

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

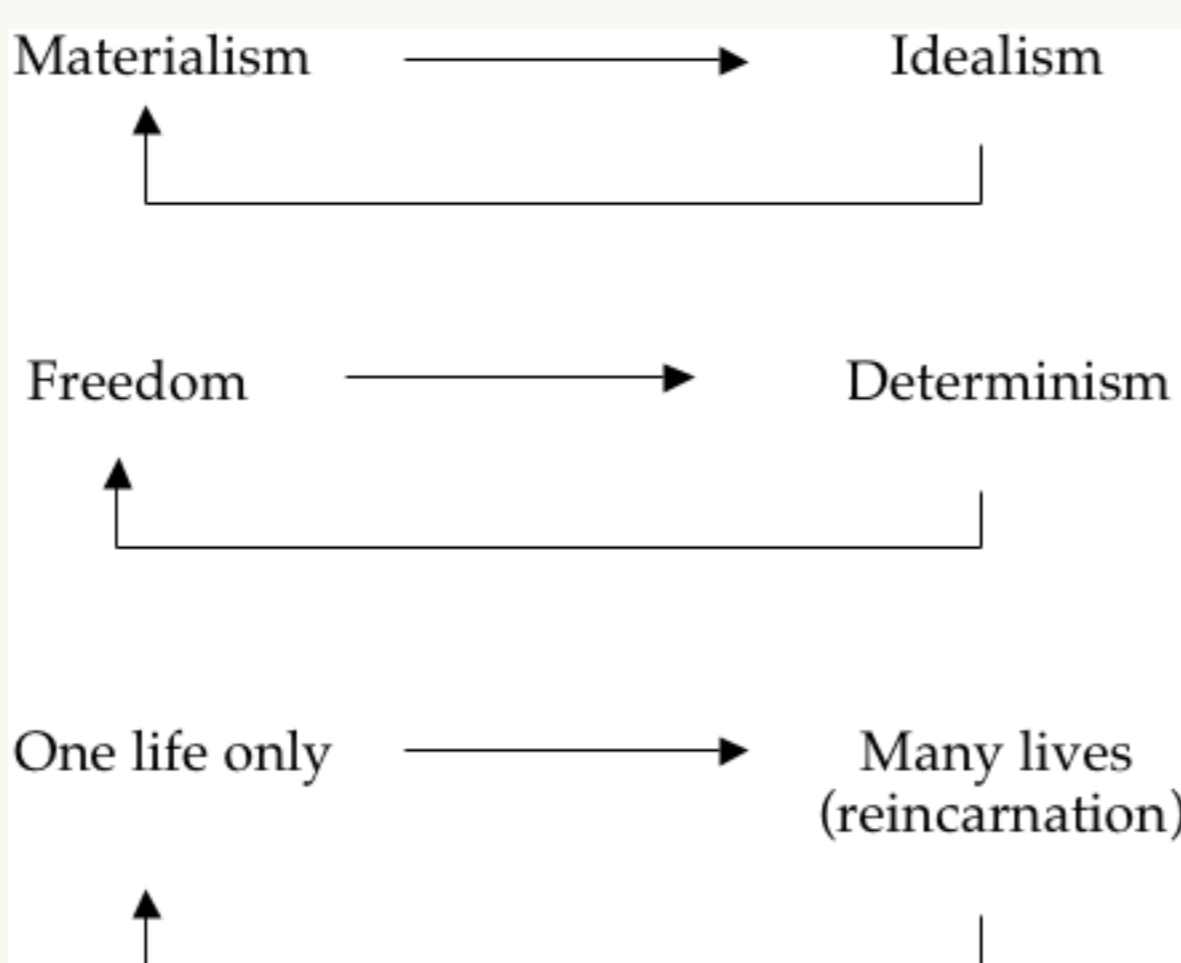
Integral Time and the Varieties of Survival
Sean Kelly

Sean Kelly joined the Survival conference for the first time this year. His presentation to the group offered a complex and multi-faceted approach to the survival hypothesis that drew upon a much richer way of conceptualizing the relationship between the past, present, and future. Kelly said that at the heart of his proposal is the idea that a more complex mode of thinking—one that can see paradoxical opposites as mutually generative—is crucial if we are to avoid a simplistic and reductive understanding of the survival issue. This type of "complex thinking" has been pioneered by the French scholar Edgar Morin, whom Sean Kelly studied with in Paris in the 1980s. According to Kelly, a truly "integral" view of time should be robust enough so that multiple and seemingly contradictory views of survival are maintained, instead of diminished or excluded.

