

KELLY, E. F., KELLY, E. W., CRABTREE, A., GAULD, A., GROSSO, M., and GREYSON, B. (2007). *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology of the 21st century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. xxxii+800 pp. ISBN 13 9780742547926. Clothbound, \$99.95. *Reviewed by Arthur Hastings.*

“The great field for new discoveries,” said a scientific friend to me the other day, “is always the ‘unclassified residuum.’” Round about the accredited and orderly facts of every science there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute and irregular and seldom met with, which it always proves more easy to ignore than to attend to. ... Anyone will renovate his science who will steadily look after the irregular phenomena. (William James, 1897, 299–300)

This volume is a stunning tour de force that belongs in every transpersonal psychology library, whether personal or institutional. Its purpose is to assess scientific theory and knowledge of the mind, including the transpersonal dimension of human possibilities. It critiques the claims of mainstream science, and presents evidential support for the topics that appear to go beyond the materialistic paradigm of mainstream scientific thought. It is relevant for anyone interested in transpersonal psychology, consciousness, spiritual experiences, altered states, creativity, human potential, and mind-body interactions, and anyone who wishes to have a grasp of the theoretical and evidential state of these topics. This is not a volume on psychotherapy, but if transpersonal psychotherapy and applications of transpersonal knowledge is to have a credible base in reality, this book will help provide it.

This volume emerged from several years of invited seminars sponsored by the Center for Theory and Research of the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California with representation at various times from psychologists, researchers, philosophers, physicists, psychiatrists, spiritual teachers, therapists, parapsychologists, anthropologists, and many others. The transpersonal field was represented by Charles T. Tart, Michael Grosso, Sean Kelly, David Fontana, myself, and Michael Murphy, who initiated the seminars. The group began by looking at the pioneering work of Frederick W. H. Myers, one of the founders of the British Society for Psychical Research, and a classics scholar. Myers (1903) wrote *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, in which he discussed the nature of many of these same phenomena, defined terms, collected reports and experimental data, and conceptualized the existence of a subliminal self that was below the threshold of our conscious mind. This subliminal self was different from the unconscious mind of Freud in that it had positive talents of creativity, intelligence, psychic functioning, and multiple skills, and these could interact with conscious awareness.

Meeting annually, the group reviewed mainstream research on exceptional phenomena and experiences, and found that the studies were embedded in a materialistic consensus, with flaws and misconceptions, and one that did not do

justice to the actual phenomena. The group decided that their considerations should be presented in a book that would critique contemporary science and research, articulate the empirical support for the phenomena in question, and suggest more fruitful approaches to studying these matters. The six authors of the book have drawn on the group discussions, included ideas from Myers, and have grounded the book with extensive research from scientific studies.

There is a renewed interest in consciousness today, not about the mind itself, but about the chemistry and neurophysiology of consciousness. It is assumed in the mainstream paradigm that what we experience as the mind is reducible to the brain. From this perspective, transpersonal and spiritual experiences are constructions of the neurology of the brain, and explainable in terms of physical brain processes, without independent meaning or reality. In a materialistic worldview, this is the only explanation possible. The sense of self, personal awareness, pleasure, pain, sensory perception, subjective experience, and meaning itself are neuronal processes in the brain, with nothing added. So also, experiences of the divine, the worlds of the shaman, inner voices, near-death experiences, transcendent values, ESP, and all spiritual and transpersonal events are thereby explainable in terms of biology, chemistry, physics and brain processes, in accordance with mechanical quantum laws. Mind, self, consciousness, and spirit have no other reality.

Such is the view that this book addresses with a critical stance. The authors review mainstream research in psychology, medicine, religion, anthropology, brain studies, and other fields, with detailed attention to research design, analysis of data, and the claims that are made. Their conclusions are straightforward that there are flaws in the case of mainstream science. The authors point out specific and detailed gaps in thinking and research methods, assumptions that are invalid, and exaggerated claims. This is one of the few scholarly appraisals of the theory and research on this topic, and this critique will not be found in such specificity elsewhere.

The book assembles large amounts of credible evidence (much from the scientific literature) for a wide range of empirical observations that are difficult, perhaps impossible to explain in terms of the present physical scientific worldview. These include stigmata, body transformation, yogic practices, mystical experiences, veridical near-death experiences, unconscious thinking in creativity, multiple personality, gaps in theories of memory, distant mental interaction with living systems, transpersonal experiences, and many more. The authors show that these are consistent and well documented through systematic observation and laboratory studies. Unfortunately, the observations of these “exceptional experiences” have been ignored and, if noticed, are explained away as faulty observation or inadequate rigor. This is not an unknown reaction in science and psychology, and is one that can be driven by motivations that are unscientific (Barber, 1961; Hastings, 2001). The authors of this book support serious scientific study of these matters, so long as it is science in an authentic sense, not scientific dogmatic assumptions. They believe that genuine scientific approaches, being open to the data, can make headway in studying transpersonal and related experiences. However,

they also contend that this has not been done yet by transpersonal psychologists.

