

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

Reflections on Kant, Myers, Schopenhauer, and Whitehead
Adam Crabtree

On Tuesday afternoon Adam Crabtree adumbrated the positions of several philosophers and psychologists from the late eighteenth century up through the twentieth. The primary theme Crabtree drew out in his presentation was how each of these philosopher-psychologists accounted for (or discounted in some cases) the unitary experience of the human mind. While describing for the conference participants some of the key developments in the historical lineage stretching from Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer up through Frederic Myers, William James, and A.N. Whitehead, Crabtree sought to situate contemporary speculations about the survival hypothesis in a much broader historical context. As Crabtree demonstrated, the nature of the human soul or self, and its possibility for survival of bodily death, has been investigated and debated by Western philosophers for centuries. Crabtree thinks that becoming familiar with the issues these scholars attempted to cover in their own philosophical systems will help contemporary speculation from repeating mistakes that already have been addressed in the past.

Immanuel Kant

In the 1780s when Kant wrote his three trenchant Critiques from his home in the far-off town of Königsberg in eastern Prussia, he was responding primarily to the British empirical tradition of John Locke and David Hume, which had claimed that all real knowledge can only be attained by using humanity's sense faculties. The Scotsman Hume had argued persuasively that humans have access only to raw, discrete sense impressions, and thus the human mind is at its base merely a habit-formed bundle of disconnected perceptions that ultimately lacks real unity, continuity, or coherence. At the time, Hume also had argued that there is no reliable or certain way to ascertain what is beyond these fleeting sense impressions, including knowledge of the Infinite or God. In short, Hume had argued convincingly against the Christian view that there is a free human soul in each of us.

Hume's secular skepticism inspired the pious and perspicacious Kant to write the first of his famous Critiques, The Critique of Pure Reason (originally published 1781), in which he countered Hume by claiming that an internal faculty of "understanding" orders our sensations according to the common categories of space, time, and causality. In this way, Kant resolved Hume's skepticism about reliable knowledge of the external world by demonstrating that the categories of space, time, and causality are not to be found "out there." Instead, we superimpose those categories on our sense experience because they exist a priori in our own minds. In response to Hume's unnerving claim about the atomistic nature of human experience, Kant observed that we do experience life as if we have a unified self and as if events happen in a timely continuum. We experience things in meaningful sequences—as coherent wholes both in the duration of time and across the span of space. For example, when we listen to music, we do not hear disconnected jangles of sound; instead we hear coherent sequences of melody that comprise an aesthetic musical whole. Thus, Kant reasoned that something exists inside us that unifies our discrete sense impressions. An enduring and coherent "self" is a necessary precondition for the types of experiences that we do in fact have everyday. Kant called this unifying self the Transcendental Subject. But Kant simultaneously stressed that although we can have reasonable faith in the capacity of the Transcendental Subject to order our experience, we still can never know the Transcendental Subject directly. Its inherent nature (the so-called "thing-in-itself") is always beyond the reach of our empirical capacity to know. In the course of addressing Hume's skepticism in his Critiques, Kant had divided the world between the phenomenal world of empirically knowable things (the world measured by Newton's physics, for example) and the ever-unreachable noumenal world of things-in-themselves. At the very least for Kant, we can know a lesser faculty of our minds, which he called the empirical ego, through introspection and inner sensing.

After giving an overview of Kant's late eighteenth century view of the human mind, Crabtree pointed out the great degree of similarity between some of Kant's basic concepts and those that Frederic Myers developed about a century later.

* Chart to be posted here soon *

Kant and Myers empirical ego supraliminal self

Transcendental Subject Subliminal Self

Crabtree pointed out that two of the central concepts in Myers's model of the human mind (the supra- and Sub- liminal selves) had been influenced by the philosophical and psychological lineage that started with the terms Kant put forth in his famous Critiques (the empirical ego and Transcendental Subject). Crabtree noted that several thinkers had built upon Kant's work during the course of the nineteenth century, most notably Arthur Schopenhauer and Carl Du Prel. Importantly, Crabtree said that what distinguished these thinkers from Kant was their acquaintance with a vast amount of research on clairvoyance, animal magnetism, and pre-cognition. Such research was not available to Kant (perhaps because he lived in Königsberg far away from the main intellectual centers of Europe), but it had started to flourish and become more recognized during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before turning to describe the next thinker, Crabtree pointed out that for Myers, unlike Kant, the Subliminal Self is an even "deeper and broader" unity than Kant's corresponding term the Transcendental Subject, because, according to Myers, it grants access to a more universal pool of experience and knowledge that transcends any individual mind.

