Survival of Bodily Death

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Frederic Myers CD-Rom and the History of Science

Bob Rosenberg

Attending this conference for the first time, historian of science Bob Rosenberg gave a brief overview of his work on creating a CD-Rom of Frederic Myers's two-volume Human Personality that will accompany the book Irreducible Mind. Rosenberg discussed with the group some of the pros and cons of including an annotated bibliography of psychical research as part of the CD-Rom. In general, Rosenberg is pleased with the version he has produced using contemporary digital copying technologies.

After discussing the CD-Rom, Rosenberg built upon Murphy's comments about advances in the history of science. Rosenberg made an interesting point about the viability of the survival hypothesis by drawing an analogy to a classic dispute in the history of science that occurred over estimates about the age of the earth. In the late nineteenth century when scholars were wrestling with the implications of Darwin's theory of natural selection, they realized that it implied an extremely gradual view of evolutionary change and thus necessitated a much more ancient age for the earth. In order for natural selection to work its magic by selecting the most advantageous random mutations in a given species, the earth's age must be far older, and not by a few years but on the order of several magnitudes. According to the best estimates of the time by esteemed geologists like Sir Charles Lyell, the fossil record indicated that the earth's age was around 500 million years old. Lyell said that the most recent geologic era, called the Cenozoic, alone must span at least 80 million years.

This estimate, however, contradicted the magniloquent pronouncements from another esteemed British scientist of the time, the physicist Lord Kelvin (aka William Thomson). Kelvin was one of the leading figures involved with the emerging science of thermodynamics, which studied the entropic processes of decay of energy and dissipation of heat. In 1868 (nine years after Darwin's Origin of Species was published in 1859) Kelvin's calculations for the continuous cooling of the earth led him to assert that its age was about one hundred million years—far less than what the geologists and Darwinian gradualists estimated. At the time, Kelvin and his colleagues claimed that their mathematical calculations were based on the reliable laws of physics—in contrast to the flimsy estimates of geologists who studied layers of rocks and ancient fossils to reconstruct the age of the earth. A classic stand-off between two intellectual disciplines was apparent: Were the geologists and Darwinians right or the physicists? This tense situation persisted throughout the late nineteenth century. It hovered like an albatross over the heads of Darwin and his intellectual ally Thomas Huxley and kept them in a somewhat defensive posture among the scientific nobility of Victorian England. Nonetheless, both Darwin and Huxley insisted that there must be some faulty assumption informing Kelvin's view.

As one might expect, it took major scientific advances for the notable lacuna of several millions years to be accounted for. Those advances came in the form of startling discoveries about radioactivity by at first Henri Becquerel in 1896 and then shortly thereafter by Pierre and Marie Curie in 1898 and 1903. (The Curies would become double Nobel prize-winners for, inter alia, their discovery of radium and polonium.) In 1903 Pierre Curie announced that radioactive decay generates a steady supply of energy in the form of heat. Soon, geologists realized that such decay had been occurring in the earth for millions of years and thus Kelvin's estimate was missing a crucial piece of information. Importantly, the new physics of radioactivity showed that this decay was a slow and steady process and thus could help offset the cooling effect that Kelvin had calculated.

After telling this story, Rosenberg pointed out that the key discovery that validated the controversial gradualist theory of natural selection did not come from the evolutionary sciences of geology or biology but from changes in physics. Thus, analogously, Rosenberg suggested that an unexpected advance in another branch of science may be the key to the survival hypothesis being taken more seriously. Right now the survival hypothesis is similar to Darwin's gradualist theory in the late nineteenth century: it is highly controversial and upsetting to contemporary sensibilities in the intellectual hierarchy.

As he concluded, Rosenberg noted that in the late nineteenth century, Thomas Huxley (called Darwin's "bulldog" for his mettlesome defense of natural selection) was a devoted materialist who compared the human mind to a whistle on a steam engine; it is merely a side-effect, or epiphenomenon, of the regular functioning of the human body and brain. Nearly a century before Huxley, Kant had been wakened from his dogmatic slumber by the trenchant arguments of David Hume in the late eighteenth century. In a similar manner, Frederic Myers's own desire to write Human Personality was sparked in part by Huxley's overweening materialism and his epiphenomenal view of the human mind.

Conclusion

It is often a sign of changing times that a prominent stalwart of the intellectual elite will stubbornly maintain the tenets of the old worldview even in the face of new evidence that dramatically calls for them to be discarded. After radioactivity was discovered and new extended estimates for the age of the earth started to appear in the early twentieth century, Lord Kelvin publicly contested the new science of radioactive decay and maintained a rear-guard position by defending his calculations until his death in 1907. Perhaps Kelvin's actions a century ago can serve as a useful analogy for us today: Will the staunchly reductive materialist Dan Dennett, whose argument that consciousness and the mind can be explained exclusively by the chemistry of the brain, be the out-dated Lord Kelvin of our own era? Will Dennett, like Kelvin, go to his grave insisting the mind is simply the brain—simply an epiphenomenon of the physical body? Like the surprise discovery of radioactivity, perhaps an unsuspected advance in consciousness studies will be the straw that breaks the materialistic camel's back and allows the evidence for the survival hypothesis to finally get a fair hearing?

As the conference drew to a close, there remained cheerful enthusiasm to stay the course—to continue the book project and chip away at the materialist edifice that dominates the contemporary sciences of mind. Ed Kelly and Adam Crabtree are looking forward to adding to Irreducible Mind the digital CD-Rom of Frederic Myers's classic work Human Personality. As greetings were exchanged and final embraces shared, plans were made to meet again next year to further refine the book, to assess the latest evidence from the field, and to critique theories that attempt to explain the survival of bodily death.

Conferences Menu | **Summary Home**
Discussion of "Irreducible Mind" and William James | **Hypnotic Suggestion for Surgery Patients** | **Update on Evolutionary Theory conference** | **How Reincarnation May Generate Complexity** | **Comments on Paul Edwards** | **Reflections on Kant, Myers, Schopenhauer, and Whitehead** | **The Many Faces of Creativity** | **Responses to Ken Wilber's Essay on Subtle Energies and Reincarnation** | **Frederic Myers CD-Rom and the History of Science** |

About Esalen CTR
General Calendar
Web Links
Home

Leading Scholars
Articles & Book Reviews
Meditation Archives
Extraordinary Functioning Archives
Scholarly Resources

Beyond Fundamentalism
Survival Research
Esoteric Renaissance
Past CTR Conferences

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