Essay Review
Theorizing Rogue Phenomena


*Beyond Physicalism* is one of the boldest and most compelling books I have read in many years. It is the culmination of a fifteen-year-long research project, the “Survival Seminar” or “Sursem”, led by Edward Kelly under the auspices of the Esalen Institute’s Center for Theory and Research. In a previous, equally compendious book from the project, *Irreducible Mind*, Kelly and colleagues (2007) claimed to demonstrate the incompleteness and indeed falsity of physicalism by adducing copious empirical evidence relating to psi phenomena, mystical experiences, and other data that seem to be inexplicable in conventional physicalist terms – collectively dubbed “rogue” phenomena. They took some first steps towards providing a more adequate theory of such phenomena by examining the model of mind-brain relations developed by Frederic Myers and the later William James, in which mind or consciousness, rather than being a product of the brain, is understood to be filtered or transmitted by the brain. The present book recapitulates this prior work and goes further in examining a wide variety of non-physicalist frameworks to assess how satisfactorily each can accommodate the rogue phenomena.

Following a lucid introduction by Kelly, the book unfolds in three parts. Part I includes two chapters presenting “The Essential Background: ‘Rogue’ Phenomena in Search of a Theory”. First, Kelly (Chapter 1) surveys an extensive range of phenomena that appear to be empirically established, or at least probable, yet inexplicable in terms of physicalism: psi phenomena, including precognition and macro-PK (such as levitation); postmortem survival; extreme psychophysiological influence (such as stigmata); prodigious memory and calculation abilities; dissociation and secondary personality; near-death experiences; genius-level creativity; both introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences; and, not least, the “central phenomena of our everyday conscious mental life including meaning, intentionality, and consciousness” (p. 24).

The last-mentioned phenomena are worth noting, for, although the main focus throughout the book is on psi and mysticism, the book’s findings also have implications for the problem of consciousness and of mind-body relations generally, as clearly signaled by some of the chapter
headings (Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 13). Paul Marshall (Chapter 2) deepens the picture by focusing on the special challenges presented by mystical experiences, especially extrovertive ones, with their interrelated characteristics including a-temporality, intuitive knowing, unity, higher sense of self, and luminosity.

Part II, which occupies the majority of the 600-page book, includes eleven chapters discussing various “Old and New Worldviews that Accommodate the Targeted Phenomena” arranged “roughly in order from more scientific or ‘grounded’ frameworks to more metaphysical or ‘grand’ ones” (p. xxiii). These chapters fall into four sets. Michael Grosso (Chapter 3) and Edward Kelly and David Presti (Chapter 4) present historical precedents and current psychophysiological evidence, respectively, for “transmission” or “filter” models of the relationship between mind and body, which postulate that the mind pre-exists the brain and operates on and through it.

Together these two chapters epitomize the volume’s multidisciplinary approach, as here a humanities approach and a scientific approach address the same issue from different, complementary perspectives. Chapter 4 even exemplifies the methodological approach of the Sursem project as a whole in the way it draws on panoptic empiricism, abducts an explanatory framework from the broadened set of data that such empiricism yields, and then attempts, modestly and carefully, to develop a program of further scientific work to derive and test predictions stemming from the abducted framework.

In the next set of chapters Henry Stapp (Chapter 5), Harald Atmanspacher and Wolfgang Fach (Chapter 6), and Bernard Carr (Chapter 7) provide three expert accounts, two by physicists and one by a physicist paired with a psychologist, of how current understanding in physics, both quantum mechanical and astrophysical, can help to make sense of both the mind-body relationship and the data of psi and mysticism. Historically, quantum mechanics has played a major role in undermining the hegemony of physicalism and reintroducing considerations of consciousness into the hard sciences (p. 494). These three chapters exploit this opening to demonstrate the compatibility of the targeted phenomena with even the most physically oriented of the sciences.

One of the assumptions of Beyond Physicalism is that for the task of theorizing rogue phenomena important pointers may be found in “the world’s great cultural traditions” (p. vii), and this assumption is converted into the methodological strategy of attending carefully to such traditions, especially to exponents of them “who have combined high philosophic acumen with direct personal experience of deep mystical states” (p. xx). Accordingly, in the next set of chapters Gregory Shaw (Chapter 8), Edward Kelly and Ian Whicher (Chapter 9), and Loriliai Biernacki (Chapter 10) examine in depth three of the worlds most influential mystical tradi-
tions – the neo-Platonism of Plotinus and Iamblichus, the Samkhya yoga philosophy of Patañjali, and the Kashmiri Shaivist tantra of Abhinavagupta.