Complex Thinking: The Circulation Between "Opposites"

Kelly said that complex thinking has been intuited by many scholars but in different ways. For example, Romantics like Coleridge called it "intuitive reason." Hegel and Kant called it Vernunft, in contrast to Verstand. Sri Aurobindo made reference to a higher mental capacity called the "Overmind." And Ken Wilber has written about what he calls "vision-logic." What Sean Kelly likes about Morin's particular formulation of complex thinking is the emphasis it places on the circulation between two irreducible poles. So, if you go deeply into one side of the polarity, you will eventually generate its opposite—meaning that you will circulate fully through to the other side. In this manner, "truth" or a solid "foundation" are not to be found in one side or the other of a paradox. Instead, such notions reside in the circulating activity between them. Kelly said that stunted forms of rational thinking too often get bogged down in fragmented and mutually opposed options. In fact, Kant's famous Critique of Pure Reason demonstrated that theologians fail when trying to grapple with the Absolute (God or Divine), because equally coherent and rational arguments can be made for both sides of its paradoxical nature (the so-called antinomies of reason).

Kelly displayed a chart with some of the common irreducible opposites that have kept showing up in the history of ideas. Following Edgar Morin's notion of recursivity, Kelly drew circulating arrows between them to show that seeming opposites can be thought of instead as mutually entailed and generative partners that feed into and off one another:



The seemingly opposed terms above actually circulate from one side to the other. The deeper you delve into one side, the more you will generate its opposite.

Kelly said that his Canadian Catholic background impressed upon him the view that there is only one life for each of us. Yet, his more recent experiences have led him to think there may be multiple lives (reincarnation). But for many Christians, the ground of intrinsic value in this life is challenged by the latter view. With the use of complex thinking Kelly thinks it is possible to hold both of these options at once in a manner that is at once concurrent, complementary, and antagonistic.

Likewise, Kelly thinks complex thinking is indispensable to understanding the true nature of the Self. Drawing from the work of the medieval scholar Nicholas of Cusa, Carl Jung wrote that the Self is a coincidentia oppositorum (or complexio oppositorum). In other words, it is a conjunction of opposites. When reflecting on the true nature of God and the Infinite, Cusa wrote that "God is that intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Kelly thinks this paradoxical vision rings true for a whole manner of things in the cosmos. For example, at the quantum level matter is both discrete and continuous, both localized and distributed. Niels Bohr developed his complementarity principle to describe the concurrently particulate and wave-like behavior apparent in the sub-atomic realm. Thus, Bohr concluded philosophically that "the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth."

The Concurrent Holding of Two Views of Time and Survival

Kelly noted that Nietzsche, the Epicureans, and the Stoics all referred in their own way to a doctrine of "Eternal Recurrence." Given the postulation of infinity and a finite number of combinations of matter in the universe, all things must recur. Kelly's reading of Nietzsche, however, points to the intuition that our life is not repeating like a broken record, but is in some sense always happening. Leibniz's notion of "the identity of indiscernibles" suggests that if we cannot distinguish between two events, then we are justified in saying there is only one event. Kelly sees Leibniz's idea and the notion of eternal recurrence as closely related to the Christian view of the sanctity of one life only. Thus, there is no appreciable difference between an infinite series of identical lives and the idea that each of us has one life to live.

Kelly thinks this understanding also helps explain déjà vu experiences. Instead of thinking that they are memories of past lives, we might think of them as awakenings to something that is "occurring eternally." A déjà vu is an experience of a moment that is some-how always there and always happening. When we experience it, we are simply coming into resonance with what has always been there all along.

