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Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality: A Brief History of the “Sursem” Project



Daniel Bianchetta

The rise of modern science, accompanied by its many technological triumphs, has led to widespread acceptance among intellectual elites of a worldview that conflicts sharply both with everyday human experience and with beliefs widely shared among the world’s institutional religions.

Most contemporary psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers of mind, in particular, subscribe explicitly or implicitly to some version of “physicalism,” the modern philosophical descendant of the “materialism” of previous centuries. On such views *all* facts are determined by physical facts alone. We human beings are thus nothing more than extremely complicated biological machines, and everything we are and do is explainable, at least in principle, in terms of our physics, chemistry, and biology—ultimately, that is, in terms of local interactions among self-existent bits of matter moving in accordance with mathematical laws under the influence of fields of force. Some of what we know, and our capacities to learn more, are built in genetically as complex resultants of biological evolution. Everything else comes to us by way of our sensory surfaces, through energetic exchanges with the environment of types already largely understood. All aspects

of mind and consciousness are generated by (or in some mysterious way identical with, or supervenient upon), neurophysiological processes occurring in the brain. We are “meat computers” in Marvin Minsky’s chilling phrase, or “moist robots” in its Dilbert parody. Mental causation, free will, and the self are mere illusions, by-products of the grinding of our neural machinery. And of course since mind and personality are entirely products of our bodily machinery, they are necessarily extinguished, totally and finally, by the demise and dissolution of the body.

There can be no doubt that this bleak vision continues to dominate mainstream scientific thinking and has contributed to the “disenchantment” of the modern world with its multifarious ills. It has also driven progressive erosion of traditional forms of religious belief. Indeed, recent years have witnessed a series of all-out attacks on religion by well-meaning defenders of Enlightenment-style rationalism such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, who clearly regard themselves and current mainstream science as reliably marshaling the intellectual virtues of reason and objectivity against retreating forces of irrational authority and superstition. For them the truth of physicalism has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, and to think anything different is necessarily to abandon centuries of scientific progress, unleash the black flood of occultism, and revert to primitive supernaturalist beliefs characteristic of bygone times.

Not everyone shares these sentiments. I, for one, represent a long-running intellectual fellowship, initially organized in 1998 by Michael Murphy, co-founder of Esalen Institute and Director of its Center for Theory and Research, whose members take a starkly different view: We think it requires astonishing hubris to dismiss *en masse* the collective experience and wisdom of a large proportion of our forebears, including persons widely recognized as pillars of all human civilization, and we believe that the single most important task confronting all of modernity is that of *meaningful* reconciliation of science and religion.

I hasten to add that for us any such “reconciliation” involves much more than simply segregating science and religion into hermetically sealed “magisteria” where they can go their separate ways in uneasy coexistence, as originally decreed by Descartes and recently advocated again by Stephen Jay Gould. Rather, we believe that emerging developments within science itself are leading inexorably toward an enlarged conception of nature, one that can accommodate realities of a “spiritual” sort while rejecting rationally untenable “overbeliefs” of the sorts targeted by critics of the world’s institutional religions. We advocate no specific religious faith, and we aspire to remain anchored in science while expanding its horizons. We

are attempting in this way to find a middle path between the polarized fundamentalisms—religious *and* scientific—that have dominated recent public discourse. *Both* science and religion, we believe, must evolve.



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Funder and Founder: John Cleese and Mike Murphy

Over the 15-year duration of the project our work has involved more than 50 participants *in toto*, roughly 20 of whom were active during any given year. Our core membership remained largely constant, but as the project evolved some members dropped out for various reasons while others were recruited to help us address specific new issues and needs as these came into focus. Each year we organized an intensive 5-day face-to-face meeting of the currently active members in the magnificent ambience provided by Esalen, supplemented by occasional smaller meetings in San Francisco or elsewhere and by extensive ongoing background interactions among particular members as needed.

Our membership has always been uncommonly diverse, including physical, biological, and social scientists, scholars of religion, philosophers, and historians of science among others, but in general terms we are scientifically-minded adults with broad interests who think of ourselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” in any conventional sense, and who are skeptical of the currently-prevailing physicalist worldview but equally wary of uncritical embrace of any of the world’s major religions with their often conflicting beliefs and decidedly mixed historical records.

We focused initially on the question of post-mortem survival (hence the nickname “Sursem,” from “survival seminar”). As Mike Murphy had clearly recognized, this is a watershed issue theoretically, because survival beliefs are common to traditional faiths but cannot be true if physicalism is correct. Furthermore, there already exists—largely unknown to believers, skeptics, and the general public alike—a sizeable body of high-quality evidence suggesting that survival *does* at least sometimes occur. We quickly realized, however, that our task was really much larger, and that we

needed to approach it in two overlapping stages: first, to assemble in one place many lines of peer-reviewed evidence demonstrating empirically the inadequacy of conventional physicalism; second, and far more challenging, to seek some better conceptual framework to take its place.

