

CHAPTER 00: PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

This book focuses on two ideas. First, that the personality formed during life does, in fact, survive the death of the body; and, second, the idea that we do incarnate more than once.

I will explore these two challenging and provocative ideas in four steps:

- First, in this introductory chapter, I will start with a series of definitions that specify just what I mean by “survival of bodily death” (I will often refer to this phenomenon as “personality survival”). In turn, this will require a preliminary definition of what I mean by “transphysical worlds”—a key concept in this work, as we will see. I will also offer a preliminary definition of reincarnation, and then end this chapter with a set of five propositions that capture the essence of this book.
- Second, in the next chapter, I will present a summary of the scientific evidence that points toward the truth of these five fundamental propositions.
- Third, in the several chapters that follow, I will discuss what the world must be like if these propositions are true. I will do this by outlining a metaphysical system capable of supporting the truths of modern and postmodern science *and* the truths of parapsychology that support our fundamental propositions.
- Finally, I will discuss an expanded vision of the human life-cycle, and what this implies for the long trajectory of human evolution.

Let us start, then, with some fundamental definitions.

The Physical Body

By “body,” I mean the living body as it experienced in waking life. I am assuming that the living body contains inorganic entities such as atoms and molecules, and that these atoms and molecules are organized (in a manner to be explored) into cells, tissues and organs.

This definition of “physical body” is unremarkable, but I do want to emphasize that I am most emphatically not making the assumption that the human body can be reduced to inorganic entities and their dynamic interactions. In other words, I am not suggesting that the body is already “dead” or insentient, even when it seems alive. In working to understand survival and reincarnation, the question of what makes the physical body a living body is one to which we will have to pay considerable attention. When I refer to survival, by the personality, of bodily death, I will always mean the “physical body” in this sense. Later, I will broaden the definition of “body” to include transphysical bodies, as well.

Personality

I want to propose that we define personality in terms of five different characteristics. As you review these, I invite you to check them against your own experience.

Being an individual among other individuals

It is certainly possible to refer to entities that transcend or pervade the entirety of the actual world. Such beings may be referred to as Divine and may, perhaps, be reasonably called “gods,” but such beings are not what I have in mind when referring to a “personality.” A personality, as I am defining it here is, first of all, finite. It is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. It is not a god.

A personality is an individual and, as such, it is a finite being. It is not co-extensive with its environment, and it exists in the presence of others. To be finite is to be an individual existing in interaction with other individuals of some type. Further, individuals in causal interaction with one another must share some coherent context in which that interaction takes place. I will express this by saying that a personality is always contextualized by a world of some type.

Various arguments can be advanced in favor of this idea, but I am going to introduce it here as a definition. I am using myself as a paradigm of what I mean by personality. After all, one my deep motivations for developing the ideas in this book is to discover the destiny of my own personality after the death of my physical body. As a personality, I am

a finite being. I find myself in a world full of other beings—beings like myself who keep me company, and many other beings constituting the complex context of my existence. All of these beings exercise causal effects on one another, and all share a common system of spatial and temporal relations. These entities constitute the world in which I live, move, and have my being.

Throughout this work, when I use the term “world,” it does not refer to a planet in a solar system, but rather to a system of individuals causally interacting in a common space and time, and serving as a context for the life of personalities.

If I am going to survive the death of my body in a way that is truly interesting to me, I want to survive it as a finite being in a world I can explore. I am, therefore, assuming that personality is a finite being playing out its existence in a coherent world of others.

Consciousness

The word “consciousness” has been used in so many different ways that each author is now obliged to define it for him- or herself.

In this work, I propose that we define consciousness as “that factor of experience by virtue of which there is feeling and choice.”

Feeling

When I say that consciousness is the factor of existence that brings feeling, I am using the word a sense that includes all types of sensation. Later on, I will contrast *feeling* with the idea of *efficient cause* that our educated commonsense imports from classical physics.

When we think of a cause (especially when we are being scientific about it), we mean an event that directly precipitates another event in its immediate future. For example, if I throw a ball through a window, the window will most likely break. The movement of the ball *causes* the breaking of the window. When we think of cause in this way, we assume that both the rock and the window are entirely insentient and completely unaware of what is happening to them. If I were to suggest that the window “felt” the rock shattering it, I would most probably be accused of naïve anthropomorphism. On the other hand suppose the rock hit me instead. In that case I would most certainly *feel* the impact.

