

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

Discussion of "Irreducible Mind" and William James

Ed Kelly

The conference began on Monday morning with an update from Ed Kelly, who is overseeing a collaboratively authored book that includes chapters written by several of the regular participants in this annual conference series. The working title for the book is Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century. In the fall of 2003 the publisher Rowman and Littlefield agreed to publish it along with an accompanying CD-Rom that will contain the full contents of Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death, which is the two-volume magnum opus written by the early twentieth century philosopher and parapsychologist Frederic Myers. Originally published in England in 1903, Myers's grand work has served as the inspirational well-spring and intellectual launching pad for this annual series of conferences at Esalen. In fact, the title of the conference series was deliberately chosen as a twenty-first century echo to the subtitle of Myers's original text. Kelly spoke about a few of the marketing strategies he hoped to implement for Irreducible Mind. For example, he noted that MIT Press recently published (without great concern for its profit margin) a comparably rigorous book by Jane Austin titled Zen and the Brain. To date, its sales have been quite brisk. Kelly thinks examples such as this bode well for the potential sales of Irreducible Mind.

Putting his background in neuroscience research to good use, Kelly is authoring the second chapter of the book, which will point out a fortiori the many noticeable inadequacies in contemporary theories of brain functioning proffered by mainstream cognitive scientists. According to Kelly, recently popular books in this genre, such as The Feeling of What Happens by Antonio Damasio and The Blank Slate by Steven Pinker, do not even come close to addressing or incorporating the vast data from over one hundred years of parapsychology research that demonstrates the human mind cannot be reduced to the brain alone.

An erstwhile skeptic who has meandered in his position regarding the survival hypothesis, Ed Kelly stated frankly at this meeting that he has now come to fully embrace the survival hypothesis because the data supporting it is so convincing to him. In regard to this intellectual transformation, Kelly reminded the conference participants that William James also had a series of significant intellectual shifts during his own lifetime. Kelly pointed out that the younger William James who wrote The Principles of Psychology was different from the more seasoned man who wrote The Varieties of Religious Experience and A Pluralistic Universe. Kelly said that he thinks that the "later James" invoked many of Frederic Myers's ideas and even pushed them a step further. Kelly noted that the later works of James reflect a degree of philosophical reflection upon Myers's concept of the Subliminal Self. Kelly remarked that today he finds himself in a similar intellectual position to the one James was in during the early 1900s. Kelly sees himself as a modern-day neuroscientist wrestling with the same core questions that James did as a philosopher a century ago: How are will, effort, and selectivity all central to what we call "mind?" Much as James did years ago, Kelly generally has resisted the idea that psychology and philosophy must embrace an all-encompassing concept like Myers's Subliminal Self in order to explain the nature of the human mind.

Despite that ongoing resistance, which Kelly sees as an expression of his own parsimonious temperament of intellectual reserve and restraint, he nonetheless thinks that contemporary cognitive science will prove itself feckless in the attempt to reductively explain the human mind by means of the complex circuitry of the brain alone. According to Kelly's observation of his own field, most of his colleagues in cognitive and neuro- science would jettison the long-standing philosophical quest for a unifying "executive self" with alacrity. Instead, they would like to see any need for a transcendent "self" replaced with a more detailed and purely materialistic explication of the intricacies of the brain. At this point, Kelly noted that the linchpin of Adam Crabtree's investigations into multiple personality phenomena is the thorny issue of how "something" in each us unifies our experience into an intelligible whole (what cognitive scientists call "the binding problem"). Thus when that "something" is temporarily disabled, other sub-personalities can manifest with dramatically different results. In anticipation of Crabtree's presentation on Tuesday (which covered some of the rich history in Western philosophy and psychology concerning the nature of the "self") Ed Kelly pointed out that William James discarded Immanuel Kant's well-known psychological organizing faculty called the "Transcendental Subject" for his own notion of "manifolds of experience." Like James, Kelly is still inclined to think there are other ways of explaining human selfhood than postulating a non-material supra-self (Transcendental Subject, Subliminal Self, etc.). Overall, Kelly plans to make clear what is at stake in these complex issues in Irreducible Mind. He also believes the book will help scuttle the dominant materialistic view that the human mind can be reduced to the brain alone.

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