

Survival of Bodily Death
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Metaphysical Assumptions and the Survival Hypothesis

Eric Weiss

Eric Weiss participated in this conference for the first time in 2004, at which time he gave an extensive presentation concerning how A.N. Whitehead's metaphysical system (often called "process philosophy" or the "philosophy of organism") not only can offer a coherent way to explain much of the survival data but also fits remarkably well with Sri Aurobindo's mystical cosmology. Weiss showed that when Whitehead and Aurobindo are combined, they offer us a complete system into which the survival evidence fits naturally. (Note: for further background on this, please see the conference summary from 2004. Briefly put, Whitehead was a well-regarded mathematician and systematic philosopher of the early 20th century, and Sri Aurobindo was a prolific Indian author, mystic, and sage of the same time period.) During his presentation at the 2005 conference, Weiss addressed the nature of metaphysics and how that topic applies to the goals of the survival conference at this juncture. Because this multi-year conference is now turning its attention to theorizing about the survival data, Weiss felt that we should all get clear about just what we mean by "theorizing," "theory-building," "model-building," and "metaphysics."

Weiss pointed out that A.N. Whitehead called philosophical inquiry the critique of abstractions. What does this mean? To explain, Weiss said that we all live our lives with a common set of abstractions that enable us to function. In our Western scientific culture, we have a commonly agreed upon set of abstractions that act as our guiding framework for interpreting reality. For example, Newton's physics of gravitational pulls and pushes and its description of atomic bits of matter is the convenient set of abstractions that helps us calculate how to fire a cannon ball and avoid a pine cone falling from a tree.

The crucial idea that Weiss emphasized is that the branch of philosophy called "metaphysics" is really a self-reflective intellectual process of critiquing our own convenient assumptions and abstractions about reality. And furthermore, this is exactly the activity we need to do right now in this conference series in order to create an intelligible framework into which the survival hypothesis can fit naturally. Posed as question: In what metaphysical framework (or set of assumptions and abstractions about reality) does survival make sense?

Weiss said there a number of well-known choices that we could make for our metaphysical framework, such as:

1. Dualism (mind and matter are radically separate)
2. Interactive dualism (mind and matter are real but influence one another)
3. Actual occasions (the basis of Whitehead's neutral monism)

Weiss believes that Whitehead's metaphysical scheme provides us with an intelligible way to understand the survival data. Weiss used his presentation time to introduce some of the core areas of his own development of Whitehead's thought. What follows is a brief summary of these ideas.

Actual occasions and the phenomenology of inner experience

Weiss started by describing the core metaphysical postulate of Whitehead's system: actual occasions. In standard physics, scientists discuss things like "atoms" and "electromagnetic fields," but Whitehead critiqued these terms as convenient abstractions of a deeper more primal reality of continuous events. Whitehead thought that the closest abstraction to describe what is actually happening is flashing moments of experience. He called these moments actual occasions. Weiss noted just how radically different a starting point this is for a metaphysical framework. In particular, Whitehead's system locates intentionality (choice, agency, subjectivity) at the most basic level in the universe in these occasions. According to Whitehead, actual occasions are intentional acts with purpose and value. What a scientific experiment might perceive from the outside as an atom is more primarily composed of thousands of events that are intentional on the inside. What we perceive as an exterior universe is always experienced as an interior from the other side.

How did Whitehead come to such a radically different view? One reason is that he had a sophisticated phenomenological analysis of how we make abstractions about our own human experience. For example, when we say the familiar phrase, "you are in the room," we normally bring up in our awareness a series of familiar abstractions about what that means. In particular, most of us start to think that we are spectators inside an external room that we can act upon if we want to. But Whitehead's thought asks us to reflect carefully on our experience and our descriptions of it, so that we can emancipate ourselves from these faulty and inadequate abstractions away from the unclouded truth. Weiss said that although Whitehead did not describe his philosophy with this following term, he essentially rehabilitated the "Hermetic principle," which is usually translated as "as above, so below." This feature of Whitehead's metaphysics appears in his basic view that since I am a real entity in the world, then by studying my own interior experience I can learn about that same interiority in the rest of the universe. So, the Hermetic Principle might be re-phrased as "as inside me, so outside and all around me." Because there is an inside and an outside to my own experience, then everything else has this same inside/outside structure. Insides go all the way down to the level of actual occasions, which are not static things but processural moments of experience. In this way, for Whitehead, what we call "consciousness" is intrinsic to existence at the smallest and most fundamental level. There is no such thing as a purely dead, physical thing. There is only the living process of moments of experience. Even quantum events have some degree of "interiority" or inner feeling. Whitehead thus starts his metaphysical system with a radically new metaphysical category called actual occasions to account for this view of the universe.

Weiss said that this has implications for how we think about the evidence for survival. What survives death is typically thought of as a thing, like a "soul." But what if what survives death is not a thing but a process? This view fits well with Whitehead's overall scheme of actual occasions, which are processes of experience. A "soul" that survives death and is detached from the physical body could be explained as a unique and continuous organization of actual occasions within Whitehead's metaphysical scheme.

The Mental Pole and Physical Pole

But not all actual occasions are the same in Whitehead's view. Instead, there is a hierarchical grade to them that is recognizable and distinguishable by two factors: the relative dominance of the mental pole and physical pole. What does this mean?

