

BOOK REVIEW

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Book Review: *The Final Choice: Playing the Survival Game*, by Michael Grosso. Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Press, 1985. 348 pp., \$10.95.

In this highly ambitious, beautifully written, and continually thought-provoking book, Michael Grosso, a scholar who has emerged as one of our day's leading parapsychological philosophers, comes close to formulating a world view big enough to make sense of these tumultuous times. Grosso's work embodies as credible a New Age metaphysics as I have yet to encounter, linking the confluence of events shaping the latter half of the twentieth century with what may lie ahead. In philosophical orientation and range of vision, Grosso's book most closely resembles Kenneth Ring's recent work, *Heading Toward Omega* (1984), thus qualifying it as an addition to the "new literature of hope" of which Grosso (1985) himself has spoken.

With an eye on synoptic as opposed to analytic thinking (p. 6), Grosso packs the pages of this volume full with provocative facts and tantalizing insights on an impressive array of subjects. That emphasis enables him to pose intriguing conjectures on possible interrelationships between the usual focal points of parapsychologically oriented near-death research—that is, survivalistically inclined analyses of out-of-body experiences (OBEs), near-death experiences (NDEs), and seemingly related, ostensibly paranormal phenomena—and a host of additional weighty topics.

A partial list of these additional topics includes Darwinian natural

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selection and other variations on evolutionary theory, theories of evolution in personal and species-wide human consciousness, purportedly miraculous events and associated religious relics, visions of historical religious personages and other apparitional figures, UFO encounters, and conflicts within today's collective human psyche terrorized by the mounting threat of worldwide nuclear annihilation.

To comprehend the meaning of this rather expansive subject matter, Grosso draws upon the metaphysical and psychological thought of Freud and Jung and borrows other ideas from transpersonal psychology, parapsychology and other sources. Out of these ideas Grosso fashions the notion of "Mind at Large," which is the overriding theoretical construct of the book. Metaphysically aligned with such earlier concepts as Frederic W. H. Myers's (1903) *Subliminal Self*, Henri Bergson's (1911/1970) *Creative Evolution*, Carl Jung's (1959) *Objective Psyche*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's (1959) *Noosphere* and Kenneth Ring's (1984) recent speculations on NDEs, evolution and higher consciousness, Mind at Large is conceived to possess emergent as well as transcendent properties. Mind at Large, in other words, possesses properties that emerge from matter under the influence of physical evolution and other properties that exist outside of space, time, and matter, i.e., in eternity. Through the mediary of psi, Grosso proposes, Mind at Large bridges eternity and the physical universe, subtly guiding the course of planetary evolution and the growth of human consciousness.

In Grosso's analysis of the contemporary human condition, humanity has arrived, in the latter half of the twentieth century, at a critical juncture in history. Burdened by the evolutionary acquisition of an intellect whose powers have far outstripped any accompanying evolutionary capacity to control its lower animal passions, humankind lies precariously positioned upon a lofty precipice, which it has scaled on its evolutionary climb. Confronted by a final choice, humanity's next step will decide whether the human species shall slip and fall to be dashed upon the rocky shoals of nuclear devastation below, or overcome the remaining obstacles and ascend to a new high ground above. In the actualization of the latter scenario humanity will have fulfilled long-dormant psychic and spiritual evolutionary potentials and in the process will have transmuted into a new and higher species, a species termed *Homo noeticus* by the New Age theorist John White (1981). Backing down off these New Age slopes just a bit, I cannot help but wonder how appropriate it actually is to look upon today's nuclear crisis within the context of a choice, final or otherwise. But before attending to Grosso's reasons for so framing our planet's present nu-

clear predicament, let us first review in more detail the particulars of this truly challenging work.

Grosso's text is divided into six sections, ranging from two to five chapters each. An impressive organizational feature of the book, further improving its readability, is the additional division of chapters into sections ranging from half a page to several pages in length, each of which is offset by thematically relevant headings.

The first section compares, contrasts, and summarizes religious and other beliefs and attitudes on death and dying from the classical Greek, early to medieval Christian, Tibetan Buddhist, and modern Western religious and secular societies. Sifting through these beliefs and attitudes, Grosso culls a number of ideas that he feels would be valuable in the construction of a modern craft for dying. Information gleaned from contemporary parapsychology, near-death studies, and thanatology would play crucial roles in that deathcraft. As Grosso sees it, that deathcraft would fill a spiritual vacuum present throughout much of the contemporary Western world.