Schopenhauer

Crabtree turned next to an early nineteenth century philosopher who was well-aware of contemporary parapsychology research, Arthur Schopenhauer. In his book *Perergera and Paralipomena* (originally published 1851) Schopenhauer proposed that it was necessary to bridge Kant's rigid division of the phenomenal and noumenal realms because new research was revealing ways that the human mind could in fact make contact with the seemingly unreachable noumenal realm of the thing-in-itself. Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer was well-acquainted with the varied phenomena of somnambulism (aka sleep walking), spirit apparitions, dream visions, pre-cognition, and even remote viewing. He felt strongly that these experiences could not be explained away or doubted. Instead, there must be some faculty of experience that Kant had not accounted for that enables us to have access to the noumenal realm.

In the *Perergera and Paralipomena* Schopenhauer postulated that we each have a "dream-organ," which he defined as "a faculty of intuitive perception which has been shown to be independent of the external impression of the senses." Schopenhauer claimed that the dream-organ perceives through a qualitatively different channel than that of our everyday sense faculties. Schopenhauer described the nature of dreams to demonstrate his point. He claimed that when we dream, the content often seems exterior and foreign to us. The action and events in our dreams are often contrary to our own wishes. Such content is experienced as an "other" to us. Importantly, Crabtree noted that for Schopenhauer the dream-organ does not grant access to another dimension or some ontologically separate world. Instead, through the dream-organ, we are enabled to see and experience the noumenal realm (the things-in-themselves that lie just beyond the phenomenal world of sense experience) in a more direct, rich, and complete way that is not possible by means of our sense faculties. The dream-organ grants a less opaque and more immediate perception of the thing-in-itself. Schopenhauer thought that his dream-organ helped account for the common experience of waking out of a dream at night and not being certain at first how to determine what is more real—the dream state or waking life here. For Schopenhauer, the dream state that we experience with our dream-organ grants a deeper, fuller experience of things-in-themselves. In a sense, the veil that Kant had lain between the phenomenal and noumenal realms could be lifted by the dream-organ. And because it is not bound by the sense categories of space and time, we can even see glimpses of the future with it.

In sum, Kant's philosophy may have been successful in addressing Hume's skepticism about reliable knowledge, but in the process he tore apart reality into two realms, the phenomenal and noumenal. As a result, his philosophical heirs wrestled with the strange consequences of the Kantian worldview: if we can never know with our senses the reality that lies beyond the appearances of the phenomenal world, then there must be some non-sensory means of direct access to noumenal reality. From the standpoint of the history of ideas, Kant's infamous division led to two opposed streams of nineteenth century thought: the materialism of modern science (which still denies the noumenal realm altogether) and the Idealism of philosophers like Hegel and Schopenhauer (which explores ways of reconnecting the human mind back to natural phenomena). Crabtree concluded his comments on Schopenhauer by indicating that future historians may look back on him as one of the first pioneers to take parapsychological research seriously. Schopenhauer was one of the first philosophers to attempt to integrate such research into a viable metaphysical worldview and a psychology of the self.

Whitehead

Crabtree concluded his overview with a few comments on the contemporary Whiteheadian scholar David Ray Griffin, who has addressed the mind-body problem and reincarnation in several of his books, including his most recent one, *Unsnarling the World Knot* (1998, UC California Press). Crabtree pointed out that Griffin's pan-experientialist position (meaning that all "things"—even atoms—have a small degree of experience or subjectivity) approaches the issue of the human mind's unity by claiming that the quality of unity is not a completely unique emergent in human consciousness but that it stretches much further back in time. According to Griffin, the universe at all its levels displays the capacity to create centered wholes that can organize experience and respond meaningfully to the external world with a degree of freedom and choice (even if only a very slight degree in atoms and cells). In this sense, then, Hume was wrong not only in arguing that the human mind is ultimately just a disconnected bundle of impressions, but he was also wrong for all lower-leveled forms, because they too have a degree of unity, coherence, and meaningful organization. Crabtree emphasized two important points in the Whitehead-Griffin scheme: The first is that it allows for the emergence of the novel feature of the human soul, namely that soul can function independently of the body and even reincarnate into other bodies. Griffin has speculated that this feature may be a novel emergent feature that arises naturally when several lower-grade forms work in concert to give rise to the soul itself as a reincarnating entity. The second is that Whitehead's notion of "prehension" (meaning the ability to include past events and memories into one's interior being) may occur through a faculty similar to Schopenhauer's dream-organ. Thus, if memories of past experiences are "pre-hended" and then stored in the dream-organ, then it is what must survive bodily death.

For further information on this topic, readers are encouraged to look at Adam Crabtree's comprehensive document titled "Models of the Mind," which is available at this website in the articles section. To view that document in PDF format, click here.

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