The first stage culminated in publication in 2007 of *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*.¹ Topics addressed include paranormal (“psi”) phenomena; manifestations of extreme psychophysiological influence such as stigmata and hypnotically induced blisters; prodigious forms of memory and calculation; psychological automatism and secondary centers of consciousness; near-death and out-of-body experiences, including experiences occurring under extreme physiological conditions such as deep general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest; genius-level creativity; and mystical-type experiences whether spontaneous, pharmacologically induced, or induced by transformative practices such as intense meditative disciplines of one or another sort. Collectively, these phenomena greatly compound the explanatory difficulties posed by everyday phenomena of human mental life (such as meaning, intentionality, subjective point of view, and the qualitative aspects of consciousness) that have recently been targets of intense philosophical discussion. In a nutshell, this work added a rich *empirical* dimension to what appears to be a rising worldwide chorus of *theoretical* dissatisfaction with classical physicalism as a formal metaphysical position. We seem to be at or very near a major inflection point in modern intellectual history.

Classical physicalism is definitely inadequate, but what should take its place? We have addressed this far more difficult question, the main target of the second phase of our project, essentially by struggling to understand how we individual human beings and the world at large must be constituted, in order that “rogue” phenomena of the sorts catalogued in *Irreducible Mind*—and systematically ignored or derided by mainstream physicalist science—can occur.

On the psychological side we were already committed to what historically have been called “filter” or “transmission” or “permission” models of the brain/mind relation. As developed by great pioneers of Psychical Research such as F. W. H. Myers, William James, and Henri Bergson, such models portray the brain not as the *generator* of mind and consciousness but as an organ of adaptation to the demands of life in our everyday environment, selecting, focusing, channeling, and constraining the operations of a mind and consciousness inherently far greater in capacities and scope. A central aim of the first phase of our project had been to review and re-assess Myers’s model of human personality in light of subsequent research, and we had found that the evidence supporting that model has actually grown far stronger in the century following his death. Myers and James were of course soon pushed aside by the rise of radical behaviorism with its self-conscious aping of the methods of classical physics, and that influence persists in modified form even now in mainstream cognitive neuroscience. In our view psychology has taken a hundred-year detour, and is only now

¹ Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Adam Crabtree, Alan Gauld, Michael Grosso, and Bruce Greyson, *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

becoming capable of appreciating the theoretical beachhead that our founders had already established.

The normally hidden subliminal region of the mind, “The More” of William James, is the wellspring of the latent human potentials that historically have comprised Esalen’s main practical focus. But it is also precisely these *transpersonal* aspects—especially psi phenomena and mystical experience with their deep historical and psychological interconnections, postmortem survival, and genius in its highest expressions—which jointly demonstrate that classical physicalism must give way to some richer form of metaphysics. I should perhaps add here that for me personally the first phase of our project had gone a long way toward dissolving what Gardner Murphy long ago called the “immovable object” in the survival debate—the biological objection to survival: Specifically, if physicalism is true, and mind and consciousness are manufactured entirely by neurophysiological processes occurring in brains, then survival is impossible, period. But the evidence we assembled clearly shows, I believe, that the connections between mind and brain are in fact much looser, and can be conceptualized in the alternative fashion of filter or transmission models without violence to other parts of our scientific understanding, including in particular leading-edge neuroscience and physics. That in turn invites—in fact *demand*s, we believe—a more radical overhaul of the prevailing physicalist metaphysics. Note that what is at issue here is *not* whether we will have metaphysics—because we inevitably will, whether conscious of it or not—but whether we will have good metaphysics or bad.

As we began to approach these larger metaphysical issues, we recognized that a central element of our strategy should be to bear down on conceptual frameworks both past and present that explicitly make room for rogue phenomena of the relevant sorts. To that end, philosopher Mike Grosso began systematically surveying the long and illustrious intellectual history of such conceptions, focusing mainly on Western thinkers from pre-Socratic philosophers up through Myers, James, and Bergson, and then on to more contemporary figures such as C. D. Broad, Cyril Burt, and Aldous Huxley. We also recruited a number of new members having especially relevant skills and interests. These include, for example, a number of scholars of religion who specialize in relevant forms of mystically-informed religious philosophy: Paul Marshall, author of several excellent books on mysticism, who helped us understand more fully why and how mystical experiences, although widely ignored or disparaged in our Western scientific tradition, provide crucially important pieces of the metaphysical puzzle; Greg Shaw, a specialist in the Neoplatonic tradition; Ian Whicher, on Patanjali and the yogic tradition; Loriliai Biernacki, on the 11th-century Kashmiri Tantric philosopher/sage Abhinavagupta; Jeff Kripal, on comparative religion generally; and G. William Barnard, another comparativist and author of books on James and Bergson. We approached this comparative material, of course, not with the expectation that any of these ancient systems contained all the answers, but in the interest of prospecting for common themes and useful clues as to how best to advance our theoretical purposes.

