

Survival of Bodily Death  
An Esalen Invitational Conference  
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Survival in a Multi-World Cosmology of Subtle Realms  
Eric Weiss

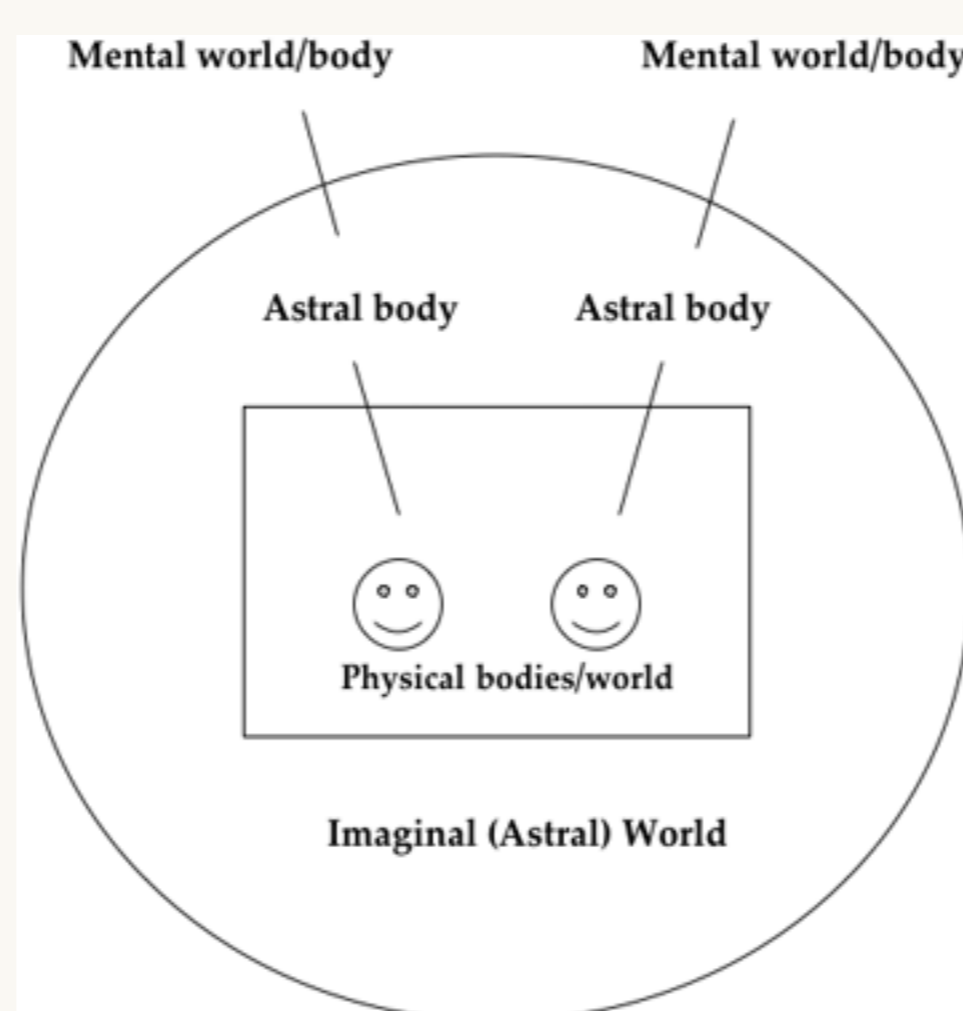
**Eric Weiss** is a scholar of Sri Aurobindo and A.N. Whitehead. He recently completed his doctoral dissertation titled "The Doctrine of the Subtle Worlds," in which he integrates the work of these two prodigious thinkers from East and West. According to Weiss, Whitehead provides a unique metaphysical picture that is true to quantum mechanics and relativity and yet still fits well into Sri Aurobindo's larger multi-world cosmological scheme. Weiss's presentation to the Survival conference looked at the following questions from a Whiteheadian and Aurobindonian point of view: What is continuous through a soul's successive lives? And, more importantly, where does a soul find itself after its physical body dies? In doing so, Weiss emphasized the need to understand how causality works in the subtle realms of dream and imagination, and, furthermore, how causality works between those realms and our own physical realm here on earth.

