

## BRIEF RESPONSE TO DOUG STOKES (AND *MOA*)

By Edward F. Kelly

What will best serve the purposes of this exchange, I believe, is for me to put the key issues in larger perspective, highlighting the fundamental problems I have both with Stokes' essay/review of *BP* and with *MOA*.

*BP* is actually the second major product of a 15-year multidisciplinary collaboration, sponsored by Esalen Institute's Center for Theory and Research, focused on the contemporary dialogue between science and religion. Our diverse academic participants, several score in all, have generally been skeptical of the currently prevailing classical 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. At the same time, we sense 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.

We focused initially on the question of post-mortem survival (hence the nickname “Sursem,” from “survival seminar”). 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 substantial 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 pointing to the empirical inadequacy of classical physicalism; second, and far more challenging, to seek some better conceptual framework to take its place.

The first stage culminated in publication of *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Kelly et al., 2007, henceforth *IM*). There we catalogued the serious challenges posed to physicalism by well-evidenced empirical phenomena such as psi (possibly including post-mortem survival); manifestations of extreme psychophysiological influence such as stigmata and hypnotically induced blisters; prodigious forms of memory and calculation; phenomena of human memory more generally; psychological automatisms 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 to physicalism by everyday properties of human mental life such as meaning, intentionality, subjective point of view, and the qualitative aspects of consciousness, all of which have recently been targets of intense philosophical discussion. In a nutshell, *IM* 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.

Assuming now that classical physicalism is inadequate, as we firmly believe it is, what should take its place? We 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 *IM*—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 pioneers 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 was to review and reassess Myers’s model of human personality in light of the subsequent century of research in psychology and neuroscience, and in *IM* we argued that the evidence supporting such pictures has actually grown far stronger since his death. Myers and James themselves 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 (see *IM*, Chapter 1). In our view psychology has taken a hundred-plus-year detour and is only now becoming capable of appreciating the theoretical beachhead that our founders had already established.

The normally hidden region of the mind, Myers’s subliminal consciousness or “the more” of William James, is the wellspring of the crucial *transpersonal* phenomena—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. The work summarized in *IM* invites—in fact *demand*s, we believe—a radical overhaul of currently prevailing physicalist conceptions. 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.

A central element of our strategy in approaching these larger issues was to investigate conceptual frameworks both past and present that explicitly make room for rogue phenomena of the relevant sorts. To that end, we assembled an interdisciplinary team including physical and biological scientists, psychologists, philosophers, and scholars of religion specializing in relevant forms of mystically-informed religious philosophy (*not* “theologians,” as Stokes repeatedly and incorrectly states). We approached the comparative-religion material, of course, not with the expectation that any of these ancient systems contain all the answers, ready-made, but in the interest of prospecting for common themes and useful clues as to how best to advance our theoretical purposes.

All of these efforts culminated in the publication of *BP* earlier this year. To cut straight to the bottom line, our collective sense is that theorizing based upon an adequately comprehensive empirical foundation that includes the rogue phenomena catalogued in *IM* moves inescapably into metaphysical territory traditionally occupied by the world’s major institutional religions. Specifically, we argue in *BP* that emerging developments in science and comparative religion, viewed in relation to centuries of philosophical theology, point to some form of *evolutionary panentheism* 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, postulating an ultimate consciousness as pervading or even constituting the manifest world, as in pantheism, but with something left over, as in theism. The version we tentatively embrace in *BP* 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 flesh out the picture sketched in *BP*, we feel confident that we are headed in the right general direction.

What is ultimately at stake here seems nothing less than recovery, in an intellectually responsible manner, of vital parts of human experience that were prematurely devalued or 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.

Turning to the specifics of Stokes’s essay/review with that larger context in mind, I must first comment on two key claims he advances repeatedly, both of which I view as deeply mistaken.

