
AFTERNOON GENERAL DISCUSSION
DAY ONE

ALMEDER: I just want to remind everybody there are various different conceptions about what science is and that depending on what you take it to be it may be able to provide you with evidence that confirms belief in reincarnation and things of that sort. Nobody ever expected science to provide one with these transformational experiences. I mean, obviously, there is private knowledge that one has as a result of certain experiences that can't be repeated. And one comes to acquire knowledge of that sort. That doesn't mean, though, that you have to throw out science or even that you have to demean it. I tend to be convinced of the fact that science can do a great deal by way of establishing things like facts that are relevant to supporting beliefs. In other words, I may not have any transformational experiences in my life. It would not follow from that that I could not be rationally justified in believing that some people survive their death. I often hear people talk about what science can and can't do. I'm just here to tell you that when you sit down among philosophers of science and start the discussion on what science is you get a very interesting and fairly protracted discussion on what a scientific explanation is supposed to do, not one of which is to give you transformational experiences. Science may fail us in that regard, but nobody ever asked it to do that. As for contemporary psychology, I think it's a mess. I'm not sure what you have in mind. I'm a little unclear on what your thesis is, Eugene. Maybe it's the hour. Maybe it's just a little jet lag here. Is your thesis that somehow or another we need a new psychology based on personal experience? I still think we have to be very careful about what science cannot do and to set ourselves over against it might be a serious mistake. I happen to think we have some very good empirical evidence for personal survival. And I have not had any of those experiences.

TAYLOR: I will concede I would rather see it as a tool than an end even if I have to be a little bit militant in order to achieve that. I am reminded of a recent biography on Simon Newcomb by Professor

Albert Moyer.⁶ Newcomb was an astronomer and the first Director of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. He was, of course, linked to all the big science committees for the federal government in the late 19th-century. Moyer shows that there were three levels of discourse that Newcomb and his scientific colleagues engaged in. One was the public image of science. All the definitions were, in which case, clear-cut. Science was not the same as religion. Science was numerical. It had nothing to do with any subjective events. Then there were the discussions that the scientists had with their deans and with the people in the government whom they talked to in order to get funding for science. They conveyed a completely different kind of image of what science could do. This was science as a vehicle of progress, as a tool, as a weapon, as whatever they needed to say in order to establish that they were at the center of the scientific military industrial complex. Newcomb and his colleagues were the basic arbiters of science. The money came to them. They dispensed it. They produced science. Then there were the conversations the scientists had among themselves, which is exactly the conversation you just described. They all clearly admitted to *themselves* the tentative nature of their enterprise, despite what they said in public. The fact that these three different levels of discourse still go on simultaneously is an extremely important point for us to remember and a very powerful piece of information for the type of science that parapsychology purports to want to support.

PALMER: A lot of what I was going to say has been said by other people, particularly by Steve Braude. I wholeheartedly agree with what he said. I'll say it again but put a slightly different spin on it. I think it's important when we are discussing this topic to keep our objectives and methods separate. If the goal is to "get in touch with reality", I think Steve hit the nail very much on the head. When you try to contact reality, you can either do it through cognitive scientific models, with language and equations, or you can do it through personal experience.

⁶ Moyer, A.E. (1992). *A scientist's voice in American culture: Simon Newcomb and the rhetoric of scientific method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Of course, science really boils down to experience; you experience, for example, what is on the dial of your machine. Both kinds of experience may or may not correspond to objective reality assuming there is such a thing. Nonetheless, there are certain rules that I would think both phenomenologists and experimentalists would accept. For example, a near-death experience is not close to reality simply because it is accompanied by a sense of conviction. I can have tremendous conviction when I'm drunk, but in another state I all of a sudden realize that this conviction does not square with the reality that I see at this time. This means I have to accept some kind of a relativism. I also believe that the near-death experience is not literal reality, but I may be wrong. I'm saying we can't know that.

