

Survival of Bodily Death
An Esalen Invitational Conference
May 2 to 7, 2004

Comments on Ken Wilber and Subtle Bodies
Michael Grosso

Michael Grosso presented on Monday afternoon and focused on the hypothesis that there may be subtle bodies that transcend the mere physical (or gross) body. Grosso started by making a number of points about Ken Wilber's proposals about subtle bodies in the essay "Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies." Grosso thinks that Wilber, unfortunately, is not familiar enough with the core data for survival. Thus, he does not consider possibilities for survival other than reincarnation. Survival in another world is a distinct possibility Wilber might consider.

Grosso said there are three ways that the subtle body hypothesis helps survival theory:

Individuation: With subtle bodies, disembodied beings can maintain an individuated consciousness without a gross body to anchor it (ghosts, etc.).

Dualistic interactionism: Subtle bodies mediate the interaction with the physical body.

Other worlds: Subtle bodies may live in and possibly provide information about extra-physical worlds that stand in some relationship to our world.

Traditionally, the subtle body has been thought of as a finer form of matter that eludes our scientific instrumentation. But Grosso instead described a different idea called psychohylism, which maintains that all forms of consciousness have the potential to materialize new forms. This is different from the Whiteheadian view of that all physical occasions have a correlative bit of consciousness. Instead, psychohylism maintains that the mind manifests fine bodies. It can thus be regarded as an extreme form of PK.

The general idea is that mental activity—thought, desire, will, attention, intention—does influence the physical world. For example, I desire to buy a car, so I work and buy one. The idea of the car eventually manifests physically. With this simple example in mind, we can think of subtle bodies as an extension of this general process. Thus, Grosso thinks that what we call the subtle body may be created by our own mental activity. It is a latent possibility that our mind can manifest. The mental activity of our daily lives brings it into existence. What the Upanishad's called the manamaya kosha (mental sheath or subtle body) is the result of "ideoplastic force"—the force of our thoughts and ideas to change the world and to manifest reality in a physical way. Grosso said that if this idea is true, then we don't need to discover some special type of finer matter. Instead, we might start to think that subtle bodies are ad hoc and possibly only temporary. They are the creation of the ordinary and supernormal mind.

Response

To the notion of undetectable "stuff" Gary Schwartz pointed out that photons are mass-less particles and that they are detectable by normal science. Henry Stapp added that photons are mass-less only when they are at rest, which they never are. When they move, they have mass. And at the speed of light, they have finite (nonzero) mass, in accordance with Einstein's famous formula $E = MC^2$. As the wave frequency of a photon is increased, its energy is increased. This is a direct result of Max Planck's famous discovery in 1900 that led to quantum physics.

Michael Murphy commented that there is a rich lore in meditative practice about subtle matter, which comes in and out of view of advanced practitioners. For example, during extended Zen retreats, Richard Baker Roshi has reported seeing subtle bodies. Murphy also noted that there is a tremendous amount of cross-cultural lore about them.

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