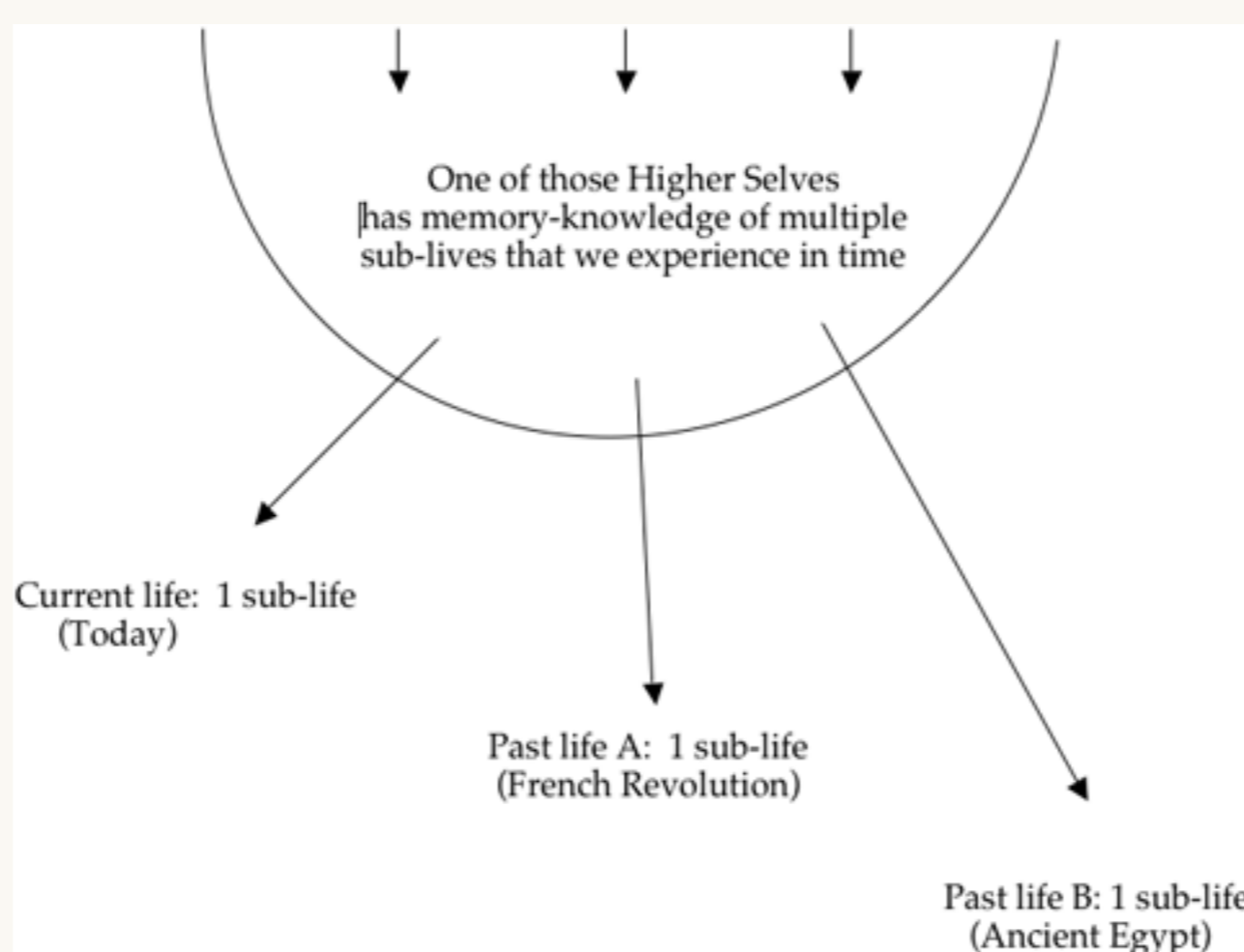
To help flesh out this approach to the survival question, Kelly said it is necessary to grapple first with two seemingly opposed views of time:

- 1) The **linear arrow of time**: stretching from past, to present, to future.
- 2) The **block view of time**: complete blocks of spatially arranged events (proposed by Einstein and developed by Julian Barbour)

With the use of complex thinking, Sean Kelly thinks these two views can be held concurrently as a complementary and antagonistic pair. They are both true, but also partial and incomplete. Recently, the English physicist Julian Barbour published *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in Physics*, in which he develops Einstein's block view of time and the universe. Barbour argues that the linear arrow of time is really an illusion. In its place, he extends Einstein's spatialized view of time into a quasi-mystical view of "instants," in which all given arrangements of the universe pre-exist in a Platonic world of Forms. Kelly thinks there is something worthy in Einstein's and Barbour's approach, but it is incomplete on its own. It is still not a fully "integral" view of time.