The juxtaposition of the three chapters prompts some interesting intercultural and intra-cultural comparisons and reflections, for example on debates about dualism and monism. As Shaw details in Chapter 8, Iamblichus attempts with his Platonic theurgy to correct lingering elements of dualism in Plotinus’ thought by bringing the soul more fully into embodiment. This move is reflected in the development, signaled in the segue from Chapter 9 to Chapter 10, from the dualist Samkhya yoga tradition of Patañjali to the non-dualist and embodied tantric philosophy of Abhinavagupta.

Each of the three traditions discussed can comfortably accommodate psi phenomena as well as central features of mystical experiences such as intuitive knowing through identification between knower and known. But together they also seem to indicate a move away from dualism, which may have implications for the meta-theorizing that takes place in Chapter 14. Finally, an incidental but important benefit of these three chapters is that, supported by the contemporary scholarship and research of the Sursem project, they restore credibility to the neo-Platonists’ and Indian philosophers’ claims about exceptional experiences and cognitions, which mainstream scholars of those thinkers tend not to take seriously.

In the last set of chapters in Part II Paul Marshall (Chapter 11), Adam Crabtree (Chapter 12), and Eric Weiss (Chapter 13) bring us into the realm of modern Western philosophy and present their own readings and adaptations of some of the ideas of Leibniz, Peirce, and Whitehead, respectively – again with the primary aim of highlighting how they might account for the targeted rogue phenomena.

Marshall’s modification of Leibnizian monads, so that they become “a little more like Plotinian intellects” (p. 403) with a subliminal level of universal awareness, succeeds, especially in relation to mystical experiences, in making Leibniz’s exotic system intuitively satisfying and illuminating. Among the highlights of Crabtree’s chapter is his lucid account of Peirce’s concept of “abduction”, so important for the overall methodology of Beyond Physicalism. And Weiss’s adaptation of Whitehead’s process philosophy in the light of modern physics and the mystical philosophy of Sri Aurobindo is especially helpful in providing a means, absent from Whitehead’s original formulations, of conceiving of veridical precognition. Different from the earlier traditions considered in the book, both Peirce’s and Whitehead’s philosophies include an important evolutionary dimension.

Finally, Part III comprises two chapters with the bold aim of “Putting the Pieces Together”. In the first of these, Kelly (Chapter 14) masterfully distills the main insights emerging from the book and indeed from
the Sursem project as a whole. These include (not exhaustively): that physicalism can indeed be rejected; that programs of further scientific work on rogue phenomena are desirable and possible; that science needs to expand in the direction of psychology and metaphysics; that science and spirituality need to be, and probably can be, reconciled; that a better theory of imagination is needed; that top-down emergentism has greater explanatory potential in relation to the targeted phenomena than bottom-up emergentism; and above all that, while there is no definitive best model, there is a significant theoretical convergence among the frameworks considered towards some form of evolutionary panentheism. Picking up this last insight, Michael Murphy (Chapter 15) concludes the book with a spirited account of the history, present salience, and possible scientific, social, cultural, and soteriological implications of evolutionary panentheism as a worldview.

In his penultimate chapter Kelly states that the Sursem project has attempted to reach “an approximately correct picture of the general character of Reality” and that in relation to this Beyond Physicalism advances “two primary claims” (p. 538):

First – and we have regarded this as axiomatic from the beginning – serious metaphysical thinking or theorizing cannot hope to succeed unless it builds upon an adequate empirical foundation, one that includes the rogue phenomena targeted in IM [Irreducible Mind] and summarized in Chapter 1 – especially psi phenomena and mystical experience with their deep interconnections, postmortem survival, and genius in its highest expressions. Second – and this comprises the main conclusion of [...] the book as a whole – we now claim in addition that a rich and worldwide history of efforts towards abduction from that sort of broadened empirical foundation points inescapably in the direction of a panentheistic metaphysics [...].

