

Survival of Bodily Death  
An Esalen Invitational Conference  
May 22 to 27, 2005

## The Infinite Regress of the Observer and the Stubbornness of Fact Adam Crabtree

The 2005 conference marked a significant turning point in the history of this conference series because the group decided to focus its attention and energy on theoretical issues. Up through 2004, the conferences largely supported the efforts of Ed and Emily Kelly as they wrote their book *Irreducible Mind*. This book updates psychology since the time of Frederic Myers in the early 20th century and adduces the best evidence in support of the survival hypothesis (that is, the hypothesis that some "consciousness" or "soul" does indeed survive the death of the human body). Now that this book is ready to appear in book stores in fall 2006, the time has arrived to address the next question: How does it all hang together? This is what a theory of survival should tell us.

**Adam Crabtree** stepped forward after the 2004 meeting and volunteered himself as the new leader of this phase of the conference series. As part of this new role, in 2005 Crabtree gave a two-part presentation to set the scene as the group turned its own attention to the issue of a survival theory. On Monday morning Crabtree started by saying there are essentially three ideas about what is meant by the notion of "survival of bodily death":

- 1) After death, I am the same person as before but lacking my body
- 2) After death, I re-identify with a higher being of which I am a sub-part
- 3) After death, my former identity completely dissolves into One Consciousness

In the first two above, there is memory that continues after the body has died. While in the third case, there is no first-person knowledge and memory involved, because whatever one is ultimately melts back into the One Consciousness. Thus, survival implies that some type of identity really does continue and has memory after the body is dead. According to Crabtree, our choice with respect to the three options above turns on what we mean by this identity or "I".

Next, Crabtree reviewed a bit of the history of inquiry into the nature of the "I". In the second half of the 19th century, Carl DuPrel published a major work on the subject, a two-volume book titled *The Philosophy of Mysticism* (published in 1885, and later translated into English in 1889). In it, Du Prel employed a dual metaphor of daytime and nighttime to describe our two egos:

- 1) The empirical ego (daytime)
- 2) The transcendental ego (nighttime)

Each person has a daytime and nighttime self, in which the nighttime self shades into the Ultimate "I" (divine self). According to Du Prel, the empirical ego is what dies at death, while the transcendental one continues.

Crabtree then described the work of military aircraft engineer J.W. Dunne and his 1934 book *The Serial Universe*. When reading this work, Crabtree was struck by Dunne's parable of the mad artist, in which he describes an infinite regress of knowers. If we are the ones who know the universe, then who knows us? This type of questioning leads to an inevitable procession all the way back to the "Ultimate Observer" or "Ultimate 'I'". While contemplating this infinite stretch, Dunne pondered whether a universe plagued by such a problem could be considered rational. In his own conclusion, Dunne offers that the universe is completely rational except for the Ultimate Observer, who is the one making the picture. For Dunne, one can never discover or explain this Ultimate Observer completely.

After describing Du Prel's and Dunne's work, Crabtree said that anyone who grapples with the issue of identity must confront the infinite regress issue at some point. Crabtree displayed a table of several philosophers and sages who have wrestled with the infinite regress issue in their work:

**Transcendental Idealism** Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Du Prel

**Phenomenology** Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre

**Psychology and Process Philosophy** James and Whitehead

**Hindu Mysticism** Ramana Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo

**Quantum Physics** Schrödinger

**Contemporary Philosophy of Mind** John Searle

Crabtree said it is interesting to note that some thinkers are "pro-regress," in the sense that they consider this an interesting phenomenon and want to understand and describe what it means. While others are "anti-regress" and want desperately to get rid of this problem. For example, John Searle might be considered an "anti-regress" thinker, because Searle claims that if we view consciousness as an "observer" then we are left with the homunculus problem (smaller and smaller homunculi one inside the other, like the famous Russian dolls). Overall, Crabtree suggested that the survival group must come to a satisfactory agreement with respect to the infinite regress of observers, if it is to bring forth an adequate theory of survival. During the second part of his presentation in the afternoon Crabtree summarized five positions that he hoped would stimulate a fruitful discussion in the group. He started by quoting a letter by William James to his more literary brother Henry concerning the nature of stubborn empirical facts:

How you produce volume and after volume the way you do is more than I can conceive, but you haven't had to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts as I do. It's like walking through the densest brush wood.

Crabtree then portrayed a number of philosophical positions with respect to the mind-body problem:

- 1) Materialistic reductionism: all mind is reducible to matter
- 2) Dualism: mind and body correlate and interact but are distinct
- 3) Mind exists but is not efficacious (or causal) in the world

Crabtree said that perhaps Thomas Huxley penned the consummate statement of material reductionism and epiphenomenalism in 1874 when he wrote:

*The consciousness of brutes and men would appear to be related to the mechanism of their body simply as a collateral product of its working. And to be as completely without any power of modifying that working as the steam whistle, which accompanies the work of a locomotive engine, is without influence upon its machinery.*

This statement was extremely influential on subsequent philosophers and the budding field of psychology. Throughout the 20th century, academic and cultural power politics led to the entrenchment of reductive materialism in the Western worldview. For example, even today, Daniel Wegner's recent book cites Huxley's 19th century views throughout the text.

But based on the stubborn facts they had observed, Myers, James, Janet, and others opposed the material reductionism of Thomas Huxley, but in the early 20th century they lacked a persuasive and coherent theory to counter-act it. As he covered the history of 20th century views on this topic, Crabtree listed an array of anti-reductive forces and thinkers, but in particular he listed five key characters for this conference group to focus on in their discussions:

- 1) Thomas Huxley: consciousness exists but has no causal role in the world. Apparent free choice is a mechanical process.
- 2) William James: thinking happens and is irreducible. Thinking and the thought-objects are intrinsically unified. What we know of an independent external reality is secondary to this more fundamental process.
- 3) Edmund Husserl: consciousness as an intentional act is the real starting point of all our knowledge. In this sense, the external world is always dependent upon consciousness.
- 4) Alfred North Whitehead: freely chosen moments of consciousness form the successive and continually evolving drops of existence that make up our world.
- 5) Henry Stapp: consciousness and free choice play an essential role in the establishment of concrete reality as we come to know it. Orthodox quantum mechanics brings into the dynamics certain conscious choices that are not determined by the currently known laws of physics but have important causal effects in the physical world.

After Crabtree laid out these five positions, a rich discussion followed that carried throughout the week. One immediate response came from Michael Murphy, who called for the group to rank the existing data for survival. What data is most assured? What data is most speculative? Based on such a ranking, the group could then venture toward a theory. Murphy said that forcing ourselves to commit to a particular theory will also force us to make choices about what data we accept as legitimate and what are not.

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