Later on, I will discuss the possibility that there may, in fact, be some feeling involved in an actual encounter between a ball and a window. But for now, let's use this classical view to establish an important contrast. Why is it that we think the window feels nothing as it is shattered, while I feel pain when I am hit by the rock? I propose that I feel, rather than being merely affected, because I am a conscious being. To put this more simply, there can be no feeling without consciousness, and no personality without feeling.

A personality is necessarily conscious and, as such, a personality feels its environing world.

Free choice

I want to propose that consciousness is not only the factor of experience by virtue of which there is feeling, it is also the primary factor of experience by virtue of which there is choice (value or aim, a factor which is discussed below, is also needed).

Classical science, which was entirely deterministic, made no room in its cosmology for **choice**. Scientific reductionists of the classical era thought of choice as a miraculous gift from God, or as a mere illusion. Quantum mechanics has, however, pushed science beyond the narrow and excessively abstract position of earlier centuries. Our predictions about the outcome of events can only be probabilistic. We can never, in principle, generate perfectly accurate predictions of anything. Beyond blind computation, something else is involved in actuality. We might just label this "blind chance," but quantum physics goes still further.

Quantum theory recognizes that the consciousness of the "observer" not only enables us to observe the outcome of experiments, but is also a *causal factor* in the outcome of experiments. The consciousness of the observer makes decisions among otherwise merely probable outcomes, and thus causes them to actualize. This factor of existence—*consciousness*—has real effects in the physical world, but its decisions are not determined

by anything in the physical world at all.¹ Consciousness is that which feels and makes choices.

This interpretation of quantum theory is also consistent with various trends of Vedic thought. For example, in the yogic psychology of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *purusha*, the pole of pure consciousness around which individual experience is constellated, is also the ultimate origin of all free decisions.²

Finally, my waking consciousness is strongly flavored by my sense that I, the conscious being that I am, make the decisions that cause my behaviors in the world. My decisions are not mere echoes of randomness. They are conscious choices, made with awareness of possible outcomes. They are also made in the context of valuation—I decide which outcome to choose based on my sense of the values that my decision will achieve.

While consciousness is the factor of existence that makes those choices that we call free, it can do so only under the influence of value and purpose. In fact, the difference between randomness and choice is just the presence of values that give the choice meaning. As we will see later, this process of valuation is also a crucial factor in our definition of personality.

I define “personality,; then, as a locus of choice. As personalities, we make our decisions among the different options that open before us in the creative advance. Personality, among its other characteristics, is an ongoing sequence of conscious acts of decision.

Causal Power

The free decisions made by a personality exercise causal influence on the world inhabited by that personality. For example, it is I, the personality, that decides which way to turn at

¹ This quantum consciousness is part of what is intended in the title, *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly, Edward F., and Kelly, Emily Williams. *Irreducible Mind*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007.) —the first book to come out of the Survival Research conference at the Esalen Center for Theory and Research (<http://www.esalenctr.org/>).

² Sri Aurobindo *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1983. See Chapter 8 in particular.

a crossroads. Also, it is I, the personality, that chooses which words to speak and write. In this book, I will take the position that all communication involves causal interaction. This is obvious in the case of any form of communication mediated by direct sensory experience in waking life. I will argue that it is true, also, of various forms of empathy (the direct communication of feeling states) and telepathy (the direct communication of thoughts).

Technically: To know any finite fact is to be causally affected by the circumstances constituting that fact. To be a personality is to be a conscious, feeling entity that has causal effects in its environment.

Memory

Without my memories, I would not be a personality. Because we have memory, we discover time as a dimension that extends continuously into the causal past. The extension of that dimension into an anticipated future underlies the range of possibilities I can embrace. While I recognize, of course, that my future may have an end in time, nonetheless—except when death seems very close—I not only remember having extension in time past, I also anticipate that I will continue to extend my existence into the future. Just as I assume that my past memories can be arranged in a linear sequence, so I assume, too, that my future experiences will continue to be sequential, so that I will have one and only one experience at any moment of future time. Also, induction is the projection of memories of causal sequences into anticipations of future causal sequences. Spatial extension (as we will see in Chapter 9) cannot be understood apart from possibilities of movement; the recognition of movement involves the recognition of a difference between the past and the present, and thus it, too, involves memory. Without memory there is no experience of time, no experience of space, no experience of causality, no experience of a coherent world.