This volume provides a strong basis for the validity of transpersonal psychology as a study of real dimensions of human experience, real in the sense of evidential support for transpersonal experiences that are more than subjective fantasy, and that have impact on mind and behavior. For example, the chapter on mystical experiences by Edward F. Kelly and Michael Grosso discusses the current brain studies of such experiences, critiques the claims that they are pathological (e.g., epileptic in nature) and guides the reader through the serious research on these levels of experience. They conclude that

The facts of mysticism pose fundamental challenges to mainstream reductionistic physicalism....Scientific psychology must open itself more fully to these genuinely transpersonal aspects of the human psyche. Transpersonal psychology thus has a real subject matter. But to put the matter bluntly, it must put its scientific house in better order. (p. 574)

The chapter 'Unusual Experiences Near Death and Related Phenomena,' by Emily Williams Kelly, Bruce Grayson, and Edward F. Kelly, is a detailed discussion of near-death experiences (NDEs), deathbed visions, lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences and apparitions. These are phenomena that transpersonal psychologists and therapists are likely to be asked about, and they often have spiritual import. The authors carefully establish the evidence for the validity and impact of these events. Alternative reductive explanations that NDEs are due to lack of oxygen, overmedication, wishful constructionism, and other causes are dissected by the authors as illogical and lacking evidence, leaving the nature of these as a challenge to further study.

Another chapter looks into areas of mind-body relationships (psychophysiology), many of which have relevance for healing, such as health effects of meditation, faith healing, reincarnation birthmarks, and hypnotic cures of physical diseases. These effects are well documented, mysterious, and without adequate explanation.

One might expect a chapter to be included on psychic and parapsychological phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and other forms of ESP. However, the authors omit this as they comment that the case for ESP is evidentially well established. They state,

Sufficient high-quality evidence has long since been available, we believe, to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt the existence of the basic "paranormal" phenomena, at least for those willing to study that evidence with an open mind. (p. xxvi)

I can add my agreement to their position, and refer readers for documentation of this to *The Conscious Universe* by Dean Radin (1997). There is, of course, an extensive body of theory and research on psi phenomena that is not included in

Irreducible Mind and which has obvious transpersonal relevance. Rather than discuss what they believe is a settled issue, the authors provide an outstanding annotated bibliography for their readers on psychical research. Questions about ESP, near-death experiences, past lives, and reincarnation are often brought to transpersonal psychologists and therapists; it may be time to recognize that they have transpersonal features and are of significance to the wider transcendent landscape of the self.

Irreducible Mind makes a solid case that transpersonal and exceptional experiences can be researched and brought into a scientific perspective. As mentioned above, the authors bluntly state that transpersonal psychology is lacking in scientific standing. This criticism has also come from others. Psychologist Paul Cunningham (2006) writes that

Many Western psychologists still believe that [transpersonal psychology] deals essentially with “non-information” and does not contain any statements about any kind of scientifically valid, hard-bed reality. (p. 62)

Cunningham says that one reason for this is the lack of an agreed upon discipline for the field:

Transpersonal psychologists have not resolved basic issues of subject matter, philosophical assumptions, conceptual models, theoretical language, or research methodology. (p. 63)

The paucity of scientific research in transpersonal psychology pointed out by this book is borne out by the journals in the field. In a rough poll, I reviewed the past three years of articles published in the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, *Revision*, and this journal. There were 113 published articles, of which only 12 were research reports. I assume that this probably reflects the same proportion of submissions. Yet there is extensive research being published on meditation, spiritual practices, distant healing, and transpersonal experiences, but which is not being done by transpersonal psychologists nor with the assumptions and approaches that the transpersonal field could bring. This volume is a challenge to transpersonal psychology to develop theoretical underpinnings for the field, and to encourage credible empirical research on the transpersonal dimension of life. As the book says, “Transpersonal psychology can certainly be brought into better relationship with the mainstream, with its central impulses and concerns grounded primarily in real empirical knowledge” (p. 642). It is clear that the authors take the transpersonal level of human nature seriously, and believe that a more scientific approach from transpersonal psychologists will make an important contribution to our understanding of that nature.

The authors do not agree that a clash between transpersonal stances and science is necessary. “Mystical experiences,” they write, “and associated phenomena are available for study from a variety of perspectives, and there exist numerous important opportunities for further scientific research....Mainstream psychology will also benefit from such efforts” (p. 574).

As you can guess by now, this is a scholarly and technically written volume. It is not light reading, and it communicates at a graduate level for an educated audience. I had to read it in short takes a little at a time. Although the themes and ideas of Myers make contributions, they too often cloud the discussions of current concepts and research, and the connections are sometimes obscure. Nevertheless, the main focus is clearly and skillfully composed. Even though I thought I was familiar with much of the data, I admit that I was astonished when it was gathered together in this one place. The book therefore also serves as a resource for information about these phenomena for professionals such as therapists, educators, researchers, spiritual teachers, and the ministry. We are indebted to the authors for this volume.

The book has 92 pages of references and an extensive index. A welcome addition from the publisher is a free CD in PDF format of the text of the hard-to-find 1903 edition of Myers' *Human Personality*, along with reviews of the book by William James and others. The CD thoughtfully has English translations of Myers' French, Italian, German, Latin and Greek quotations, which as a classical scholar writing for other classically educated readers, Myers wrote in the original tongues, leaving us non-classically educated readers in the dark. This book provides light in many ways.

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The Reviewer

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