First, echoing the skeptical position he adopted in the new parapsychology *Handbook* (Stokes, 2015), he begins by challenging one of the major premises of *IM* and *BP*, declaring that psi does not exist or at least has not been demonstrated to exist. He arrives at this conclusion essentially by extrapolating rates of misconduct recently found in various kinds of mainstream research to experimental studies of psi, and especially to meta-analyses of the direct-hit rates reported in ganzfeld studies and the like.

This conclusion seems to me unwarranted. In the first place the extrapolation itself seems unwarranted, because statistical and experimental methods in psi research have from the beginning been subjected to unusually intense scrutiny, precisely because of the theoretical challenge psi phenomena present to mainstream physicalist thinking. Furthermore, Stokes ignores other kinds of systematic psi effects such as terminal salience, displacement effects, consistent missing, and grouping of hits, which have often been found or confirmed through re-analysis of datasets originally collected for other purposes. He also does not take into consideration the substantial literature of process-oriented experimental studies (which as recently shown by Carpenter, 2012, in *First Sight* reveals many parallels to effects discovered by mainstream psychologists and neuroscientists) and the extreme levels of statistical success obtained in many individual experiments involving exceptional subjects (which has always seemed to me the best way to study rare psychological capacities of *any* kind, including psi capacities). Last but certainly not least, he also completely ignores the enormous body of high-quality literature devoted to case and field studies of crisis apparitions, mediumship, and cases of the reincarnation type. The empirical case for the reality of psi remains extremely strong, in my opinion, and in fact I surmise that experimental parapsychology may well emerge from the current controversies over questionable research practices looking substantially *better* than many areas of conventional mainstream research.

The second recurring theme arises in connection with the possibility of post-mortem survival. Stokes repeatedly suggests or insinuates that we, like other pro-survivalists, must be oblivious to the skeptical arguments and fail to appreciate the dependence of mental states on states of the brain. He refers approvingly to *MoA* as making this case in great detail and even characterizes the Sursem group as preferring in contrast to return to the 18th Century with Myers rather than engaging with contemporary neuroscience.

That this is a gross distortion should be apparent from what I have already said above, but let me now put it in more personal terms: For me the first phase of our project went a long way toward dissolving what the great American psychologist 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, as clearly acknowledged in the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *IM*, and as argued at great length in *MoA*. But the evidence we assembled in *IM* 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* (see especially *IM*, Chapter 9). In this context it should be evident that the direct counterpart to *MoA* is not *BP* but *IM*, yet neither Stokes nor *MoA* has much of anything to say about *IM* itself, and Stokes chastises us repeatedly for not saying more in *BP* about matters that are treated at length in *IM*. To repeat: The work on *BP* began at the point where for us at least *that* discussion was over, and the need for an alternative metaphysics had already been established. *MoA*, by contrast, is a sustained polemic in support of classical physicalism, which is simply assumed from the outset to represent the truth of the matter. Indeed, the basic tone of the entire collection is set in its Foreword, whose author asserts that we *know* survival is impossible and hence that the main question of interest is why anybody would believe such crazy stuff.

I need say only a little more about the essay/review itself. Stokes provides chapter-by-chapter descriptions of the contents of *BP*, as a reviewer should, but his descriptions vary wildly in length and are often inaccurate, so I encourage interested readers to find out for themselves what is actually there. The “essay” aspect seems to consist mainly of increasingly strident appeals for greater attention to his own views, with which I must confess not being very familiar. Curiously, despite his repeated embrace of *MoA*’s physicalist polemic against the possibility of survival, Stokes himself apparently endorses survival (although not in personal form) and arrives at a nonphysicalist metaphysics having much more in common with ours than with theirs. He repeatedly congratulates himself for accomplishing this without appeal to the evidence for psi and survival, which of course he regards as defective. I will try to read his 2014 book, of which I had not known until reading his essay/review, but meanwhile my co-authors and I can certainly take heart from the convergence toward similar metaphysical positions, if it is real, while making no apology for our very different way of getting there.

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