I remember the being that I was a moment ago, the being that I was on my last birthday, and so on. Although my memories are generally patchy and rather jumbled, I operate on the assumption that I could, given sufficient powers of discrimination and attention, order all of my waking memories (at least) into a linear sequence.

A personality then, is a sequence of conscious experiences that stretches off, in memory, into the indistinct reaches of the past; is always experiencing one moment as a present in which there are decisions to be made; and always anticipates its ongoing existence in a similar sequence of future moments.

I want to emphasize here that memory not “merely subjective”—it is a causal factor in the actual world. For example, suppose I am walking along a street in a particular direction, and suddenly I remember that I have an appointment with someone who lives off to the right. and so I make a right turn at the next corner. My memory was a causal factor in the world, causing me to turn my body in a new direction. In this case, my behavior is influenced by a clear conscious memory. Memory also operates unconsciously. My memories of past decisions and their consequences constantly impact the decisions that I am making in the present moment even when they do not become thematic in my current moment of experience. This causal continuity of personality, carrying the effects of past decisions into the present moment, is part of what is meant by the term “karma” in Buddhism and other Vedic traditions.

As we will see, the notion of the survival of bodily death involves a continuation of this sequence of memory and causation after the death of the physical body.

Continuity of purpose

While some scientists imagine that the physical body is a system driven entirely by efficient causes, it is impossible to think adequately of the personality in these terms alone. Personality, as we live it, is always characterized by the operation of *purpose*.

Purpose, as I am using it here, is a very general term. It encompasses instinctive self-preservation; the desire for satisfaction, pleasure and joy; and the intention to achieve a consciously chosen goal. Every moment in the life of a personality enacts some purpose. In the realm of personality, nothing happens without a “reason why.”

Every purpose expresses a value of some kind. I want to survive because I *value* my life. I want this job rather than one because I *value* my free time. I will give to others because my moral *values* dictate that action.

Earlier, I defined consciousness as that factor in existence that makes free decisions. Clearly, one of the differences between a random event and a choice is the presence of consciousness, but consciousness, though necessary, is not in itself sufficient. A conscious choice made in the absence of any sort of criterion would still be random. Besides *value*, another key factor that distinguishes between randomness and choice is *purpose* (or *aim*). When I make a choice, I am consciously choosing among a number of *meaningful* alternatives. And what gives the alternatives meaning is the value each option has for me. Every moment in the life of a personality is making decisions regarding the future in light of the values those decisions may realize.

However, personality is characterized by more than the mere presence of purpose. It is also characterized, in an essential way, by various types of *continuity* of purpose. All personalities pursue the value of continued existence for themselves, and they do so on an ongoing basis. As personalities become more developed, they also begin to hold specific purposes over time. Other animals, which are also covered by this definition of personality, display very elaborate continuities of purpose. They demonstrate “instinctive” purpose when, for example, birds migrate over thousands of miles. But they also demonstrate the ability to hold a purpose through a complex series of operations designed to achieve a goal, as we see regularly in the domesticated animals with which we are most often familiar.

Human personalities are differentiated from the personalities of other animals by factors such as the ability to speak and think in grammatical languages,³ and this allows us to consider significant ranges of the future when we make our decisions. Human personalities can hold conscious purposes for a significantly greater length of time—indeed, even spanning generations.

³ Other animals seem to use and understand words—both their own calls and human words. If other animals did not have this capacity, it would be difficult to imagine how human language could ever have evolved at all. But it seems that other animals rarely make sentences, and never paragraphs. We could speculate that human language is differentiated from the language of other animals by virtue of its grammar—a structure that permits much more interesting concatenations of words and, thus, of ideas.

However, while personalities may vary in their capacity for holding and sustaining purpose, some kind of purpose motivates every moment in the life of a personality.

