BOOK REVIEW

Carlos S. Alvarado, Ph.D.
University of Virginia

Experiencing the Next World Now, by Michael Grosso.

In this book, addressed to the general public, philosopher Michael Grosso argues that there are phenomena that suggest that human beings survive bodily death. Investigations on the subject, he writes, have “revolutionary implications for human psychology and for how we should view the world and live our lives” (p. xiii). However, Grosso points out that he is not interested solely in providing evidence for an afterlife. Instead, he writes that he wants “to experience my life-enhancing truths in my body – now – and not just deduce them from isolated anomalies or puzzling observation” (p. xiii).

The book is divided into four parts, each of which has several chapters. The first one, entitled “Experiences,” presents a variety of phenomena the author feels are suggestive of life after death. He starts with out-of-body experiences (OBEs). Following countless authors before him, none of which he cites, Grosso writes that OBEs provide us with a clue of what happens at death. In his view, “if my consciousness can function outside and at a distance from my body, why not survive death without any body?” (p. 22).

Other chapters include discussions of a variety of phenomena. The one about apparitions includes several classic cases, as well as examples of different types of apparitions, among which are those seen during crises, deathbed visions, apparitions of persons long after death, and haunting apparitions. There are also chapters on

Carlos S. Alvarado, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Research in Psychiatric Medicine at the University of Virginia. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Alvarado at Division of Personality Studies, Department of Psychiatric Medicine, Box 800152, University of Virginia Health System, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0152; e-mail: csalvar@virginia.edu.
reincarnation and mediumship. The latter include several cases such as those of mediums Leonora Piper and Gladys Osborne Leonard, and a consideration of proxy sittings, drop-in communicators, the cross-correspondences, and both book and newspaper tests. These topics represent veridical mental mediumship; but I am glad that Grosso does not limit his discussion only to the veridical. In his view, "mediumship for the spiritualists was an instrument of prophetic critique of an entire way of life. To take the spirits seriously was boldly to challenge everyday life in America" (p. 66).

Part Two, "Challenges," has two chapters. One is about explanations. It is hard to disagree with the author regarding the assessment of either discarnate or psi-from-the-living agency: "In the end, only a case-by-case analysis allows for credible appraisals; needs, desires, and motivation have to be taken into account" (p. 140). Another chapter is devoted to concepts about the next world that include, among others, the ideas of philosopher H. H. Price.

Part Three is titled "Connections." Grosso suggests that a new approach is needed to connect the idea of, and the evidence for, survival of death to our lives. In his words: "Once this proximity is established, it will be possible to think about preparing for the transition; in this way the stress will shift from theory to practice, from trying to determine that there is a next world to figuring out how to experience the next world now" (pp. 153–154). This approach, however, is not new. It is based on the assumption that whatever may survive death is present in the living and that it may be explored with the living in different ways. A fairly recent example of this approach can be found in the writings of William Roll (1974/1975).

Grosso starts exploring the issue by examining the concept of evolution. As he writes: "Once we think of life after death as a stage in the ascent of biological progress, a stage of increasing autonomy from the physical substrate, it seems less remote from the mainstream view of life" (p. 159). Later in the chapter he mentions the concept of subtle bodies. He argues, inspired by Henri Bergson, Michael Murphy, and others, that "inside our bodies we find harbingers of the next world" (p. 165); that is, bodies other than the physical one are related to life in the next world.

The author sees several phenomena as bridges or connections between our terrestrial and our spiritual life. Memories and acts of will are cases in point, because Grosso feels their final explanation may not be physical or biological, as generally assumed. The same is said about dreaming, which shows connections to extrasensory perception (ESP) and may "be a halfway house to the next world."
Among other phenomena, the author considers artistic inspiration as well. Grosso mentions other “cracks and doors” (p. 188) that he believes connect this world to the next. There are many examples of people who claim all kinds of visionary experiences, among them prophets and shamans. Mystical experiences, the author writes, imply “release of conscious existence from bodily constraints” (p. 193). Other phenomena Grosso also considers are the materialization of objects by Sathya Sai Baba, the levitations and stigmata of mystics and saints, poltergeists, and physical mediumship. Grosso does not offer any of these phenomena as proof of an afterlife. Instead he sees them as indicators of channels, connections, or openings between our world and other realities.

Grosso argues that we can use “otherworld telescopes” to explore our inner transcendence. By this he means such “natural technologies for inducing visionary experiences” (p. 228) as crystal gazing and a variety of meditation-like techniques designed to control attention. The induction of both lucid dreams and OBEs is briefly mentioned as a way that may be helpful for self-exploration. Although not mentioned in the book, Grosso’s point reminds me of Sylvan Muldoon’s claim that once you have experienced astral projection

you will no longer doubt that the individual can exist apart from the physical body .... No longer will you be forced to base your belief in immortality upon the word of the Medium, the Pastor, or the Holy Books, for you will have the proof for yourself. (Muldoon and Carrington, 1929, p. 316)

However, Grosso cautions us that the issue is not only about having experiences:

More important is to form an attitude in the face of existence, living in radical openness, without fear of impermanence. It’s about a way of looking at things, a way that keeps us poised for departure, and helps us to think transitonally. (p. 232)

In the final chapter Grosso suggests other ways of self-exploration “involving small but significant changes in ordinary life” (p. 256), among them diet and fasting. He also argues that the modern mind is absorbed by all kinds of worries, such as work, that separate us from our transcendental nature. During such distracting situations,

consciousness cannot afford that kind of openness, and so is easily captured by the mundane, and contracted by anxious concerns. To tune into signals from the other side, we would need to reduce the noise and clutter of our lives. (p. 268)
These ideas, as Grosso points out, are related to yoga and other systems that deal with consciousness. But there is also a history of such ideas in parapsychology that Grosso does not include in this section (Alvarado, 1986).