All occasions have a mental pole that unifies their experience into a coherent perception so that they can make intentional decisions. The dominance of this mental pole is slight when we consider smaller units of reality like atoms, but it grows in relative proportion to the physical pole as we come up the evolutionary ladder of complexity. So, for example, the mental pole becomes most dominant in humans, because we are highest up that ladder. In this way, Whitehead can explain how humans have much greater freedom of choice than atoms, even though both are comprised of actual occasions. Both poles go up and down the ladder of complexity, but the relative dominance of the mental increases the higher up one goes. And as that dominance increases, so does one's amount of freedom and choice.

Weiss noted that Whitehead's scheme of mental and physical poles addresses the so-called "binding problem" in cognitive science at the deepest level of reality. For Whitehead, this problem is not a problem at all, because it is solved all the way down at the level of actual occasions. Even actual occasions are unified from the beginning, so there is no need to figure out how one person's experience is unified (or "bound") into a coherent picture.

Weiss also noted that the issue of subtle matter and subtle bodies can be better explained by the relative dominance of the mental and physical poles. Despite how subtle and diaphanous matter gets in our subtle bodies, it will still have both of these poles. Physical bodies and subtle bodies (auras, etc.) are both composed of actual occasions. The importance difference is the grade of those occasions.

Causation and inherited memory from the past

According to Whitehead's scheme, to be real is to have the potential to cause other occasions and be caused by them. We normally experience that the world of events has causes and that we can act causally on this world. But for Whitehead, our standard experience of causation is re-framed from the standard view of pushes and pulls to a much more temporal explanation of causality. Causation is seen as an inheritance of the entirety of the past. In this way, past events cause future events. Even intentions and moods are transmitted from past to present. Whitehead's view is thus a time-sensitive metaphysics.

Weiss pointed out that if we really think about it, we are always receiving the most recent moment in our present experience. We have no choice about this, but we do have a choice about how we will act after receiving it. Weiss then noted that what we call memory is an efficient cause from the past as well. We are constantly receiving past feelings of the entire universe in each moment. Causation is thus a transmission of both feeling and memory.

Given this view, it is striking to note that all of us are already deeply telepathic with our own past. This is true because a memory of something that happened 15 years ago can still affect our emotions today. Whitehead's metaphysics is thus thoroughly telepathic, but in a much broader and more basic sense. Weiss said that what parapsychologists call telepathy is actually a specific and more localized phenomenon within the larger field of inherited experience that is a standard feature in Whitehead's metaphysics.

Whitehead and Psi

So, how does this help us with the survival hypothesis? According to Weiss, a correct reading of Whitehead's metaphysics reveals that psi phenomena (like telepathy) are normative. The whole edifice of explanation is turned upside down. Instead of starting with the limits of physical causation, and attempting to explain trans-physical communication like psi, Whitehead created a metaphysical system in which all moments of the universe are potentially in contact with one another from the start. The physical world is thus seen as a limit on a larger world of telepathy and connection. If we assume a connected world of actual occasions, then we must explain how a limited physical one is derived from that—not the other way around, as is done by most scientists.

Subtle bodies and subtle worlds

In the last section of his presentation Weiss discussed subtle bodies and subtle worlds. Weiss wrote his dissertation on the topic of the subtle worlds, and he thinks that we must have a clear account of the causal structure of these worlds and their relationship to our own in order to adequately address the survival hypothesis.

Weiss thinks that different kinds or grades of matter exist in these different worlds. In the vital world of plants, there is a particular kind of matter, and in the mental world of ideas and thoughts, there is a higher grade of matter correlated with that world. Beyond that there are subtle worlds that we can contact directly in our own dreams at night. Weiss thinks that our experiences in our dreams are not just imaginations but real encounters in realms that have a certain causal structure of their own that is similar but different than the causal structure of our physical world. And if we take the evidence from mediums and lucid dreams seriously, then it seems that disincarnate humans live in a hierarchy of these dream worlds or subtle realms. In these contexts, there seems to be a recognizable type of functioning that occurs outside the physical body. When we are there in our dreams, we are really in a world with other entities and a distinct scenery and topology. There is even a different kind of space and time in these worlds.

At this point in his presentation Weiss made an important point, which is that we do not go to these worlds as if leaving our bodies at night. Rather, we are in these worlds already, right now, but we don't know it because our attention is so focused on the physical world. It is only at night when we are sleeping and our physical senses are shut off that the vivid reality of these worlds becomes apparent to us. So, in a very real sense, when I die, I do not go to find my subtle body, instead that body is already here right now and I simply tune into its presence. What happens when I die is similar to what happens when I fall asleep, I simply withdraw attention from my physical body and I wake up in a subtle world. And importantly, people experience this as an actual world of entities involved in a variety of causal interactions. Overall, Weiss thinks that we need to formulate a rigorous science of these subtle worlds.

In conclusion, Weiss reiterated that we need a worldview that explains memory, psi phenomena, and the other anomalous data of parapsychology, such as the evidence for survival. In the current abstractions of materialistic science, we cannot account well for these phenomena. But in Whitehead's metaphysics of actual occasions, there is a much clearer and coherent account for them. Weiss thinks as well that an articulate account of subtle worlds and their causal structure will also be crucial in the attempt to create a viable survival hypothesis.

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

[A Note to Readers](#) | [Conference Participants](#) | [The Infinite Regress of the Observer and the Stubbornness of Fact](#) | [Metaphysical Assumptions and the Survival Hypothesis](#) | [Sri Aurobindo and the Survival Hypothesis](#) | [Quantum Physics and the Psycho-physical Nature of Reality](#) | [The Zeitgeist, Einstein, and Survival](#) | [On the Nature of Entangled Minds](#) | [William James and the Nature of the Personal "I"](#) | [The Later James and the Influence of Myers](#) |

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