But what if the goal is not to get in touch with the reality, but to achieve personal transformation? Now, what do we mean by transformation? If by transformation we mean getting in touch with reality, the argument reduces to what I just said. But maybe that's not what we mean by transformation. Even if we were all to become convinced that the near-death experience is not real in the sense of reflecting what the afterlife is like, there may be a sense in which it is very transformative for the person to believe that. If you describe transformation in terms of a sense of well-being, of being better able to function in the world, the near-death experience may be very valuable. Transpersonal psychology notwithstanding, being in touch with reality does not necessarily lead to transformation. I'm inclined to think it often does not. So, maybe from the point of view of transformation, it might be better to do entirely different things than you would if the primary goal was to be in touch with reality.

I would like to end this tirade with a plea for humility, and I want to go back to getting in touch with reality as my framework. Why is it that we want to have this sense of reality? Why is it that we as scientists want the ultimate cognitive theory? Why do we want to unify science? In answering those questions, I come back to what I think all ethical philosophy reduces to, and that is hedonism. Basically we do what we do because it gives us some kind of satisfaction. I have read that it's like a mystical experience for some physicists to contemplate the simple elegance and power of the formula $e=mc^2$. So, I would say even science can be transformative in this sense. Even though hedonism

is a pejorative word, I think that is basically what we are dealing with. We want to have psychic or transcendental experiences to study them, to know more about them, because that is satisfying and fulfilling to us in some way. But different things are going to be fulfilling for different people. You have all heard Carl Sagan wax enthusiastically about the "billions of billions" of stars in our galaxy. Here is a scientist who is really turned on by astronomy. On the other hand, there is a quote by the philosopher Paul Feyerabend, who, in an attack on scientific hubris, commented, "What's the big deal? I can't relate to somebody who gets turned on by a bunch of rocks out in space." Again, Feyerabend's point was that different people are turned on by different things.

Returning to my humility theme, let's not denigrate what someone else is doing simply because when we put ourselves in that position, it wouldn't satisfy us. I see this particularly in parapsychology. When I read Eugene Taylor's paper it reminded me of some things that Rhea White has been saying that I have been very critical of. I don't think you go quite as far as she does, Eugene, but it is still this "us versus them" mentality. Perhaps there's a kind of reaction formation going on; there is a hubris on one side and this lead to hubris on the other side. What I tried to argue with Rhea is that there is value in all our approaches. Let's not be so judgmental. Let's recognize that whereas one approach accomplishes something good for Person X, something different might accomplish it for Person Y.

TAYLOR: There is a visionary tradition that you have either seen or you have not. If you have seen it, you know exactly what I'm talking about, and if you have not, you haven't the slightest clue what I'm about to say. Dr. Elisha Atkins, a physician and professor at Yale, made this point to me one day. He was a very sympathetic and compassionate physician, who learned all the sciences that he needed to but he had a low opinion of the purely rational types. He came in just fuming one day. He's been retired for a number of years. I said, "Well, what's the matter with you?" He said, "You know, I have been thinking about it, and I'm just furious. All my life I have seen myself as a compassionate and warm person. I have stood out against all these people who espouse empirical science and exact measurement. I always believed that I was inferior to them because they claimed I was too soft. I compensated by mastering their way of thinking. You know, it

didn't dawn on me until after I retired that those people do not know anything else but that, and I know both things. I'm just mad because it took me so long to realize that simple truth." Professor Atkins' story suggests that it might be about time we brought the hard and the soft together and started to assert what the real relationship might need to be, frankly. In my opinion, it has to do with the primacy of experience. Scientific knowledge is the mere handmaiden to an enlightened personal consciousness.

PALMER: Let me just make one very brief point. I'm not quite sure this is what you were getting at, but I think it is fine that if you think you are selling a better mousetrap than the next guy you try to convince him of that. That's not what I was complaining about.

LAWRENCE: I would just like to discuss something that you said, John. I don't know if I heard this correctly or not. I think I have heard Eugene talk about how we invalidate certain kinds of experiences and phenomena. I think you can't talk about science without talking about paradigms and Kuhn, as Michael Grosso pointed out. A lot of work has been done demonstrating that people interpret reality based on the current paradigm. We don't know whether that is a situation that we are really faced with. When you talk about people who have near-death experiences, you have eight million people who are saying, "This is what happened to me," and we say, "No, that's not really what happened to you. This is what happened to you." Fifty years from now it will be really clear who was right and who was not. When you're sitting in the middle of it, it is really tough to decide. Should we pursue this avenue? Is this really a paradigm shift? Is this something that's telling us something that should be investigated? Or is this something that really does just stay within the normal way that we usually interpret it? Or do we need new ways of investigating and new ways of looking at it?