The Sursem participants, May 2010: Top (left to right): Ed Kelly, Deb Frost, Gordon Wheeler, Charles Tart, David Hufford, Adam Crabtree, Mike Murphy, Harald Atmanspacher; Middle: Henry Stapp, Mike Grosso, Jim Tucker, Bruce Greyson, Sam Yau, David Presti, Eric Weiss, Bernard Carr, Nancy Worcester; Bottom: Greg Shaw, Frank Poletti, Loriliai Biernacki, Jeff Kripal, Bob Rosenberg



We also invested considerable effort on relevant parts of the Western metaphysical tradition. Paul Marshall, for example, has continued to develop his long-gestating “monadic” theory, modified from Leibniz’s original version so as to improve its power to explain the relevant phenomena. In addition, Adam Crabtree launched an in-depth investigation of the contributions of James’s friend and colleague Charles Sanders Peirce, who took both psi and survival seriously and believed his metaphysics could explain them; and Eric Weiss further elaborated his “transphysical process metaphysics,” which combines an updated version of Whitehead with insights derived from the modern Tantric philosopher/sage Sri Aurobindo.

In keeping with our general orientation we have also emphasized potential contributions from the scientific side. Neurobiologist David Presti and I, for example, have examined filter or transmission models from a psychobiological point of view, concentrating on psi, flights of genius, and mystical experiences as primary expressions of the deeper resources of the psyche, and trying to understand what sorts of brain conditions permit or actively encourage access to these resources, and why. We also recruited several prominent physicists including Henry Stapp, who presented his general quantum-theoretic model of the mind/brain connection and began exploring its possible extensions to rogue phenomena, including psi and survival; Harald Atmanspacher, another quantum theorist, who informed us about the Pauli-Jung dual-aspect monism, and showed how it leads naturally to a theoretical taxonomy of exceptional experiences matching those actually occurring in clinical practice; and Bernard Carr, a cosmologist and former president of the Society for Psychical Research, who provided expositions of his own and other forms of hyperdimensional theory, again emphasizing their compatibility with leading-edge science (in this case relativistic science and string theory) and their potential to help explain phenomena such as psi and survival.

All of these efforts recently culminated in a second large book, *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*.² To cut straight to the bottom line, our collective sense is that theorizing based upon an adequately comprehensive empirical foundation that includes our rogue phenomena—especially psi, survival and mystical experience—leads inescapably into metaphysical territory traditionally occupied by the world’s major institutional religions. Specifically, we argue that emerging developments in science and comparative religion, viewed in relation to centuries of philosophical theology, point to some sort of evolutionary pantheism as our current best guess about the metaphysically ultimate nature of things. In brief, pantheisms in general attempt to split the difference between classical theisms and pantheisms, conceiving of an ultimate consciousness or God as pervading or even constituting the manifest world, as in pantheism, but with something left over, as in theism. The version we tentatively embrace further conceives the universe as in some sense slowly waking up to itself through evolution in time. Most importantly, the rough first-approximation picture we develop can be

elaborated and tested through many kinds of further empirical research, especially research on meditation and psychedelics as pathways into higher states of consciousness. Although a great deal remains to be done both theoretically and empirically to narrow the class to its most viable member(s), we feel confident that we are headed in the right direction.

We see evolutionary pantheism more generally as an emerging metaphysical vision—a “stealth worldview”—which integrates the philosophical lineage of German idealists such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel with the common deliverances of the world’s mystical traditions and with the incipient expansion of science itself as previewed in *Irreducible Mind*—in effect an expanded scientific worldview that can embrace empirical realities of spiritual sorts while remaining faithful to science. This synoptic vision seems to us to harbor tremendous practical implications—its “cash value,” as William James would say—in terms of providing humanity individually and collectively with an *ethos* that is fundamentally life-affirming and optimistic, profoundly ecumenical in character, and potentially capable of addressing a multitude of societal ills and threats to our precious planet that can be seen as flowing directly or indirectly from the currently dominant physicalism. What is ultimately at stake here seems nothing less than recovery, in an intellectually responsible manner, of parts of our human cultural heritage that were prematurely discarded with the meteoric rise of modern science starting four centuries ago. And what is especially significant at this critical juncture, and the fundamental new factor that we think will finally allow this recovery to succeed after numerous previous failures, is that it is now being energized by leading-edge developments in science itself.

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² Edward F. Kelly, Adam Crabtree, and Paul Marshall (Eds), *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.