

Survival of Bodily Death  
An Esalen Invitational Conference  
May 4 to 9, 2003

Comments on Paul Edwards  
Michael Grosso

On Tuesday Michael Grosso started the day by presenting a number of ideas in response to the work of the poorly informed survival critic Paul Edwards. Grosso made several comments about Edwards that sparked discussion in the group. His main points were:

- 1) Edwards's case against the survival hypothesis is hampered by feckless scholarship, confusing and misleading generalities, and a lack of reference to specific cases.
- 2) Edwards tries to discredit survival by citing popular scholars who are against it, but he does not state their specific positions on issues and data. For example, he mentions that Sue Blackmore is against the Wilmot case (a well-known case of an out-of-body projection) but does not cite any of the details of this important case, and what Blackmore's response is to those details.
- 3) Edwards poorly understands the relationship between mind (soul) and matter (body) and applies rigid Cartesian categories of mind and body to discredit the survival hypothesis. For example, Edwards's main contention against survival stems from his own uncritical acceptance of Descartes's two basic categories: flat, extended matter (*res extensa*) and non-extended mind (*res cogitans*). Edwards uses the rigid Cartesian separation between these two categories to support his own view that mind (or soul) cannot have any influence on, or function independently of, the human brain and body. In response, Grosso pointed out that Descartes was simply wrong on many points, one of which is the fact that some aspects of mental life are in fact extended. For example, when we have dreams, we experience spatial and extended properties in them. Descartes simply overlooked this. Overall, Grosso pointed out that Edwards used many aspects of Cartesian philosophy to support his own a priori stance against a form of mind-body interactionism.
- 4) In the place of a rigid Cartesian dualism of non-interacting and completely distinct substances, Grosso believes that the survival evidence calls for a new type of dualism that is specifically non-Cartesian. Grosso suggested that a key feature to it might be described as "property dualism," because there are irreducible properties associated with both sides of the dualism between mind and body, but those properties do not entail a distinct and autonomous existence.
- 5) Edwards claims there is no physical evidence for subtle bodies (also called astral bodies, light bodies, psychic bodies, or koshas). Edwards discounts reports of astral bodies because these reports regularly include descriptions of clothing. According to Edwards's reasoning, it does not make any sense why astral beings would have clothes. Grosso responded by pointing out that what most likely comprises an astral body is not an actual physical-like substance but an array of mental images, thoughts, and memories. Thus, there is every reason to think they would include imaginary or commonly remembered clothing. Grosso noted that people often are led to think that the astral body should be something like a subtle physical duplicate of the actual human body, when, instead, the astral body is more like a mental body that is comprised of mental contents, not a super-subtle physical matter.
- 6) Lastly, Grosso brought up the fact that there continues to be solid evidence that the mind can function reasonably well even when independent of a fully functioning brain and body. For example, he cited reports that some late-stage Alzheimer's patients recover normal mental functioning just before death. Bruce Greyson, an expert in near-death cases, substantiated Grosso by commenting that in his experience these patients do not merely recover a few memories; instead, they often experience restoration of their entire personalities within the last 24 to 48 hours of life. Greyson said there have been similar reports for dying schizophrenics as well. Grosso speculated that just before death we may be more identified with our astral bodies and less identified with our physical body and thus capable of by-passing some of the constraints of our deteriorating physical condition.

In response to Grosso, Michael Murphy commented that in some meditation schools adepts have been assigned practices that involve the consumption of alcohol or marijuana, or the deliberate invoking of extreme states of fatigue, in order for that practitioner to test the strength of mental clarity in the face of brain and bodily deterioration or distortion.

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