Among the most impressive features of the book are, one, the tenacity with which the implication of the first of these claims, the need for panoptic empiricism, has been adhered to by each of the contributors, none of whom ever loses sight of the problematic phenomena that require explanation or modelling; and, two, the cautious manner in which the move is made from the first of the claims to the second, from the panoptic empiricism to the abduction. Not just one favored framework is invoked but a multitude of different frameworks are assembled, tested against the phenomena, and evaluated. All presented by subject experts, they are drawn, as we have seen, from the sciences (especially, neurobiology, psychophysiology, physics, and psychology), from overviews of religious and intellectual history, and from recent specialist scholarship on ancient traditions both Western (neo-Platonism) and Eastern (yoga and Tantra) as well as on modern philosophies (neo-Leibnizian, Peircean,
and Whiteheadian). While this range is inevitably selective and contingent on the available expertise, it is sufficient to provide comparisons and triangulation among scientific and religious, modern and ancient, Western and Eastern, and mainstream and esoteric bodies of thought.

It is clear from the interconnections and cross-references between many of the chapters that real and effective dialogue, often over many years, has in fact taken place among exponents of the different perspectives. Moreover, by way of further checks, all of the frameworks are required not only to remain “anchored in science” (pp. viii, 116) but also to cohere “both with everyday human experience and with beliefs widely shared among the world’s great cultural traditions” (p. vii). To have found and maintained this approach that is at once uncommonly open-minded and rigorously testing evinces outstanding editorial vision.

The second of the claims quoted above, the theoretical convergence towards a panentheistic metaphysics, is probably the most significant finding of the book and of the Sursem project as a whole. This finding was perhaps not entirely unexpected. As noted in the “Introduction”, evolutionary panentheism is “the worldview that has implicitly guided Esalen Institute [the Sursem project’s sponsor] for the past fifty years” and its articulation by Esalen founder Michael Murphy in Chapter 15 is acknowledged to have “served as a navigational aid for our other chapters and a destination for the book as a whole” (p. xxvii). Nevertheless, the finding tallies with a surge of interest in panentheism beyond the project: for example, among Christian theologians and philosophers (Cooper 2006, Brierley 2008), especially those concerned with the relationship between religion and science (Clayton and Peacocke 2004); among process philosophers (Griffin 2014); and among scholars of Western esotericism, who have identified panentheism as the implicit theology of most Western esoteric thought (Hanegraaff 2012, Asprem 2014).

The significance of panentheism stems from the fact that it is a metaphysical or theological position fundamentally different from that which has underpinned not just mainstream Western religious thought but also modern science. In mainstream theistic religion God is seen as separate from the world and knowledge is obtainable only through faith and reason, while in mainstream science, the world is viewed independently of any supposition about the divine and knowledge is obtainable only through empiricism and reason. In panentheistic metaphysics, by contrast, God permeates and gives structure and meaning to the world, including to humans, who therefore have an inborn capacity for obtaining direct, experiential, soteriological knowledge of the divine (“gnosis”; see, e.g., Hanegraaff 2012, pp. 370-373).

It is difficult to overestimate how different a science might be if it were really based on panentheism. There would be not only the possibility of acquiring knowledge of realities deemed inaccessible in the mainstream
view but also a requirement that the knower undergo transformation, of a kind rather different from normal scientific training, in order to access that knowledge.

One of the claims of *Beyond Physicalism* is that the data and convergent theoretical perspectives presented are amenable to further investigation by the methods of natural science, and therefore that scientific research programs could be developed on the basis of these data and theories. This is surely true, but there may be points where tensions arise between scientific knowledge, even scientific knowledge taking account of subjectivity, and gnostic forms of knowledge in which cognition is so closely bound up with the soteriological transformation of the knower that the purposes of scientific practice become either of minor significance or simply unavailable. As Shaw notes of the neo-Platonists, “Their rationality was designed to transcend itself” (p. 306). Whether the tension between science and soteriology has implications for how firmly “anchored in science” one should remain when in pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge, or how far science should be expanded, is a question that is likely to require continual reflection.