Sean Kelly's own pursuit of a more integral vision of time and survival has been influenced by the 19th century scholar G. T. Fechner, who was one of the founders of experimental psychology. Fechner was the first to develop the idea of a limina, or threshold, of consciousness (from the Latin limen), which influenced Frederic Myers's proposal of the term "subliminal." Most historians of psychology are not familiar with the more esoteric side of Fechner's work, which involved the postulation of a soul for plants, the earth, stars, and the cosmos. His best book on the survival thesis was called *A Little Book on Life After Death* (1835), in which he postulated that our death to this life is simply an opening into a much bigger, broader "life." When we die, we awaken out of the sleepy dream of this life and into the Soul of the World (Anima Mundi)—which harbors a series of "Higher Selves" that encompass our little selves. Kelly drew a model of Fechner's proposal to explain this idea:

The Anima Mundi Includes Multiple Higher Selves



Any given Higher Self has several sub-personalities included in it. All of the experience that occurs in human bodies in the course of linear past-present-future time is encompassed by the Higher Self's experience of its own "Now" sense of time, which is expansive enough to include our linear time. This means that a Higher Self can experience several lives through people like us in the ordinary world of linear time. When one of us—a sub-life within the Higher Self—has a past life memory through hypnotic regression or psychedelics, we are not necessarily "remembering" the past so much as resonating with one of the other sub-lives that is karmically connected (or resonant) with our own life. From the perspective of the Higher Self, though, all these sub-lives in time are already experienced in their completeness.

What is the advantage of this proposal? Well, if we are serious about the survival hypothesis, then we must account for the population explosion of recent years. The simple fact is that many more people are alive today. Fortunately, according to Kelly's development of Fechner's view, a Higher Self can have multiple sub-personalities, and therefore there is no reason that person A and person B might not experience the same past life—or same sub-personality. It may seem strange at first, but different people may recall the same past life. If we take seriously the notion that we exist within Higher Selves that are much vaster than us, then these Higher Selves should be able to draw upon (or include) multiple lives in linear time. Of course, Higher Selves are ultimately embedded in God or Spirit. Kelly said that in this view it is also possible to account better for the "life review" experience that is often reported by those that have had NDEs. In these experiences the completeness of one's life is "already present" in the altered state of the NDE.

Another advantage of this scheme is that it provides an opening to the future and the experience of pre-cognition. Like the past, the future too can be experienced through resonance. Furthermore, what we experience as the "now" is really immortal. The now moment that just occurred as you were reading this sentence is not only in the past. It is ever-occurring. On this note, Kelly pointed out that Whitehead maintains a similar idea when he says that actual occasions are not in time. Once they satisfy their aim, they become immortal, according to Whitehead's metaphysical picture. Thus, past life recall is more akin to an individual that resonates with a separate ongoing life. Kelly said that perhaps this occurs via similar karma patterning, or even similar genetic dispositions? He is not sure how it works. But it seems reasonable to think that we can "resonate in" with these other lives. Kelly pointed out that Rupert Sheldrake has developed the idea that the past is still present and accessible through an invisible field called a morphic field. Ken Wilber too has developed Sheldrake's idea of morphic fields as habits of the universe. In fact, Wilber is at work on his next installment of his Kosmos trilogy, which will be titled *Kosmic Karma* to get at this notion of universal memory and karmic patterning.

Overall, Kelly suggested that when we are thinking about past lives and reincarnation, we may want to entertain the idea that "past" lives are always-occurring. The past, and future too, is alive, and we can resonate with this living presence. From the point of view of our ego, we experience past lives as past occurrences, but from the point of view of the Higher Self, there is the possibility of experiencing multiple complete lives concurrently.