TAYLOR: I would challenge the emphasis that you have placed on reality versus my fantasy about reality. In other words, I think what science is presently confronting is the epistemological conception of multiple realities. Acknowledging the existence of multiple realities is going to completely transform science. It is going to mean an end to the reigning view that the material world is really the only reality there is, and all the rest of what is going on in my mind is idealism or myth

or something like that. I think that in the neuroscience revolution we most cogently see the new biology of consciousness is forcing us to look for the first time at the very organ that is creating science in the first place. Philosophies of mind are now coming back with a vengeance. It's precisely these issues that have been winnowed out of the sciences over the past 100 years. Now it has become the major issue to look at the possibility of these multiple realities.

PALMER: I just want to make one brief response to something that Madelaine said. In near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences it's very important to make a distinction between an experience and inferences that people make from an experience. When a person tells you, "I had an experience of what the afterlife is really like," that person is not describing their experience; they are making an inference from the experience. You can get in a lot of trouble by not making a distinction between the experience on the one hand, which should be in and of itself validated and appreciated, and the inference from the experience, which I think (at least as long as we are in some sense committed to Western logic) is just plain wrong.

LAWRENCE: I don't disagree with your statement. Who could disagree with your statement? But I think the question is, whether you have a near-death experience or an out-of-body experience, how you handle the veridical perceptions? People see things that, given their particular state, they should not have been able to see. If you work in a hospital or some place where you are taking care of dying people, they will report things. There is no way that you can explain how they have heard or seen what they report. I think those are the kinds of things that don't fit our paradigm. That's different than the interpretation people make of the experience.

PALMER: You have opened up a new area which certainly bears on inference. I'm not saying the inference is necessarily wrong. There may be good reasons for making the inference. But what I'm trying to argue is that you need to take any distinction into account. Certainly, one thing that would facilitate interpretation of the experience as corresponding to some objective reality, would be some kind of psychic process. I still don't think that's sufficient, but it would open up some important new areas of discussion.

ROLL: I think something that also needs to be looked at is human creativity. So far I think most of us have looked at our subject matter as something "out there". And then we try to make sense of it. We regard ourselves as passive consumers or observers of whatever is going on. There is also the perspective of being made in the image of God—creators or co-creators of the universe—in that our theorizing and our conceptualizations may have a direct effect on the world. Our work in this field, or in any other field, allows for direct, original creativity, including creation through psychokinesis as a part of the enterprise. At this time the world is such a manifest mess it is just unbelievable. Our murderous nature, our ignorance, our irrationality, the amount of guns in this country, the ethnic cleansing, and so forth are beyond our understanding. Perhaps through some sort of miracle, people will listen to us at some time. What kind of world can we conceptualize that not only is true but also might provide healing? What kind of image followed by practice could provide healing? I think that is something for us to consider.

GROSSO: I just want to pick up on something that you started to say, Bill, that I didn't spell out in my talk on the creative role here. At first it may seem inconceivable, at least in terms of talking about life after death, that we should play a role in determining whether or not we do in fact survive bodily death. On the other hand, if we put the question of survival in an evolutionary perspective that idea may not be quite so fantastic as it may seem at first glance. Let me just suggest a question I've been asking myself. Instead of asking, "Do we, in fact, survive bodily death?" perhaps a more interesting question or an alternative question may be, "Are we, in fact, evolving the ability to survive bodily death?" After all, human history is only about 6,000 years old. For all we know the process whereby the ability (and I think it is accurate to talk about survival as an ability) may still be in process of emerging. This may account for the unevenness of the evidence, the confusion. The questions arise: Do some people survive bodily death? Are there degrees of intensity of consciousness required? It may be that the very process whereby some human beings acquire that ability to survive may still be evolving. And so, the question arises, "Maybe there are things that we can do and need to do to further that process along." I'm thinking, for example, of the Chinese book *The Secret of*