In the epilogue, Grosso restates his conviction that survival of death is a reality. In addition, he writes:

Our evidence ... has implications for the art of living. Out-of-body experiences speak to our ecstatic potential; apparitional experiences to our latent visionary talents. Mediumship proves the polycentric nature of personal consciousness; the "I" we cling to so fiercely is somewhat of a sham, a delusion, and very superficial. There are other "I's," deeper and more interesting that the little I that rides the rickety wagon of my surface consciousness. Tapping into the deeper self is part of our creative endowment. (p. 277)

Grosso is not satisfied with pure research and insists on the importance of personal experience. Certainly personal experience carries a conviction that conventional research cannot convey. They put us in contact, Grosso states, with transcendence that "rightly honored, gain authority and inspire us to pursue our explorations" (p. 277).

My main critique of the book is the omission of information that could have improved the points the author makes. Granted this is a popular book, but discussions of the omitted material are relevant, and sometimes essential, in books crafted for the general public. An example of an all too brief discussion is that of subtle bodies (pp. 12, 163–165). I doubt that readers unfamiliar with the literature on the subject will realize that the author is alluding to an extremely influential concept that comes from antiquity and has been connected to spirituality, survival of death, and psychic phenomena, as can be seen in J. J. Poortman's (1954/1978) study.

Although there are many affirmations about the transcendental aspects of a variety of phenomena such as memory and mystical experiences, the author presents little discussion to support his points. More detail about the reasons behind his opinions would have strengthened his position.

A more detailed use of the research literature would have improved the book in different parts. Regarding OBE prevalence, instead of using anecdotal recollections about students with whom he discussed the experience (p. 8), Grosso could have used the survey literature on the subject. There is little in the book about the psychological correlates of psychic experiences. This becomes important in the author's discussion of the role of forming "an attitude in the face of
existence” to have OBEs (p. 232), which would have been more useful if he had included correlates of the experience that seem to indicate cognitive openness, such as positive relationships with lucid dreams, absorption, dissociation, and fantasy experiences. The point is that in inducing OBEs for self-exploration we need to keep in mind that, most likely, having a set belief or an attitude is not enough because we are probably dealing with an interaction of several variables, some of which presumably reflect psychological and psychophysiological processes related to the ability of individuals to have the experience. Furthermore, one misses discussions of specific theoretical constructs such as the psychometric model of hauntings and ideas of subtle bodies. Such concepts are not beyond the grasp of general readers.

In addition, but less important for the purpose of the book, there are a few issues of historical import with which I disagree with Grosso. In his discussion of the ideas of Spiritualists he gives the impression that all of them were interested in women’s rights and free love (pp. 65–66). However, it is important to recognize that there were many different positions within Spiritualism about these and other issues. More problematic is the absolute statement that “Darwin’s The Origin of Species in 1859 triggered modern survival research” (p. 155). While there is no doubt that Darwin’s book and other publications had a wide influence on intellectual, religious, and philosophical discussions about the nature of humankind in the 19th century European and American world (Richard, 1987), it is just incorrect to give all the credit to a single historical influence. There were many other factors that contributed to the scientific materialism that, interacting with evolutionary ideas, affected both early Spiritualism and psychical research. One such example is the study of the nervous system, particularly attempts at localization of both sensory and motor functions in the brain (Young, 1970).

These criticisms aside, Grosso’s Experiencing the Next World Now has much to recommend it. In addition to being a very well-written book, the author is to be commended for his use of classic cases, which are summarized in ways that are both accessible and attractive to the general reader. Grosso’s discussion is at its best when he informs his readers about the different types of phenomena that exist, or the way in which they manifest. Two good examples are his descriptions of apparitions and mediumship.

Following on the tradition of Frederic W. H. Myers, Ernesto Bozzano, Raynor Johnson, and others, Grosso presents a wide view of human consciousness. Such a view includes a positive outlook of
human nature and its potential, and a varied map of the range of phenomena that he believes suggest that a component of human beings transcends physical limitations. But perhaps more than most previous authors, Grosso emphasizes how the realization of this transcendence can benefit us in daily life and argues that we should actively cultivate this realization.

Another positive aspect of the book, and one particularly important in a work addressed to the general public, is that Grosso reminds his readers of the need to consider alternate explanations of the phenomena discussed. For example, he writes that "hidden memories can explain cases suggestive of survival, so you have to be sure you have ruled out that possibility" (p. 132).

One hopes that readable books such as this one will both inform the general public and encourage some people to conduct their own personal explorations, and to find a way to contribute to the scientific investigation of these topics.

References