Those contributors to the book (Grosso, Shaw, Biernacki) who are trained in the humanities rather than the sciences have written predominantly from historical and comparative perspectives. Arguably a further contribution that scholars in the humanities could make to this project would be to provide a richer hermeneutic approach, one that asked of the rogue phenomena not only can they be proven and how can they best be explained but also what do they mean. Jeffrey Kripal (2010), for instance, has stressed the mythical, literary, narrative, and fantastic dimensions of rogue phenomena, including the sense one can get from such phenomena that one is being written by them, all of which features lend themselves to exploration and interpretation through the expertise of scholars and practitioners of the humanities. This hermeneutic dimension is noted, but not developed, at the end of the chapter by Atmanspacher and Fach: “the ‘reality of the symbol’”, they remark, “is [...] essential for psychophysical phenomena” (p. 222). It is also implied in Kelly’s recognition that “we clearly need a richer and more comprehensive theory of human imagination” (p. 512).

No less significantly, the contributors also stress the implications of panentheistic metaphysics for culture and society as a whole. As Kelly writes with emphasis (p. 542):

> the world pictured by panentheism is not just the same old physicalist world with an altered expression, but a world whose constitution is fundamentally different in ways that matter to us as human beings.

Such a world-picture would provide, he says, “an antidote to the preval-
ing postmodern disenchantment of the world” (p. 542). It would provide grounds for belief in freedom, meaning, and human potential; it would enhance possibilities of community and environmental sustainability by fostering the sense of interconnectedness among people and between people and nature; and it would help to forestall the emergence and spread of polarized religious and scientific absolutes (p. 542). Though exploration of these implications has been outside the scope of _Beyond Physicalism_, the need for such exploration is well signaled in the last two chapters, and a scientific and religious basis for it has been provided.

Though significant, the convergence among the contributions is, as already noted, far from complete, and sites for possible further work are suggested by some of the remaining fault-lines. For example, a leitmotif of the book is the filter or transmission model of the relationship between mind and brain, yet it is acknowledged (p. 496) that at least one of the presented models, the dual-aspect monism of Pauli and Jung (Atmanspacher and Fach), might not so readily be framed in these terms. Similarly, the metaphysical position towards which the contributors seem to converge is described in the penultimate chapter as “some form of _idealistic evolutionary panentheism_” (p. 537, emphasis added) but in the introduction as “some form of _idealist or dual-aspect_ panentheism” (p. xxvi, emphasis added). Again, there are differences among the models discussed in the extent to which they may be considered dualist (e.g., Plotinus, Patañjali, Myers and the earlier James), non-dualist (e.g., Iamblichus, Abhinavagupta), or in some sense both (e.g., Pauli and Jung).

Interestingly, the chapter on Pauli and Jung features in all of the above fault-lines, and this leads me to wonder whether a fuller encounter between Jungian psychology and the findings from _Beyond Physicalism_ and the Sursem project as a whole might be illuminating. The grounds for such engagement are certainly there. No less than Myers and James, with both of whose work he was familiar, Jung experienced, researched, and theorized about psi phenomena and mystical experiences throughout his life. With his dual commitment to science and religion, his affinities with esotericism, German idealism, and Eastern thought, and his distinction between an unknowable God archetype and an evolving God-image, Jung’s work is arguably even more panentheistic than that of Myers or James. Moreover, with its rich understanding of symbolism and imagination Jungian psychology supplies resources for enhancing the hermeneutic in addition to the scientific study of rogue phenomena.

Jung’s work was sympathetically considered in _Irreducible Mind_ (usually for its affinities with the work of Myers) but was ultimately sidelined for a variety of reasons, the most significant of which was Jung’s claim that there could be no experiences without the ego, which, writes Kelly, “is flatly contradicted by the unanimous testimony of great mystics of all times and places” (Kelly _et al._ 2007, p. 577). This is an issue that
I think could be profitably revisited in light of Jung’s own late mystical experiences, some late developments in his thinking about the relationship between the ego and the self, and the case for his being viewed as an implicit panentheist. For the later Jung the ego is essential for self-realization in a way that is parallel to, or a microcosm of, the way the world is essential for God’s self-realization in panentheistic metaphysics.

These are just some of the directions in which the huge generative potential of this book could be pursued. As a collection of insightful chapters, as a visionary yet grounded and cogently ordered whole, and as a worthy companion to Irreducible Mind, Beyond Physicalism is a work which anyone seriously engaged in exploring the relationship between mind and matter could be guided, challenged, and illuminated by again and again.

References


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