the Golden Flower. It was introduced by Carl Jung and translated by the German scholar Richard Wilhelm. The doctrine in the book is that not all of us achieve immortality or achieve the capability to survive bodily death. But rather, we have to undergo some kind of inner cultivation, some kind of development in the cohesiveness of our consciousness before that becomes possible. Now, that strikes me as being at least a plausible hypothesis. I just want to put that idea out for consideration. Perhaps we should rethink the question or rephrase the question: Not, "Do we survive?" but, "Are we evolving the ability to survive?"

ROLL: I think that G.I. Gurdjieff produced a system designed to ensure that kind of survival. But, this kind of survival frightens me a little. If we survive the way we are, in our egocentric physical state of mind, in our murderousness, in our tribalism (I think the psyche to a large extent is tribal with all that goes with it), "hell on earth" would have a new meaning. You see what I'm driving at now?

GROSSO: I think I do. But what I would say is this: The way we survive, if we do survive, and the way things turn out, is the way things turn out. It may be that only some people who die horrible deaths have been shocked into some kind of state of awareness that somehow survives bodily death. That might even square with some of the evidence. Or it may be that only extraordinary, saintly, highly evolved beings who attach themselves to or charge their psyches up, so to speak, in relationship to other human beings and their followers, reach the critical point of survivability. So, I simply don't know. I mean, nature is full of dark things.

ROLL: If we think in terms of healing, of wholeness, of the matrix of connectedness experienced in NDEs, then your continuation might be healing. Isn't that what psychologists are trying to be, healers, seeing and assisting others to experience things in wholeness? To me that's really what is at the bottom. That is our basic nature and that is what we are aiming for at the same time—our goal and our home.

OWENS: I wanted to pick up on something that John said about near-death experience and the interpretation of near-death experience. In analyzing several hundred narratives, I very much agree that this is an important distinction to make. It's a very rich area that is relatively unstudied. As the meta-cognition about the experience after the fact, it

can have a very complex and long-term unfolding process, especially if this is a completely new kind of experience for the person. It also can be quite agonizing. So, there are the wonderful after-effects; that's true. But sometimes it's a very rocky road that has to do with a lot of soul-searching and becoming on-the-street philosophers about just what is going on here. People are often all alone trying to figure this all out and they are compelled to do it. It is a huge area that is quite separate from the experience. I also wanted to mention an excellent article by Roger Shepard⁷ who is a cognitive psychologist. It is the study of visionary experience in the scientific process throughout history giving common examples like Friedrich Kekulé. The discovery of the structure of the benzene ring was preceded by a dream of a snake biting its tail. That's a fairly well-known case. But he has really given a thorough documentation of many instances of this kind throughout the history of science challenging the notion of how people think science proceeds.

LAWRENCE: To comment on what Justine and Bill said, an experience one of the patients that I interviewed had was after he had had the near-death experience and was leaving the hospital. It was a very cold day in January. As they were driving down the street leaving the hospital, which is in a very poor section, he saw someone on the road that didn't have very good clothes on given how cold it was. He said to his wife, "Stop the car. I want to give this man my coat." His wife said, "What are you, crazy? You want to stop in the middle of the slums? You want to stop the car?" "Yes, I want to give him my coat." I think this kind of altruistic feeling, this real desire to help and serve people, and to be much less materialistic is totally invalidated. People don't understand why this person feels this way. They don't understand why they want to help somebody. "Why would you dare stop in the middle of the street like that?" Even if they come back with this sense, the culture is such that it doesn't accept it and they struggle with dealing with it. How do they convince their immediate family members that this is an okay thing, "It's okay for me to give somebody my coat"? It's much better than shooting somebody, yet we can't buy

⁷ Shepard, R.N. (1978). The mental image. *American Psychologist*, 33(2), 125-137.

into that as a general cultural situation. I think if we're going to evolve into that kind of consciousness, we need to validate those experiences.