Kelly commented that some people have difficulty understanding his proposal because we are so conditioned toward thinking spatially. For example, the conceptual structure of physics is biased toward Einstein's spatialized view of four-dimensional space-time, in which time is interpreted as an extra dimension of space. Likewise with the observed quantum phenomenon called "non-locality." This refers to the instantaneous correlation of the polarization of two separated electrons (which was experimentally confirmed for the first time by one of Henry Stapp's colleagues at UC Berkeley in 1972, John Clauser). To explain this phenomenon spatially we must either postulate a faster than speed of light "signaling" between the two electrons, or say that the sub-atomic level has a "non-local" connectedness. But Kelly thinks that non-locality could just as easily be conceived as non-temporality. Light photons and quantum phenomena are non-temporal as well as non-local. As Einstein showed us, light does not age. Light knows no time. From the point of view of Newtonian space and time, we can picture a substantial soul that travels through time and incarnates into bodies and has memories of past lives. From a post-Newtonian view of space-time, however, we can imagine multiple co-existing lives that resonate with one another.

In conclusion, Kelly said that an integral view of time would allow for a variety of types of survival. The Christian emphasis on the sanctity of one unique and non-repeatable life can co-exist complexly with the Eastern emphasis on reincarnation and multiple lives across time. Overall, Kelly called on the conference participants not to settle for a simplistic view of survival. We must employ the appropriate mental tools that enable us to fully embrace the complexity of multiplicity and generative relationship.