In the next section Grosso discourses upon certain of the essential features he sees in the relationships among evolution, human consciousness, and the paranormal. Overall, I found this section to be the strongest, most eloquently delivered portion of the book. The current of opinion Grosso sets in motion pertaining to possible evolutionary constraints on psi in the physical universe deserves, in my view, the serious scrutiny of experimental parapsychologists the world over.

Grosso accepts that the principle of natural selection must play some role in the evolution of life (p. 59). However, he observes that there are a myriad of gaps in the empirical data upon which Darwin's theory is founded. He speculates that Mind at Large, through the mediary of psi, "intervenes at critical junctures . . . [e.g., at] the origin of life, the development of a new and higher species, instances of 'paranormal healing' and in other circumstances where we observe psi at work" (p. 62).

In Grosso's view, however, psi does not act directly upon the behavior or gradual development of planetary life forms. The presence of exceptionally potent psi powers within the animal kingdom would, perhaps, upset the food cycle as preyed-upon species might evade their predators too successfully, thereby upsetting Nature's ecological balance. Grosso also ponders the potentially horrifying consequences for humanity if powerful, physically efficient psi abilities were ever to come into the possession of highly motivated, intelligent but unscrupulous human beings. Here I am reminded of the rumors that Adolf Hitler possessed powerful psi abilities (Ostrander and Schroeder, 1970). Within the

context of Grosso's evolutionary framework the difficulties of eliciting psi in modern parapsychological experiments may be seen to stem from the activity of protective cosmic forces, forces whose function it is to minimize but not completely impede the flow of psi into the physical universe. That psi abilities do not seem to be learnable but, on the contrary, often seem to attenuate and then disappear entirely in those persons subjected to extensive psi testing is, as Grosso notes, relevant to this argument. Rather than facilitating any increased capacity to manipulate space, time and matter, the natural thrust of psi, Grosso proposes, may be altogether different, i.e., it may facilitate the ascendance of human consciousness above and outside of space and time. Accordingly, Grosso speculates that "If the function of psi is essentially otherworldly, then we need not be surprised how transient and marginal an effect we find it to be in this world" (p. 49).

Grosso then reviews a number of arguments promoted by various distinguished biologists, zoologists, and other natural scientists on the extreme improbability of random physical forces fostering the evolution of life on earth. Siding with those scholars, Grosso states that "the mechanists' faith in the play of random forces is no more justified than the theists' faith in design" (p. 54). The plausibility of that particular argument is questionable in light of a recent development in modern logic called the "game of life" (Poundstone, 1985). This "game" is played on an infinite two-dimensional grid in which the various cells, according to the rules, may be designated to be "empty" or "occupied" by a dot. Out of the recursion of a few initial steps (wherein dot formations blink on or off, move and change shape, grow or wither) repeated randomly over sufficiently large spans of space and time, universes of extraordinary richness come into being, seemingly awash in a whole hierarchy of simple to complex "two dimensional" life forms. Similar games played in three dimensions have also been developed and their possible relevance to the evolution of our own physical universe is currently under investigation.

Abstract games of logic, however, may or may not be able to address another of the criticisms Grosso levels at natural selection, a criticism involving the difficulty of incorporating preadaptation into Darwin's evolutionary scheme. As one of any number of possible examples of preadaptation, Grosso cites evidence that "a tree-climbing apparatus developed in frogs before they began to climb trees" (p. 66). Preadaptation implies, Grosso argues, the preexistence of a goal or plan in Nature. Grosso construes examples of preadaptation to be evidence of intelligently planned forethought on the part of Mind at Large as it engages in the act of shaping what would otherwise be the play of

totally random physical forces and energies. Relating this theme to the fossils of dead-ended animal species, Grosso likens Mind at Large to "an experimental artist-God who makes mistakes and scratches them out discovering what it creates as it goes along" (p. 63). To digress momentarily, this scratching out of species brings to my mind the almost too-large-for-life dinosaurs. In the fossils of those bygone behemoths do we see preserved records of Mind at Large in the formative years of its education, before it graduated to engineer the creation of life forms with more promise for evolutionary growth?

Further on in his text, Grosso continues to articulate the theme that the evolution of life need not be confined to successive developments in space along a linear progression in time, much like the roots of a tree need not be confined to any set growth pattern, but rather will grow wildly in all manner of directions, to seek out life's sustaining waters. Grosso considers that theme within the framework of human consciousness surviving bodily death as he ponders that "if the goal of life is more life—in a word, survival—and if psi serves the needs of life's goals, then psi may be an instrument for mediating survival of bodily death itself" (p. 51). He continues, "If the goal of life is more life, higher, freer and more complex forms of life, then psi may represent the next medium of self transcending life. Psi thus understood as a transcendent function is the wedge of life driving through the most fundamental of obstacles to the evolutionary process" (p. 51).