Continuity of identity

Beyond the five characteristics already developed, we need to consider one other factor at this point. As a personality, I tend to assume there is an “I” that was earlier, is now, and will be later. In all three phases of time, this “I” seems, in some important sense, to be the same “I”. The nature of this “I,” however, is a hotly contested issue.

Many schools thought that take this “I” to be illusory. For example, materialistic reductionism, which denies the existence of personality altogether. Process philosophy (the intellectual context for the ideas in this book), has decisively rejected materialistic reductionism for what I take to be very good reasons. Without going into the issue deeply, I would suggest two serious difficulties confront the philosophy of materialistic reductionism. First, those advocating this position seem to be involved in a performative contradiction: In denying the existence of personality, they deny their own existence and the existence of their students and readers, thereby condemning their work to utter irrelevance. Second, they seem to be led to this conclusion by a classic instance of what Alfred North Whitehead calls “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” —i.e., they try to describe all of reality in terms of abstractions that are relevant to only the part of reality explored in physics. Along with many others, I have argued this point extensively.⁴

While acknowledging the existence of personality, Buddhists are well known for their denial of any permanent “I” binding it into an identity. But their rejection of the ongoing identity of personality is softened in two important ways. First, while Buddhists quite rightly point out that there is no single element of experience that remains constant in the flow of experiences making up the personality, they do recognize the existence of a pattern of organization that does remain constant as long as the personality is functioning. This constant organizational pattern is spelled out in the twelve links of

⁴ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Science and the Modern World*, New York: The Free Press, 1967. ; de Quincey, Christian, *Radical Nature*, Invisible Cities Press, 2002. Weiss, Eric, *The Doctrine of the Subtle Worlds*, Proquest, 2003.

interdependent origination.⁵ In this way, the personality has at least the unity of an ongoing system.⁶ In addition to this unity, Buddhists also have a doctrine of karma, which provides for the causes generated in one lifetime to affect a subsequent reincarnation of that same personality. This allows the unity of the system to survive a change of bodies.

Other schools of thought (usually with its own definition of “soul”) posit a permanent identity in the form of a soul. Arguments for the existence of the soul, while they can be quite compelling, are not, generally, rooted in empirical observations.

When we come to discuss reincarnation, near the end of this book, complex issues surrounding the idea of soul will emerge, and will be explored more deeply at that time.

Meanwhile, for our current purposes, we will adopt something similar to the Buddhist position—that the unity of the personality is guaranteed by its unity as a system, and by its significant (though hardly complete) continuity of memory and purpose.

Transphysical Worlds

If the personality is to survive bodily death while still remaining a personality in the sense just defined, it must continue to exist after death in some world other than the “regular world” of our everyday, waking experience (the precise nature of this world will be explored more fully in Chapter 7). Therefore, a central idea of this book is the notion of “transphysical worlds.” The doctrine of the transphysical worlds can be summarized as follows:

- The physical world is part of a larger system of interlocking worlds.

⁵ Bhikku Nanamoli (trans.), *The Path of Purification (Vishddhimagga)*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1975, p. 696.

⁶ Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural System*, State University of New York Press, 1991.

- These other worlds are not physical (hence, “*transphysical*”), and they operate according to laws different from those that govern the physical world. They are, nonetheless, objectively real.
- Processes taking place in those other worlds directly impact what takes place in the physical world—whether or not human beings are aware of them.
- Human beings can consciously experience those other worlds, and can operate in those other worlds in ways that significantly affect the unfolding of events here in the physical world.⁷

The idea that the personalities of the deceased inhabit the same world in which we live our daily lives flies in the face of the evidence. If we are surrounded by disincarnate personalities during our waking lives, then it is remarkable that they have such minor causal effects. Also, as we will see, the descriptions of the afterlife received from deceased personalities by mediums generally describe a world quite different from the one we share in our waking lives.

Because the definition of survival I am using in this book requires the existence of transphysical worlds (other than physical worlds) one of the prime tasks of this book is to make these words intelligible.

