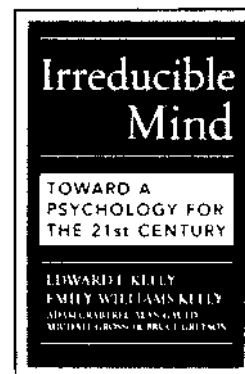


The Soul of the Gaps

***Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* by Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Adam Crabtree, Alan Gauld, Michael Grosso, and Bruce Greyson. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. 832 pp., \$99.95. ISBN 0-7425-4792-2**



S E B A S T I A N D I E G U E Z

DISCUSSING PSYCHOANALYSTS, Ludwig Wittgenstein once quipped that "they have given up one way of thinking and adopted another." This diagnosis certainly applies to the authors of *Irreducible Mind* (henceforth IM), although reading through this 800-page volume makes it clear that they would take it as a compliment. The book is an ambitious work, as it explicitly purports to "justify and to some extent foreshadow what we anticipate will become a major and vitally necessary reworking of central parts of scientific psychology" (xiii). It is written by a group of researchers mostly associated by their belief in the paranormal and their involvement in a New-Age Californian think-tank called the Esalen Center for Theory and Research. Although each chapter was written by different authors, they insist that the book is really a common effort, hence I will refer to them as Kelly, et al.

According to the authors, there seem to be two major problems with current views of what the mind is and how it works. First of all—and this is the implicit reproach addressed to "mainstream" cognitive psychologists, philosophers of mind and neuroscientists (all treated as an undifferentiated package sharing a similar worldview, namely materialism)—we just do not have a full and satisfactory physicalist explanation of how the brain generates the mind. The second problem, constituting the *raison d'être* of this lengthy volume, is that what the authors portray as establishment science has along the years consistently and purposefully blinded itself to a

body of evidence that flatly contradicts its most cherished tenets, and as a consequence, it has narrowed its scope to the least significant aspects of human experience.

Some background. People trying to study the biological basis of consciousness are currently involved in many debates that range from the methodological to the metaphysical, and one can find a lot of books out there on these issues. Do we know how consciousness emerges out of a group of connected neurons? Do we have a firm grasp on how and why it evolved? Is there even an agreement as to what consciousness *is*? No, there are many things we don't know yet, and this is the reason why cognitive neuroscience and its related fields are so interesting. But in IM you won't find any sense of this awe. Kelly, et al. simply assume that researchers are on the wrong tracks and should adopt a radically new approach. As such, IM intends to be the kind of textbook that could redirect the whole enterprise of the scientific study of consciousness by leading a new generation of researchers down the right path. Its targeted audience comprises "advanced undergraduates and early-stage graduate students, particularly students in disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy." Indeed, "these are the future leaders of our field, and we want to reach them before they suffer the "hardening of the categories" that all too often accompanies entry into these highly specialized professions" (xiv).

Obviously, it is too late for me. But I wonder if anyone could actually

benefit from this book in the way its authors wish. The reason I wonder is because the book is painstakingly redundant, astoundingly arrogant in its claims and intents, utterly humorless, contains no figures, boxes or tables whatsoever, and what's more, is unaffordable to its targeted audience. In any case, criticizing the shortcomings (real or imaginary) of contemporary brain research is fair enough, as it is already commonplace in most of the literature on the topic. Many authors, not content with proposing their own theory of consciousness, usually take some time to point out the limits of the *other* theories. However, the originality of IM lies in drawing attention to what the authors themselves call "rogue phenomena," which they think are inherently incompatible with current materialistic views of the mind. Of course, if such an incompatibility was shown to truly exist, then this would not only explain why a brain-based account of consciousness is not available yet, but also why it never will be.

Such an attempt to undermine physicalist views of the mind is of course not new, and Kelly, et al. gladly acknowledge their inspiration from some predecessors. Indeed, one major aim of IM is to pay a dithyrambic tribute to Frederic W.H. Myers, a largely forgotten hero and pioneer of psychical research in England. His 1903 magnum opus *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* is incessantly praised in IM and is even enclosed as a CD. I have an abridged version of this book on my pseudoscience shelf, but I confess that until now I never differentiated it from other pompous

WWW.SKEPTIC.COM

SKEPTIC

THE BIBLICAL COSMOS versus MODERN COSMOLOGY

THE
BIBLICAL
COSMOS

VERSUS

MODERN
COSMOLOGY

David Presutta

Why the Bible Is Not the Word of God

David Presutta

The cosmos that is
revealed in the pages of

the Bible is an integral part of the narrative that unfolds in the Bible—so much so that the credibility of the Bible is dependent upon the validity of its cosmology.