EDGE: I'm going to ask Eugene to respond to some of these questions and take us in a slightly different direction. It picks up on some points that have been made earlier about the difference between what really went on in an experience and one's interpretation of the experience. You made the statement referring to scientific approaches versus personal approaches that both may be wrong. I'm just wondering in what sense would they be wrong?

TAYLOR: Of course, the simplest example from the standpoint of personal experience is where we experience something and immediately believe that our explanation of it is the reality itself. From the scientific standpoint an example would be dreaming. When you study dreaming, the first thing a scientist wants to know is the physiology of it. The whole context for scientific investigation is already preestablished. In other words, the visionary has a metaphysical psychology of transcendence, and the scientist has a philosophy of reductionism. The philosophical frame of reference for each is the same in every case; whereas the data, the subject matter, may change. This points to the very interesting possibility that science is neither a theory nor a method but an attitude: a consensually validated way of approaching external, material reality for purposes of gaining some kind of control over it. The point that I was trying to make was that science only works in one domain of consciousness. But if you are really talking about, as John was bringing up, your interest in personal experience and the transformation of personality or something more simple like character development, or if you are just trying to become a better person, to live morally and aesthetically, or to speak in a poetic language, or embark on a personal search for the actualization of your destiny, these things to me represent a completely different domain from that of scientific inquiry. The very first problem comes when you confuse the two domains and try to construct a science of the spirit by blithely mixing them. So the two things don't really seem to fit together in our present state of consciousness. It's much like searching for the gene for celibacy.

EDGE: Actually, I just read in the newspaper they found something in that monogamous animals had a particular hormone.

TAYLOR: So you believe celibacy is inheritable? It seems to me that there are two ways to look at the example, funny as it may seem. One, it is quite plausible to posit and to even show potential biological mechanisms for not reproducing, which would then evolutionarily end that line. Such a mechanism could conceivably be an evolutionary quirk that would eliminate a whole domain that Mother Nature doesn't want and, basically, allow some other species to flourish. But the point (which I actually gave half in jest) was to say that there is a radical difference between biological sterility and willful conscious choice to cease reproducing. At the present level of our understanding we indiscriminately mix science and the process of inner experience. It seems more functional to me at this stage to separate them into two distinct domains and to start out as a dualist, even if in the midst of some transcendent experience they may all seem to be one. You've got to work for such an integration to achieve it. Then it only becomes one for you, not for anybody else. Just try and tell your oneness to your neighbor; you will quickly find that they have their own problems.

ROLL: I think that is a mistaken approach, Eugene. I'm very sorry to have to say that. Let me use a personal experience. Throughout most of my life I have had absolutely convincing out-of-body experiences. I knew I was out of the body. I knew I was in consensus reality. I was walking around my room. Everything was recognizable. Sometimes I would stick my hand through a wall, and that was kind of exciting. Other than that it was my familiar, personal self that was "out". But then I always wondered, "Is this real? Is this some sort of hallucination? Am I just dreaming, though it's so real that I don't think I am? Or what is it?" I began looking into out-of-body experiences that other people had had, including John Palmer's work. Then we did some experimentation with Keith Harary at Duke University. I found sometimes out-of-body experiences are consensual; sometimes they seem to be in the real world; and, sometimes they seem to be in a sort of mental or hallucinatory world or however you want to describe it. It's not the world of consensus reality. Then I had an out-of-body experience, which was the last one I have had. It was about ten years ago now. It was completely realistic. I got into a room in my house and stood in the doorway in my out-of-body form. I was so excited about the clarity of this experience and so frustrated that I could not really