Directing this theme to the NDE, Grosso speculates:

Normal consciousness, fixated upon the plane of life, is usually locked into a narrow band of the present. In the near-death experience, that fixation is broken, and consciousness dilates over the whole life field, of memory, just as Bergson predicted it would. It dilates beyond the present, overflowing toward the future, embracing the collective life-plan, surging beyond itself and escaping the constraints of brain filtered consciousness. (p. 70).

That beautiful passage contains, unfortunately, a misrepresentation of Bergson's thought on time dilation. Bergson's time dilation, in the book Grosso cites (Bergson, 1911/1970), entails only an expansion into the past, not into the future. In other words, for Bergson time spatializes exclusively in the direction of memory. Grosso makes no mention of the pioneer higher-space metaphysicians (e.g., Fechner, 1836/1943; Ouspensky, 1922; Dunne, 1927) who have truly championed the kind of theory outlined above. Nor does Grosso cite any of the modern proponents of that metaphysical view (McLaughlin, 1977, 1979–80, 1986; Murchie, 1978; Greene, 1981, 1984; Haight, 1983) who have

attempted to integrate it into the framework of contemporary consciousness research, parapsychology and near-death studies. Grosso does cite Ring (1984), who momentarily considered the possible relevance of higher-space theory in attempting to make sense of the prophetic visions sometimes reported by NDErs.

In the following section Grosso discusses the parameters of the OBE established between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. He observes that the concept of the OBE is currently in disarray among parapsychologists and other scholars. The major alternative hypotheses, Grosso notes, argue either that 1) some aspect of the experient actually separates from the physical body or that 2) experients are really entering hallucinatory dream-like spaces, "psychological spaces" that experients misconstrue to be the external three-dimensional environment viewed from a point separate from their physical bodies. Grosso's descriptions of these investigations are sufficiently developed for the informed reader to follow. However, I would argue that some of his descriptions are too vague and cursory for uninformed but interested readers to follow clearly; that is particularly so with his accounting of research conducted at the American Society for Psychological Research.

Next Grosso extrapolates a "psychical distance" approach to comprehending the OBE. He relates this understanding of the OBE, persuasively I believe, to the esthetic, visionary, and other creative "flights of the mind" engaged in by mystics, philosophers, poets, and artists. Some of the most compelling and original insights in Grosso's book are contained in this section.

From the study of OBEs Grosso turns to an analysis of NDEs. Much of that material has appeared previously in two articles published in this journal (Grosso, 1981, 1983). Grosso reviews current theories and opinions on NDEs and then expounds a Jungian archetypal interpretation that he, more than any other researcher, has promoted. More than just explaining diverse specific features of NDEs, Grosso's archetypal theory also illustrates certain ways in which NDEs may fit into a wider spectrum of consciousness states including OBEs, UFO visions, psychedelic states, dreams, mystical experiences and afterlife states. As I have noted elsewhere (Greene, 1986), Jungian psychology by itself is capable of assimilation into any number of different metaphysical systems. By placing his archetypal theory inside the wider context of Mind at Large, Grosso has, in my view, successfully oriented it within a metaphysical outlook broad enough to cover paranormal phenomena, mystical experiences and consciousness surviving bodily death.

In the ensuing section, Grosso examines reports of apparently divine intervention into human affairs. The New Testament accounts of

Christ's resurrection and of St. Paul's ecstatic vision on the road to Damascus are considered, as well as the inspirational visions of other early Christians. Reports of helping apparitions in modern times, materializations of both living and dead persons, and the bilocations of such saintly persons as Padre Pio are also noted. Later, Grosso returns to the theme of religious apparitions, as he presents a chronology of reported sightings of the Virgin Mary from the mid-1800s to the present. He argues that this evidence suggests an increase in the frequency of apparent visitations by the Virgin. UFO contacts in modern times and prophetic visions among NDErs are also discussed in this section.