Weiss started by describing Whitehead's critique and re-visioning of the worldview of modern, mechanistic science. In the late 1920s Whitehead developed his main work *Process and Reality* in response to the recent discoveries of relativity and quantum mechanics. In fact, Whitehead wrote his own mathematical version of relativity because he did not like Einstein's! Whitehead sought to create a metaphysical view that deliberately shows how consciousness, purpose, and aesthetics are intimately woven into the causal story of science. In his scheme, consciousness and matter are two sides of one continuous procession of "actual occasions." Each actual occasion is a moment of experience filled with purpose and value. Drawing on William James, Whitehead said that actual occasions are like drops of experience. Experience comes in drops or as nothing at all. These occasions of experience comprise the final ontological basis of the universe—all the way up and all the way down. Thus, all emergent properties (e.g., the emergence of life and mind) are still comprised of actual occasions, even though they are of a "higher" grade than the "lower" grade occasions that comprise inanimate matter. What Weiss pointed out about Whitehead is that he wove both formal and final causes (in Aristotle's sense) into his metaphysical scheme, whereas mechanistic science deals exclusively in material and efficient causes.

To get his points across about the nature of the subtle worlds, Weiss gave a brief explanation of modern science. Scientists access the physical world by first ignoring all of our experiences except those that come from our external senses, and then, within the data of the external senses, they pay attention only to those highly focused (mostly visual and tactile) experiences that can figure in operations of measurement. Weiss further pointed out that measurement can only take place in a space that can be represented in terms of a metrical geometry in which parallel lines can be defined. Renaissance painters like Giotto and Leonardo da Vinci were some of the first people in the West to develop this rigorous perspectival geometry. What is crucial to understand is that all modern science is based on the assumption that physical things exist in a metrical space. All precise mathematical measurement is possible only in this context. Weiss pointed out that scientific experiments systematically measure the physical world with rigid rods (rulers) or periodic oscillators (clocks). Any accurate measurement must apply "here" as well as "over there." Two feet must mean two feet, no matter where you are standing, and that only occurs if there is a structure of parallel lines linking measurements. What we call "causal interactions" are the forces propagated in geometrical patterns in a metrical space. So-called efficient causes travel along these routes, and Newtonian science is the attempt to accurately measure those forces and calculate their trajectories. Following Whitehead, Weiss calls this geometrical way of cutting up the world a "scheme of indication." The modern scientific scheme focuses on the propagation of efficient causes among inorganic things (i.e., matter). Weiss pointed out, however, that in Whiteheadian terms, the scheme of indication binding together inorganic entities (metrical space) need not be the same as the scheme of indication binding together higher grade occasions such as those that preside over living things.

With this background in mind, Weiss noted that we already live in multiple worlds without really paying attention to them. For example, right now as you are reading this conference summary you might start day dreaming and imagine something you want to do or see. You are imagining another world and your attention might get completely absorbed into it so that it might become a dream, or a lucid dream, or an out of body experience. Weiss's main suggestion is that many imaginary worlds are actually real worlds, which contain many entities, mutually external to each other, and interacting according to causal laws which are quite different from those in the physical world. In these worlds the rigid geometrical measurements of modern science are impossible. If our imagination is rich or if we are dreaming lucidly or having an out of body experience, we may even find disincarnate personalities and the worlds they live in that defy the limitations of ordinary physics. There can even be different kinds of "matter" in these other subtle worlds. Weiss displayed a diagram to help explain:

Diagram of the simultaneity of multiple worlds



Echoing Michael Grosso's presentation (though not necessarily agreeing with him), Weiss posed the question: What makes the matter of the subtle worlds more subtle? Weiss thinks that Whitehead's scheme offers a new definition of "subtlety"—one that is very different from the more Newtonian ideas that were in the background of the Theosophical presentations of the subtle world idea (Leadbetter, Bessant, Bailey). To explain, Weiss said we need to consider how one's intentions can be expressed through 3 different mediums of expression:

**One's physical body:** I kick a can, for example. This medium is subject to rigid physical laws (gravity, etc.).

**One's imagination:** A more supple medium of expression/experience with more supple and responsive stuff than physical matter, but a matter that is not entirely amenable to the will, as many have experienced in bad dreams and negative fantasies.

**One's thoughts:** The most malleable stuff of all. We can generally shape our thoughts with our will, but even thoughts have a certain logic of their own, and they can present some resistance when we try to change them.