check it. But then, fortunately, the moonlight came in through the double-doors and cast shadows on the floor. One of these shadows overlapped the rug. The moonlight hit a round table we had in the living room and the shadow fell across the rug in the living room. I told myself, "Now, I could not have known that this shadow would fall exactly this way at this time. So, I'm going to check it." I went down on hands and knees and put my hand to the floor. I measured the shadow as it stuck out from the rug. I felt the oak grain against my palm. It was so realistic. With this precious information, I moved down a hallway where, for some reason or other, I did not walk vertically; I walked slightly at an angle, as if I was on a different floor. I got into the bedroom which was pitch dark. I plunged into my bed, hoping that I would merge with my own body rather than with my wife's, which would have been really confusing! I aroused my body and went back into the sitting room to check the shadow. The sitting room was pitch black. There was no moonlight. I should have at least been able to figure that out before I went to bed. Not only was there no moonlight, but the shadow I saw could never fall the way I saw it either by artificial light or real light. I figured out that this was a mental world. I was in the world that I pictured. The out-of-body experience is probably in a mental world though it may have ESP elements. That is something that John has pointed out. For me there was a combination of the empirical and the experiential. By combining the two, I thought I could figure out what was happening. From that I took the further step by saying the out-of-body self is very real experientially, but not quite real consensually. Before this I was convinced that life would continue for me in the out-of-body form I was familiar with in my out-of-body experiences. Now, having done further exploration of one kind or another, I feel that the out-of-body self can be projected from the body. The OBE has a biological function when it happens during life-threatening situations because when you think you are out of the body, you leave the body alone. The body can then heal itself. But the surviving self, the continuing self, the psychic self is not the out-of-body self. I'm sorry for this rather long spiel. We need to check the experiential against the empirical.

TAYLOR: I completely agree. But you have to separate them in order to do that. There is some extraordinary training that must happen

first and it should not be just the training that we get from the material, empirical sciences. In other words, it has to be training with regard to the immaterial. And we know practically nothing about that in the West. An example of the immaterial is teaching martial arts. It is possible to train people in mechanical techniques and as a result to have really remarkable psychic events befall them because they enter into non-ordinary states of reality. In a dangerous situation, the conditions of the moment are so radically changed that you enter back into this non-ordinary state and can now function in it. If you try and stay in your everyday rational state, you are not going to make it through the situation because everyone else involved is moving through a non-ordinary reality. You have had training in moving through such a reality because all of your cues are internal. Even though everything is shifting around you, you use your internal centering in order to function. Then you become a focal point of balance to reconstruct reality around yourself very quickly. In this way you avoid becoming simply another victim of circumstance even though things appear to be spiraling out of control around you. So, in a simple situation like that there is a training and honing of the animal instincts, at the same time that you have the capacities of willful consciousness that are still active but in quite extraordinary ways. Think of Houdini, who said, "Show me anything claimed to be done by psychic means, and I'll show you how to do exactly the same thing physically." But then, of course, Houdini, while he was sitting there telling you this, might be tying and untying knots with his toes under the table just to keep himself in shape. The idea is that it is possible to do these things, but we normally are not trained to do them.

Having said that, I want to pick up on one thing that Madelaine said. I am struck by the anecdotal accounts of these non-ordinary realities which suggests that some states are experienced as psychopathological and some transcendent. When there is a transcendent experience, your relation to other people is automatically transformed. There is some relationship between having seen that higher reality, that is, knowing that it is there, and living with a supreme hopefulness instead of a supreme despair. No matter what happens to you, the fact that you have seen something higher and you could get through it, gives you a completely different sense for where

other people are psychically in their own development. You are then liable to reach out to other people from that domain. There seems to me to be an interesting relationship we don't understand between transcendence and healing which is different from experiencing a psychopathic state. Access to the transcendent may be the basis of all healing, regardless of whether what the healer does is based on scientific medicine or not.

EDGE: Bill, have your out-of-body experiences changed over time? You mentioned sticking your hand through the wall during this last one. It seemed obvious to me that your out-of-the-body experience was embodied in a particular way. Has that always been the case?

ROLL: I have always had the sense of being in a body. I always had the sense of walking on the floor, for instance, and of having a specific point of view from which I perceived things.

EDGE: I'm really wondering whether or not the development of your theory of the embodied person might have, in fact, affected your experience out-of-the-body.

ROLL: This last out-of-body experience was the most vivid of them all and it falsified my theory. I didn't have any more after that. It was as if I now had the answer and could turn to something else. I have not had any other out-of-body experiences since that one. I don't know if that helps.