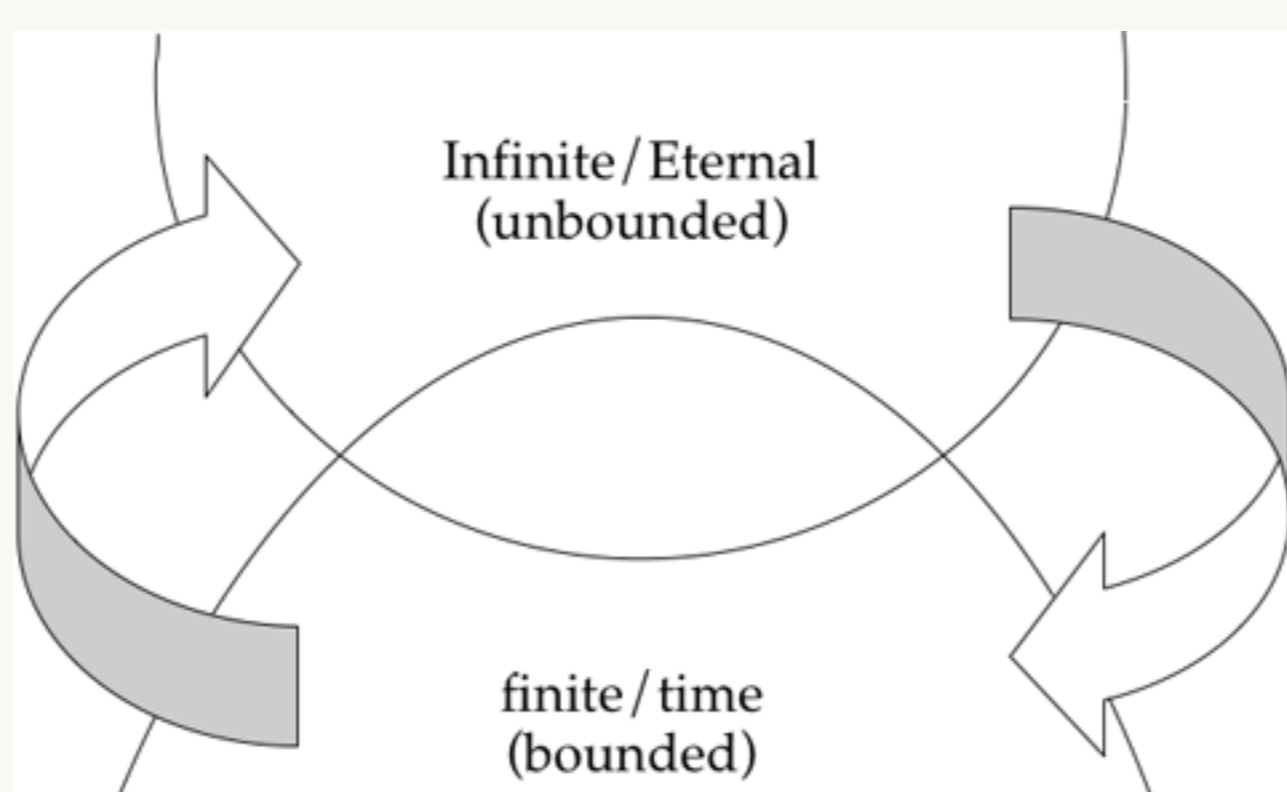
Response

Frank Poletti pointed out that Kelly's Fechnerian view is quite resonant with Adam Crabtree's research on multiple personality disorder (MPD). Where Crabtree has investigated the phenomenon of multiplicity occurring within one life and body, Kelly has applied that over the course of several lives. In this sense, we all suffer from multiple personality disorder. Each of us is a split-off personality of a Higher Self.

Inspired by Kelly's emphasis on recursion and the cycling between opposites, Gary Schwartz called attention to Kelly's first diagram. Schwartz suggested that the recursive loop between two fundamental ideas may be a macro-concept that acts as the generative process that enables evolution. The generativity between the Infinite and the finite, between matter and consciousness, between unity and diversity is not just a nice cycle but a functional process. Schwartz thinks it may allow all of life to unfold. So much of humanity's great philosophical thought has not been able to figure out why we have these dualities. Perhaps, their presence is calling us to appreciate one side through its contrast with the other. That contrast is integral to an ever-creative expression and unfolding. Each side contributes to the generativity of paradox and the constant evolution of a larger process.

In response to Schwartz's comments, Kelly drew the following diagram of Hegel's true Infinite:

Hegel's True Infinite by Sean Kelly



Kelly said that the Infinite must by definition include and generate the finite. The finite cannot be thought of as separate from it (otherwise the Infinite would itself be finite). Where else could it come from? Hegel called this notion the "true" Infinite and contrasted it with the "bad" Infinite, which cannot account for the finite. In Hegel's system, to be actual is not simply to have infinite potential, but to move in the actual world—that is, to evolve. The arrows above represent the creative movement, back-and-forth between the infinite and finite.

Frank Poletti said that he has been favorably influenced by both Sean Kelly and Edgar Morin. Their work has helped him understand the relationship between the two fundamentally irreducible "sides" that constitute the interactive dualism that this conference series has been groping to describe. There is the "mind-agency-freely-choosing" side and the "matter-mechanical-concrete-stuff" side. What Poletti likes about Kelly's and Morin's approach is that it brings forth a way of thinking (and a way of being that holds living and dynamic tensions) that does not seek out a foundation in either side, but rather pulls up to a meta-position that sees the irreducible flow between the two sides. The accent thus shifts to an interest in this flow, rather than in the search for foundations in either the mind or matter side of the pair. In a sense, this is a more "tantric" view because it seeks to creatively maintain the tension between the two sides and emphasize the energetic and processural flow that occurs between them.

Poletti also noted that the title of the book coming out of this conference is *Irreducible Mind*, and it is written to address those who have reduced the irreducible to the matter side of the polarity. Perhaps a book could be written to adequately embody the features of the "complex thinking" approach of Morin and Kelly? Instead of titling it *Irreducible Mind*, a more fitting description for it would be *Irreducible Process* or *Irreducible Complexity*.

[Conferences Menu](#) | [Summary Home](#)

[Click here for the Conference Participants](#) | [Discussion of the book "Irreducible Mind"](#) | [Quantum Physics and the Psycho-Physical Nature of the Universe](#) | [Comments on Ken Wilber and Subtle Bodies](#) | [Survival in a Multi-World Cosmology of the Book](#) | [Feedback and Systemic Memory: Implications for Survival](#) | [Integral Time and the Varieties of Survival](#) | [Reports from Experimentalists and Empiricists](#) | [The Necessity for an Ascent/Descent Model](#) | [Non-local Perception and Time-Reversed Experience](#) |

[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](#)