This book provides an extensive examination of a large number of Bible verses that shed light on the structure and physical characteristics of the biblical cosmos. In so doing, it provides the basis for answering the question: Is the Bible the word of God?

It all comes down to this: if the Bible cannot be believed concerning what it says about the natural order of things, why should it be believed concerning what it says about the supernatural order of things?

354 pp. Available at amazon.com
and other outlets.

THE LATERAL TRUTH AN APOSTATE'S BIBLE STORIES

Was Moses a liberator? Was Samson a thug? Fifteen iconoclastic stories from Rebecca Bradley, author of the *Gil Trilogy*, follow selected biblical themes to their illogical conclusions.



\$15-95 from online bookshops.
Author's blog and interview at
www.scrollpress.com/bradley

and boring compendia of weird anecdotes, ghost stories and wacky theories from the turn of the century. Apparently I was unfair: Myers seems in a different league. For one thing, he was among the first to have theorized about what would be later known as "the unconscious." However, the reason Myers is now forgotten in non-occult circles is that *Human Personality* is replete with ghost stories and mediums of all sorts, which understandably has obscured the few interesting insights that could have been found in there. Kelly, et al., seem to believe *all* of it, and much more. Indeed, a frequent piece of advice in IM is that "psychology *must* take account of the full range of human experience or be reduced to a caricature, a defacing, of what it means to be human" (495). Accordingly, the reader is warned from the onset that the reality of paranormal phenomena (psi) is taken for granted in IM. For those not convinced, Kelly, et al. direct you to the references listed in the appendix, where all the evidence can be found. This, of course, is really begging the question, since psi clearly is *not* an established phenomenon, and the convenient phrase "see the Appendix" that recurs incessantly throughout the book really translates as "we realize that what we just wrote sounds crazy, but there are some books that say it's true, and we chose to believe them."

The "full range of human experience" is displayed across nine chapters, each more than 100 pages long, that ramble on the limits of "conventional" neuroscience, while claiming that a wide array of loosely associated phenomena are simply incompatible with the idea that the brain is the seat of the mind in any conventional sense. These phenomena include placebo effects, stigmata, sudden graying of the hair, reincarnation, maternal impressions, hypnotic suggestions, distant healing, creative genius, multiple personalities, meditation, mystical experiences, near-death experiences (NDEs), out-of-body experiences (OBEs), supernormal motor automatisms, apparitions, calculating prodigies, and so forth. Parts of

the book deal unashamedly, and approvingly, with mediumship and levitation, always with a perfectly straight face. The general strategy is to proceed from rather commonplace, if sometimes intriguing phenomena, onto the really wild stuff, pretending that established facts, unresolved questions and plain crackpottery were somehow all part of the same continuum of legitimate scientific interest.

Here's a typical passage from this book: "Most challenging of all to mainstream views is the substantial body of evidence that has accumulated—much of it since Myer's original efforts along these lines—suggesting that autobiographical, semantic, and procedural (skill) memories sometimes survive bodily death. If this is the case, memory in living persons presumably exists at least in part *outside* the brain and body as conventionally understood" (35). And this suggests "the need for a radical reconceptualization of human memory" (ibid). This impatient plea for an immediate and gigantic paradigm shift is in fact the *leitmotiv* of IM. Apparently, one astounding piece of evidence for such an epistemological earthquake comes from NDE research. Here is the argument: "The central challenge of NDEs lies in asking how these complex states of consciousness, including vivid mentations, sensory perceptions, and memory, can occur under conditions in which current neurophysiological models of the production of mind by brain deem such states impossible" (421). Note here that NDEs are not said to occur *during* a flat EEG, but merely *under* general brain states that are somehow deemed unable to underlie mental states or at least to allow their recall. It strikes me as an interesting use of logic to say that since a disordered brain cannot generate experiences of tunnels and lights, then no brain activity *at all* must be responsible.

While there is not space here to debunk one by one the innumerable wild claims that are taken at face value in IM, three very general remarks should provide an idea of the flaws in this kind of thinking. First, there is a very remarkable difference between the