Reincarnation

While many people profess a belief in multiple incarnations, we will see in Chapter 11 that “reincarnation” has a variety of meanings. In the strongest sense of the term, we can understand it as a situation in which the personality survives the death of its body, and then, without losing continuity, embodies itself in another personality. In the weakest sense, we can understand it to mean that every individual is a reincarnation of all past individuals. Reincarnation may, as in some Buddhist teachings, involve no continuity of identity, or, as in soul-theories of reincarnation, it may involve a strong sense of enduring

⁷ Weiss, Op. Cit., p. 5.

identity between successive lives. We will leave the term “reincarnation” somewhat vague, until we tackle these issues in Chapter 11.

Summary

In this chapter, I have defined what I mean by “physical body,” “personality,” “transphysical worlds,” and “reincarnation.” The definition of “body” is unremarkable, though we have left for later consideration an analysis of the difference between a living body and a dead one.

The definition of “personality” is descriptive of what we mean by that term in everyday life—*a personality is an individual sharing a world with other individuals*. It is conscious, which is to say (at least) that it feels its surrounding world and makes free decisions that have effects in that world. It is endowed with some significant measure of continuity in terms of memory and purpose.

The definitions of “transphysical worlds” and of “reincarnation” given in this chapter are necessarily preliminary, and will be expanded in following chapters.

Five fundamental propositions

Our exploration of survival and reincarnation will be organized around the following five propositions:

I. The personality exercises causal agency in its actual world;

II. Transphysical worlds are part of our actual world

- This proposition is part of my definition of personality, but is sufficiently questioned by scientific thought that it needs to be established separately.

III. The personality can function in transphysical worlds, independently from the physical body, even during the life of that body.

- While this is not implicit in the definition of personality, establishing this will make the survival, by the personality, of bodily death much more plausible.

IV. The personality survives the death of its physical body, and it does so in transphysical worlds.

- People may think of personality survival in a number of different ways. For example:
 - Materialists might think of survival in terms of the survival of the matter that makes up the body. The thought of that matter, returning to the general of store of matter making up the world and participating in many generations of future life may give materialists some feeling of continuity after death, but this is in no sense a continuity of individual *identity* after death, and that is what I mean by personality survival in this book.
 - Some more spiritually oriented philosophies may imagine survival in terms of the individual personality, as a drop, dissolving into the ocean of Divine Unity. There, its essence lives on, even though its individuality is no more. Again, in this approach, there is no continuity of personal identity.
 - Alfred North Whitehead seemed to have imagine survival in terms of ones own experience living eternally, in the perfect memory of God. Here, there is some sense of a preservation of personal identity, but it is preserved as a very special and complete memory, and not as an ongoing personality.

Each of these ideas of personality survival is built around some important truth, and deserves respect in its own right. However, in this book, when I say that the personality survives the death of its physical body, I have in mind a very strong definition of survival—one in which the very personality I have formed in the course of my lifetime wakes up, after the death of the physical body, to find itself in a different world, while retaining consciousness, causal efficacy (including, under some circumstances at least, the possibility of communicating with beings who are still alive), and at least as much continuity of memory and purpose as I share with myself in earlier phases of my life.

V. Reincarnation is part of the human life-cycle.

- Reincarnation and personality survival are, logically speaking, two entirely different phenomena. Personality survival, as we have seen, involves the continuation after death of the personality, formed during bodily life. This survival is not the same thing as immortality, since the personality that survives may, and indeed, probably does, die after a time in its own world. There may be personality survival without reincarnation.⁸ On the other hand, certain Buddhist accounts of reincarnation⁹ suggest reincarnation without personality survival.

In general, we are born without accessible memory of previous lives, and the personalities we exist as now have been formed by the experiences and decisions made during this current lifetime. Many traditions suggest that the personality formed in this life, whether or not it survives the death of its body, does eventually die, and then there is a new lifetime—somehow connected to the old one, and yet enjoying an entirely new personality that forms in the future.

Later, when I discuss reincarnation, I will examine more fully the nature of the continuity between personalities that is implied in reincarnation.

In the next chapter, I will examine the evidence supporting these propositions.

⁸ While the evidence documented by Ian Stevenson (see next chapter) can be said to prove that the personality sometimes does survive bodily death and then reincarnate in a new body, it does not prove that this is the general case.

⁹ Bhikku Nanamoli (trans.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 451.