

Survival of Bodily Death
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Transmission Theory
 Michael Grosso

As a professor of philosophy who has written several books looking at issues of consciousness, soul, and survival, Michael Grosso chose to present on the subject of T theory, meaning transmission theory. Although most contemporary research into the subject of consciousness assumes that it is by-product of the human brain, Grosso believes that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this reductionistic model is inadequate. During his presentation, he pointed out that there is a long tradition in the West of thinkers who believed that the brain and body serve not as the originators of consciousness but rather as its transmitter.

History of T theory

Grosso began by giving a history of some prominent philosophers in the West who have espoused a view in which the human body and brain act as transmitters of our conscious experience. As far back as the Greeks, we have accounts that fit well with T theory. In Plato's dialogues, for example, Grosso pointed out there is the persistent theme that only after death do humans obtain full knowledge. The body is portrayed as a limiting factor on conscious experience, and the practice of philosophy is an intentional act to disengage one from those constraints. In ancient Greek the word "epiteudes" meant to free the mind from the constraints of the body. In this view human conscious experience is not derivative of the body but rather limited by it. Grosso sees a form of T theory implicit throughout the works of Plato.

Turning to more recent times, Grosso quoted from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant from his Critique of Pure Reason, "The body would thus be not the cause of our thinking but merely a condition restrictive thereof. Though essential to our sensuous and animal consciousness, it may be regarded as an imposition to our pure spiritual life." Grosso acknowledged that both Plato and Kant come across as being quite negative towards the role of the human body, but T theory does not necessarily entail such a view. In other dialogues by Plato, such as the Phaedo, Grosso pointed out that there are passages which celebrate the human body and earthly existence. The overall point is not that the body is "bad" for Kant and Plato, but rather just that it limits our consciousness.

Grosso turned next to the work of F.S.C. Schiller, the German author of The Riddle of the Sphinx, published in 1891. In this book, Schiller articulated a version of T theory and substantiated it with empirical evidence. For example, with brain injuries Schiller noted that it is more accurate to say that they impair the transmission of our conscious experience rather than the actual production of it. Schiller was aware (and modern brain research has confirmed) that when one part of the brain was damaged, other parts would compensate so that a lost function would be restored. Schiller believed this restoration of the lost ability was more suggestive of T theory than production theory. From a historical standpoint Schiller played an important role in T theory, because he was the first modern writer to cite evidential cases that suggested its plausibility over other theories of consciousness.

Grosso briefly mentioned the work of Frederick Myers, a contemporary of Schiller's, whose writings show an implicit expression of T theory. Myers' often spoke of how the contents of each person's subliminal mind are "filtered" by the brain. Although he does not use the word "transmission," the idea of the brain acting as a transmitter is implied in Myers' model.

According to Grosso, it was not until William James' 1898 Ingersoll lectures on immortality that the most articulate formulation of T theory was expressed. James did not, however, perceive himself as the originator of T theory. In fact, he often quoted the transcendentalists and Romantics as forerunners. Emerson, for example, wrote that "we lie in the lap of immense intelligence which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity." And the poet Shelley, whom James was fond of quoting, said, "life is like a dome of many colored glass that stains the white radiance of eternity."

Grosso summarized James' model of consciousness by noting that for James each human is a tripartite being: - we are a body - we are an individuated consciousness with specific memories - we are pure spirit or the undifferentiated oneness

Grosso said there are three advantages to James' version of T theory:

1. It accounted for "influxes from the larger world," such as prophetic visions.
2. It fit well with G.T. Fechner's idea of the psycho-physical threshold, in which the brain and body act to block out the full range of consciousness experience.
3. It was compatible with psychic phenomenon.

After James, Henri Bergson was another well-known proponent of T theory in the early 20th century. Bergson was known for calling the brain "the organ of attention to life." Like James, Bergson believed that the brain served as a filter for consciousness.

In the post-World War II era, Grosso mentioned a paper presented by John Beloff at a conference in Utrecht in 1972. In it, Beloff noted the work of C.D. Broad and M.M. Moncrief, whose book, The Clairvoyant Theory of Perception, developed the T theory of William James and Henri Bergson. Grosso briefly noted what Beloff's work tried to accomplish:

1. It sought to incorporate psi effects and dreams into a fuller theory of consciousness.
2. It argued that T theory could account for the decline effect often noted in psi experiments.
3. It proposed that T theory could account for a connection between subliminal perception and ESP. On this, Beloff wrote, "as with SP so with ESP, success is achieved not by effort of will but by relaxing and then concentrating on whatever impressions supervene." In other words, as we relax, we open our consciousness so that our brains may transmit more experiences.

The last name Grosso mentioned was Charles Honorton. Honorton used the word "detect" when describing the mechanisms of ESP and psi phenomena. Instead of thinking that in psi phenomena something is traveling towards the person who is receiving the information, Honorton believed that the information is already "here" and that we merely detect its ubiquitous presence. Honorton thought that the effect of practices, such as meditation, is to reduce our common distractions and thereby be more open to detect what is here all the time. Honorton also noted in his review of over 80 psi experiments that psi is improved when the practitioner is under the effects of sensory deprivation.

Grosso summarized his presentation by listing the data that fits well with T theory:

1. Experiences of panoramic memory
2. The plasticity of the brain (lost parts being compensated for)
3. The variety of transpersonal experiences
4. G.T. Fechner's psychophysical threshold
5. The psi declining effect
6. The psi conducive syndrome
7. The data from psychedelic research

Response

In response to Grosso's presentation, Michael Murphy noted that it is important to realize that the whole body and not just the brain acts as the filter of our consciousness. Charles Tart added that our bodies not only filter but shape the very nature of our conscious experience in quite specific ways. Tart mentioned that reports of extended out of body experiences reveal that consciousness increasingly transcends the "limits" of the body. Translating T theory into Buddhist terminology, Richard Baker Roshi remarked that the term "Great Functioning" describes a practitioner who has achieved a state of awareness in which all filtering out has ceased.

In conclusion, Grosso mentioned that the word transmission is only a metaphor and that in some instances it is misleading because it is mechanistic. Although it is not the best word, he suggested that "manifest" might be a better metaphor to describe the varieties of experiences of consciousness that are available to us.

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