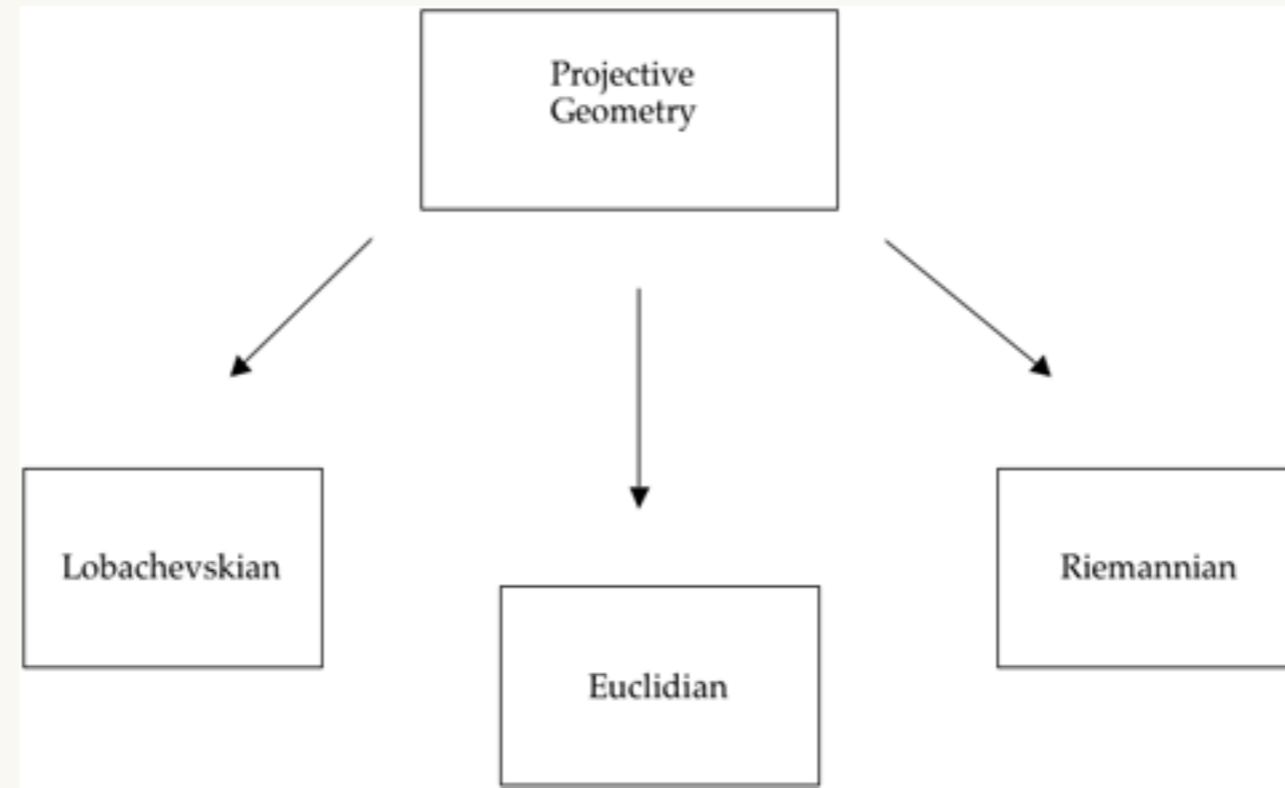
In all three of these worlds, the 3 Processes that Henry Stapp described in his presentation happen. Weiss described how Stapp's 3 Processes are applied in the physical, imaginal, and mental realms:

	Process 1 (choice)	Process 2 (mechanism)	Process 3 (feedback)
Mental	Abstract choice	Evolution of meanings without images	The meaning or shape of our thoughts
Imaginal (Astral)	Desire motivated choice	Evolution of imaginal archetypes	The results of our imagination
Physical	Scientists choosing via quantum experiments	Schrödinger's wave equation	Actual physical sense-based feedback

↑  
Increasing Freedom  
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What makes matter more subtle in the imaginal and mental realms is that Process 2 allows more possibilities for Process 1 to act upon. In those realms, Process 1 is much less restricted. There is less local causation and more play for Process 1 than in comparison to the physical matter of atoms. In the imaginal (or astral) realm, Process 2 may not be describable mathematically because the metrical geometry breaks down. Weiss said the key to remember is that something is more subtle when it is more responsive to our intentions.

What is experience like in these other realms? Dreams, lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, etc., take place in a space characterized by a non-metrical geometry without parallel lines. Weiss noted that the way we break up the world using Euclidian geometry is simply a convenience. In the history of ideas, the early and mid-19th century was a groundbreaking time for the emergence of different, more malleable geometries. In 1824 Karl Fredrich Gauss proposed that there may be alternatives to Euclidian space-time. Then in 1840 the Russian Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevski published some of these ideas (and lost his job!). Shortly thereafter, in 1854 the German mathematician Georg Riemann lectured on an alternative geometry in which the sum of the angles of a triangle would be greater than 180 degrees (the lecture was published in 1867). Lobachevski's and Riemann's geometry are both curved in ways that Euclidian geometry is not. But as long the curvature is uniform, then parallel lines remain even. In the twentieth century, these three geometries were derived from an even more fundamental geometry called projective geometry, in which parallel lines are not defined.



