiry, including religion, biology, and physics, there seems to be a trend towards theorizing the possibility of higher dimensions or higher degrees of subtlety. For example, while hylic pluralism postulates various grades of subtle matter, cutting-edge physics, in the form of string theory, postulates subtle dimensions that transcend our ordinary four dimensional universe. In physics an acknowledgement of different grades and/or dimensions of existence seems to be emerging. On this note, Murphy mentioned that at a conference series at Esalen on quantum theory, a number of physicists discussed the possibility of hyper-dimensional worlds. They imagined the possibility that our universe may be the densest form of material projection from a higher and more subtle dimension that subsumes the known universe.

In response to Murphy's presentation, Bruce Greyson noted that the physicist Jed Kenneth Arnette is looking at just how matter relates to energy. For example, is it possible that there are variations on Einstein's famous equation for the equivalence of matter and energy that might explain more subtle forms of matter?

Marilyn Schlitz added that the subject of light should be included in any discussion of the transformation of the body. She remarked that some scientists, such as the German biophoton researcher, Fritz-Albert Popp, are looking at the phosphorous properties of our bodies. Schlitz pointed out that contemporary science now knows that cells can emit light, and thus we may be quite close to describing the "soul sparks" and "seltzer water" that mystics and athletes describe.

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