

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

The Necessity for an Ascent/Descent Model
Adam Crabtree

Adam Crabtree has been attending this conference since its inception in December 1998 and has given several extensive presentations covering a variety of views on the survival question, in particular he has addressed his own specialty, which is the topic of multiple personality disorder (MPD) and the human experience of multiplicity in general. The interested reader is welcome to view previous conference summaries at the Esalen CTR website for details on these presentations. In addition, in the articles and book reviews section of the same website there is a colorful PDF document that has several diagrams of the human mind by different psychologists and philosophers, which Crabtree compiled together into one document.

In his presentation at this year's conference Crabtree offered some critical commentary and feedback relevant to the pending book project Irreducible Mind and made some comments directed at the more theoretical side of the conference material as well. He started by pointing out that Frederic Myers had a top-down model for explaining the human self and the survival question. To coordinate the experience of multiplicity in his scheme (such as the superliminal self and secondary personalities) Myers postulated a Subliminal Self (with a capital "S") that provides an overall unity and meaning to our various experiences. In contrast, other scholars have proposed bottom-up approaches, such as McDougall in 1911, and, more recently, David Ray Griffin's Whiteheadian scheme, which has several bottom-up elements to it.

Crabtree said that there are some unresolvable problems with the various bottom-up approaches that he thinks this conference would do well to address. For example, in all bottom-up approaches there is some unit that is doing the work—some module or holon or actual occasion, etc. In all bottom-up approaches these atomistic units get combined and unified into higher-leveled units. So, for example, in the Griffin-Whitehead scheme so-called higher grade occasions somehow emerge and/or evolve out of lower grade ones. But for Crabtree this is exactly where the rub is: How exactly does something "higher" emerge/evolve out of something lower? Just to say that it does so is not enough. According to Crabtree, the word "emergence" is really just a placeholder for a process that cannot be adequately explained in the bottom-up approaches. Even if one assents to the Whiteheadian view, there is still this fundamental problem of how the emergence of higher grade occasions actually works. In brief, Crabtree said that this flaw is a crucial reason he thinks that bottom-up systems just can't account for survival. Of course, top-down approaches are not without their flaws too, but at least they are not subject to this criticism.

Crabtree next turned to a more detailed examination of the Whiteheadian view. When it is viewed from a certain standpoint, Crabtree said he can see how it might be regarded as a top-down approach. The key in this respect is Whitehead's notion of "God." Crabtree read out loud some key passages (as summarized by Eric Weiss) where Whitehead defines "God":

- * The factor in existence that establishes an initial relevance among all possibilities, among which actual occasions can freely decide.
- * The One who makes the final decision about formal causes of any new concrescence.
- * The ultimate source of order in the universe.
- * The One who provides an overall aim to the creative advance, including coherency, depth, richness, and moral and aesthetic experience.

After reading these passages, Crabtree concluded that according to the Whiteheadian view, God must be involved in all formal and final causes. Thus, Crabtree said that Whitehead's scheme is an echo of the West's traditional neo-Platonic ascent/descent metaphysics. Ultimately there is no way to get around this crucial issue: for a viable account of the survival issue there must be some type of ascent/descent scheme. Crabtree added that such a view is also quite central to an intelligible notion of the evolution of the universe as well.

Eric Weiss responded briefly to Crabtree's comments on Whitehead by stating that he thinks the best way to resolve the issue of ascent/descent that Crabtree highlighted can be done by distinguishing between "metaphysics" and "cosmology." According to Weiss, "metaphysics" is a fundamental set of ideas about what there is, while "cosmology" is the story we tell about how things unfold. For Weiss, the ascent/descent issue should properly be considered as a cosmological issue and not as part of metaphysics per se.

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