

CHAPTER 0 - INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin by saying a few things about the origin and purpose of this book. These chapters began as a series of lectures organized and sponsored by the Esalen Center for Theory and Research, founded by independent scholar Michael Murphy, author of *The Future of the Body*.¹

Mike likes to convene groups of passionate and competent scholars to discuss issues and themes that are not being addressed anywhere in academia. One of these conferences—began in 1998—focuses on the topic of reincarnation and life after death.

The core of this conference consists of a group of scientists from the University of Virginia who have been studying the question of survival of consciousness after death and the evidence for reincarnation since 1968. Their research continues a long scientific tradition going back to William James and Frederic Myers in the nineteenth century. Since that time, a large amount of hard scientific evidence has been documented that strongly suggests we do not die with the death of our bodies, and the evidence also makes a very powerful case for reincarnation.

To say that what happens to us after our bodies die is an important issue is, to put it mildly, an understatement. In fact, I would claim that this is one of the most important issue we can talk about—whether as scientists, philosophers, or lay people. Who among us has not at some time wondered, “What happens to my personality when I die?” or “What happens to the people we love when they die and cease to function in our waking life? Where do they go? Where do we go? What happens?”

Indeed, questions such as these, and the answers we provide, are immensely important to the structure of our civilization. It is clear to me that whatever we believe about what happens to our sense of self or personhood at the end of our days strongly affects our outlook on life. It determines our sense of ethics and profoundly affects our values. For example, if we believe that at death everything about us is extinguished, and we ask: “What is life for?” we are likely to conclude that it is nothing but an opportunity to

¹ Murphy, Michael, *The Future of the Body*, New York:Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1992.

gratify our emotional, intellectual, and physical needs during the short span we are alive. That kind of attitude toward life and $\sqrt{\sqrt{\text{ethics}}}$ encourages the tide of consumerism that dominates and afflicts modern civilization.

If, on the other hand, we do survive the death of our bodies, and, further, if we are involved in a sequence of reincarnations that is somehow a part of the evolution of the universe, then our whole attitude toward ourselves and toward life has to change. The question of our destiny, the meaning of our existence, and all of our attitudes towards ethics would dramatically change.

Let me give some examples. Suppose, as a society, we were to confirm the fact that people's personalities survive bodily death, and suppose we were to find a way to regularly communicate with people who have died

- What would that do to our property laws? Could dead people still own property? Who has the rights to dispose of the estate?
- What would that do to our secrecy laws? Could people be expected to keep state or financial secrets after they died? And what if we discovered that the deceased could eavesdrop on our conversations? What would that do to our sense of privacy?
- What would this do to our large religious institutions with their conflicting ideas about the afterlife?

From these few examples, you can get a sense of how widespread the consequences would be if we came to know that the personality survives bodily death, and if we found a way to be in reliable contact with the deceased. Make no mistake: This is a profound issue. Nevertheless, it is not being formally considered, as far as we know, in any serious academic institution in the United States—or, indeed, in any country of the world! It seems to us that our Esalen group is the only formal group in academia working to understand the “long trajectory” of human destiny, the profound nature of the human life cycle—in other words, to fathom the full facts of life and death.

Our team of scientists and other scholars began research nearly a decade ago with a commitment to evaluating, organizing, and documenting robust scientific evidence that supports the hypotheses of life after death and reincarnation. We published the results in a thoroughly researched and documented book *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*.² We regard this as a landmark demonstration that the human personality is more than the body, and a powerful argument that the human personality survives bodily death.

Having assembled a formidable body of evidence, our next task is to ask: “If survival and reincarnation are actual facts, how can we make sense of this? This question is important for two reasons.

First, in the absence of a theory of some kind, it is very difficult to accept the facts. It is often the case that people will reject data that don’t fit into the categories through which they customarily interpret the world. It is a source of frustration and bemusement among parapsychologists that many prominent scientists reject the data of parapsychology out of hand because they believe, on the basis of their usual way of understanding things, that those data are simply “impossible.” Indeed, the picture of reality in the background of much scientific research is so mechanistic and reductionist that it is almost impossible, in that context, to understand the existence of consciousness itself, let alone survival, by the personality, of the death of its body.

Nonetheless, the data is there to be explained. As Galileo is reported to have said after is conviction by the Inquisition, “And yet, it moves.” The reference to Galileo is relevant because the problem that we face in academia today is quite similar to that faced by Galileo in his day. Many of the Learned Doctors at Galileo’s university felt no need to look through Galileo's telescope – after all the idea of planets having moons was simply too preposterous to be entertained. It was not facts that finally awakened the world to the power of scientific reasoning – it was rather the articulation, by Newton, of general scheme of ideas which organized and made intelligible the scattered findings of science up to that point.

² Kelly, Edward F., and Kelly, Emily Williams. *Irreducible Mind*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007.

So we need a theory to help make the data with which we are amassing more coherent in part because such a theory will help to make the data more intelligible and, thus, more acceptable to the scientific community. But we also need a theory because, when a good theory is found, it opens up the possibility of a deeper and more comprehensive investigation of the data.

A good example of the power of theory in stimulating deeper research is the development of the Mendeleev's Table of the Elements. A first consequence of this theory was the recognition of elements that had not yet been discovered, and then their subsequent discovery. A later consequence of this theory was the recognition of the possibility of elements that had never before existed, and the subsequent creation of those elements in the laboratory. And these are only two of the developments in chemistry that were inspired by this theory.

If the study of the long-trajectory of human existence is to open up to scientific investigation, if it is ever to become a topic upon which many investigators can focus their attention, it will only be when the data currently available concerning survival and reincarnation, along with the associated data of parapsychological investigation, is first coordinated into a general picture of reality.

Whatever theory that we develop to coordinate the data which we are about to present, that theory, to be credible at all, will also have to be coordinated with the scientific understanding of reality which our civilization has pieced together over the last 400 years of sustained social effort.

In this book, I will outline a way in which such a coordinations may be achieved.

Since the beginning of the scientific revolution, work on the areas covered in this book has been rare. The ideas offered in this book sketch out a new way of approaching the understanding of the actual world. While these ideas have a lineage - they are drawn from the works of Alfred North Whitehead, Sri Aurobindo, Jean Gebser, Ernst Cassirer and many other thinkers - nonetheless they will be unfamiliar to many of my readers. Also, those of my readers who know some of these authors well will find their ideas used

in unfamiliar ways. There is no way to open up new territory like this without new ideas and new language.

Finally, though this book was very much inspired by my work at the Esalen Center for Theory and Research, this book is my own, and is not reflective of any consensus of our working group.