Of note: It was while Lobachevski and Riemann were developing alternative geometries that the painter Edouard Manet became frustrated with the strict perspectival space that had reigned since the Renaissance. Manet unveiled his historically famous, highly controversial, and perspective-violating painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon in the Grass) in 1863.

Weiss thinks that we dream in a space that can be characterized by a projective geometry. In the subtle realms of imagination and dream, there is no need to traverse every intervening point to get from one place to another. There is, however, a type of resonance between one's thoughts and experiences. If, in an astral space, I feel or think about a person, then the person may suddenly appear in front of me. The more I can imagine something clearly, the closer it will come. Thus, one cannot define numerically how far away things are because there are different laws of perspective. In such dreams we know and see that we are in a scene of some kind with geometrical properties, but they are non-Euclidian. Weiss speculates that a scheme of "morphic" or "attentional" resonance determines the distance within these realms.

Furthermore, the level of causal interaction is richer in these realms. Whereas the metrical and Euclidian-based sciences grant only efficient causes, in dreams it seems possible to cause things through empathic intention alone. Formal and final causes become more dominant and causally effective than efficient ones. Our "bodies" seem more responsive and expressive too. We look and feel differently in the dream realm, in particular the boundaries of our bodies are more fluid. Using Stapp's terminology, Process 1 is less localized and more diffuse.

One of Weiss's central points in his presentation was that each of us lives in an imaginal body right now! We never leave our imaginal bodies even when we are awake. The way we see the physical world (which is, according to science, nothing but energies in a void) is the same way that we see things when we are dreaming — as a colorful, significant scene. Thus, we are already seeing the physical world from our astral bodies. When we die to the physical body, we find ourselves in the astral body, which we are already occupying before death. A simple way to get a sense of this is to reflect on the fact that when we day dream, we can completely give our attention to it (we might even fall asleep). In this way we are accessing the subtle worlds just by shifting our attention. Thus, we are not leaving this world and traveling some where else so much as just shifting our attention to a world that we are always already embedded in. Likewise, when we dream at night, we just release into the subtle body that is always here all the time. We are already in it right now. When we die, we die into our various subtle bodies by letting go of the physical one.

So, why don't we notice this more often? Weiss said it's a problem of differentiation. For example, when a child is born, it is not differentiated from the world. A baby is one with the world and lacks ego boundaries. When a child bites his thumb several times, he soon realizes that it is different from biting his blanket. Likewise, in the subtle worlds, we are like babies who don't clearly distinguish our bodies from the world around us. Our developmental task is to look into our own subtle feelings, emotions and thoughts, and to learn to differentiate those that our "ours" from those that belong to others. The difficulty of this task is made even more so because the boundaries between bodies are, in fact, more fluid in the subtle worlds. Nonetheless, accomplishing this task is the key to having lucid experience in those worlds.

Weiss suggested that our normal way of thinking about the subtle bodies is inverted. We usually think that our subtle, inner experiences are somehow generated by the activities of the physical body. Instead, Weiss suggested, the entity to which we apply the word "I" is already a mental body, existing in a mental world, which is incarnated in an imaginal body in the astral world, which is then incarnated into a physical body. When we wake up in the morning, the more encompassing mental and astral bodies just focus all of their attention through the physical body; they forget, temporarily, their larger and freer existence.

Weiss said that from a Whiteheadian point of view, what we call reincarnation can be explained as a simple extension of what Whitehead calls "personal order." Briefly, any continuing entity (such as a human personality) is a chain of actual occasions which succeed each other in time like beads on a string. These personally ordered societies have the characteristic that they transmit memories down the line in a very full and complete form. An analysis of personal order reveals that this very complete memory transmission is, in part, due to the fact that all of the actual occasions in the personality have a certain commonality of character (a common formal cause). It is because we share a common character with all of the occasions of our past in this lifetime that the memories of those occasions are as available to us as they are. Even if we assume that the particular chain of occasions making us up ceases at death (and this is not a necessary conclusion in Whitehead's system), then it is nonetheless possible for another such chain to start at some future location in space-time. Than new chain, then, would have privileged access to "my" memories by virtue of its identity of character. The influence of "my" occasion on its life would be part of its "karma."

Overall, Weiss suggested that reincarnation, the subtle worlds, and parapsychology will not be taken seriously—or understood properly—until there is greater specificity about the routes of causal transmission among non-physical events. To fully elucidate these relations, we will need to conduct a much deeper examination of the "geometry of experience," and we will also have to develop a logic of qualitative resonance. Weiss believes that these two disciplines, understood within the context of a metaphysical scheme which integrates Sri Aurobindo with Alfred North Whitehead, will evolve into a scientific method capable of dealing with all parapsychological phenomena.

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