SKEPTIC

VOLUME 15 NUMBER 1 2009

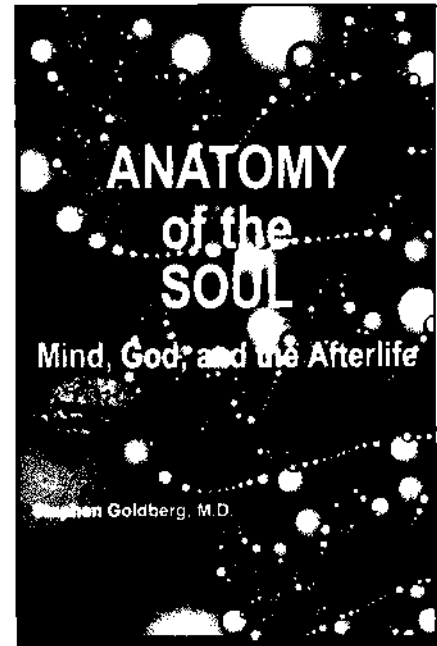
treatment of "mainstream" cognitive science and that of the "rogue" phenomena. There would be nothing left in this book if Kelly et al. would apply equal standards of scrutiny to both. They simply rant relentlessly about the limits of the former, while swallowing indiscriminately all of the later. Second, a good exercise while reading IM is to imagine what the world would look like if *everything* in this book was true. One would think that if there was "something" more to consciousness, mind, and the self than the workings of the brain, then the real world, and hence science itself, would obviously look drastically different. For example, psi, NDEs and apparitions would be *all over the place*. This, in fact, is candidly acknowledged in chapter 4, where a lengthy rendition of such a magical world is conveniently provided (293). But more important, if the advice of Kelly, et al. was actually followed, it would be interesting to know what exactly cognitive scientists should be expected to *do*. Should they all become parapsychologists? The response to this question is left unclear, especially when one considers what is not in IM. Indeed, I have noticed that Uri Geller and Ted Serios are not featured in this book.

This is puzzling, as these gentlemen used to perform some really astounding feats and, had they lived in Myers' times, they surely would have been included in *his* writings (Myers, by the way, was seriously duped by many people, something you won't learn in IM). Rupert Sheldrake is not mentioned either, nor is Gary Schwartz's research on after-death communication, and this is bizarre, since these researchers gathered *prima facie* evidence for the type of phenomena that Kelly, et al. are defending. Also disappointing is the absence of an extensive treatment of ectoplasmic materializations. Indeed, there was a time where people could produce actual *stuff* out of nothing. Indisputably credible authorities and reliable witnesses have supported and defended these cases. Therapeutic Touch, on the other hand, is deemed sufficiently important to be courageously defend-

ed in a footnote against the virulent attacks from a 9-year old skeptic named Emily Rosa (136). The author of this footnote is apparently not happy with the simplest and fairest study ever conducted on a pseudoscience. All this makes for a very confused and disorganized book.

Nonetheless, IM claims though-out that the "evidence" it presents supports an alternative theory of the nature of mind-brain relationships (that is, alternative to what most researchers in this area are supposed to think). This theory is not only meant to do justice to the glorious diversity of ghost stories, miraculous healings and other "rogue phenomena" reviewed in IM, but would also accommodate most of what we know about the brain. The idea is that the brain does not produce consciousness or cognition, it merely "constrains, regulates, restricts, limits, and enables or permits expression of the mind in its full generality" (607). This is the so-called "filter" or "transmission" theory of mind-brain interaction. One is asked to believe that the brain actually *gets in the way* of the mind, the latter really being something that Myers called the *Subliminal Self*, a purposeful entity that lurks somewhere inside of you and sometimes manifests itself in the form of supernatural phenomena. Where does this "mind" come from? We don't know, maybe it's turtles all the way down. This "theory" doesn't really get any clearer than that in IM, although towards the end of the book the whole idea is unsurprisingly buried under the usual quantum babble that one expects in pseudoscience books. In any case, Kelly, et al. acknowledge that they are still thinking hard about all this and confide that hopefully a more coherent treatment of the "theory" will see the light in a further book (638).

So, don't expect to find much sense in *this* one. Instead, for the time being, at least, their strategy is to convey the illusion that sheer quantity of information somehow amounts converging significance that some kind of "soul" must magically spring out of current gaps in knowledge. •



ANATOMY OF THE SOUL Mind, God, and the Afterlife

Dr. Stephen Goldberg

Is there a Soul that persists after death? "Anatomy of the Soul: Mind, God, and the Afterlife" presents a new approach to the subject, based on an in-depth analysis of how the mind arises from the brain. While the mind is integrally associated with the brain, Dr. Goldberg, a neuroscientist who has taught the subject of neuroanatomy for 25 years explains that there is an aspect of Mind that may continue despite the loss of the brain. The theory clarifies numerous issues within the field of consciousness study and provides insights into the nature of quantum physics, free will, God, and the question of immortality of the mind.

"Dazzling with facts,
deep with implications."

-Michael Shemer

paperback, 123 pp., \$14.95

www.medmaster.net 1-800-335-3480

ISBN 978-0-940780-85-9

Available through all major book stores
and amazon.com

WWW.SKEPTIC.COM

SKEPTIC