Grosso sees these instances of seeming contact between humanity and spiritual agencies from "above" as evidence of Mind at Large guiding our planet's spiritual evolution by healing the physical, psychic and spiritual illnesses afflicting the human race. (Grosso's approach towards identifying and remedying these illnesses shall be examined shortly.) These emissaries from beyond and "harbingers of divine intimacy" have, Grosso surmises, intervened in human affairs at an accelerating rate that matches the continuing increase in planetary tensions. In other words, Mind at Large, Grosso suggests, may be helping to mobilize humanity's psycho-spiritual reserves. As a consequence of this adaptation, humanity is, Grosso speculates, being propelled into some sort of collective NDE—the spiritual fruits of which may activate evolutionary characteristics possessing survival value for the human race. Grosso also devotes a chapter to the mysterious Shroud of Turin, purportedly the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. Grosso sides with those scholars who advocate the spiritual and historical legitimacy of the cloth. He then incorporates that view into his concept of Mind at Large involved in facilitating planetary evolution.

In the following, and final, section of the book, Grosso takes on the enormous task of attempting to identify just what it is about human nature that has brought our planet to the brink of nuclear disaster. He introduces the psychoanalytic concept that the human psyche is caught in a struggle between two opposing cosmic forces, Eros, a life instinct, and Thanatos, a death instinct. Grosso is ambivalent in his use of this theme, perhaps because scientific evidence favoring the existence of a human death instinct is, as he notes, weak. His choice of terms when discussing Thanatos, e.g., the "Thanatos conspiracy" and the subchapter headed "Rumors of a Death-Instinct" (p. 263) exemplify, I believe, his thinking on the subject. Grosso incorrectly states that Freud introduced the term Thanatos to denote this hypothetical death instinct (p. 264). Actually, Neo-Freudian writers first adopted the term when commenting on Freud's "suspect" metapsychological theory of

instincts. Grosso also fails to discuss or even reference the only modern near-death study designed specifically to examine NDEs for a human death instinct (Greene, 1983). Had he briefly summarized, in the place of his own treatment, Kenneth Wilber's (1980) brilliant extension to Freudian instinct theory, or refrained entirely from developing this avenue of speculation, his generally superb volume would have been that much better.

Grosso does, however, use other modern psychological concepts far more intelligently. He demonstrates, with unusual skill and insight, I believe, how certain concepts related to human security needs, e.g., notions of anxiety and paranoia, may be made to illuminate the behavior not only of individual persons but also of whole nation states. His depiction of the standoff between the US and the USSR is, in my view, particularly enlightening. He states that "The real conflict . . . that threatens the world today is not between East and West, Communism and Capitalism; it is the conflict between the paranoid and metanoid potentials of the human mind" (p. 275). By "metanoid potentials" Grosso refers to largely dormant capacities in the collective human psyche, that are awakened in a few persons to produce an enhanced ability to love and an increased trust in the course of events that manifest in the universe (p. 269). In another passage Grosso observes, chillingly, that "A nuclear war might erupt on the basis of what, in effect, was the hallucination of danger. The inability to distinguish between real and imagined threats is one mark of the paranoid personality" (p. 269). That collective mentality of nuclear besiegement and the collective sense of paranoia infusing it, Grosso argues, is symptomatic of a deeply ingrained "metaphysical disease" afflicting humanity in our day. And it is only in consciously striving to awaken our metanoid potentials, and thereby in opening ourselves up more directly to the ministerings of Mind at Large, Grosso writes, that we shall have any chance to heal ourselves.

That is the reason Grosso conceives our planet's nuclear crisis in terms of a choice. If we are to avoid falling blindly into the Darwinian pit of disregarded species, we must choose consciously to shed our collective paranoia so our underlying metanoid capacities will spring into action. The prospect of nuclear holocaust—viewed from a metanoid disposition—may actually serve, Grosso contends, as the primary impetus that will enable us to give birth to the next stage in the evolution of planetary consciousness instead of destroying ourselves.

Grosso finishes his volume with a two-page "coda" scribed in lyrical prose poetry that serves as a paean to the transcendental promise he sees as present, for all of us, in NDEs.

In rounding out this review, I have one additional criticism, after which I will address what I feel to be the major weaknesses in his *Mind at Large* construct. Grosso states that cases of transcendental music constitute a "rarer phenomenon among characteristics comprising NDEs" (p. 193). I would argue that not enough is known today to state confidently how frequently transcendental music is experienced during NDEs. I myself have come across many instances of this effect scattered throughout the NDE cases of Robert Crookall, Russell Noyes, Johann Hampe, Kenneth Ring, and other researchers. What is rare is researcher interest in this fascinating area of near-death studies. Few contemporary near-death researchers seem even to be aware of D. Scott Rogo's (1970, 1972) two-volume content analysis of transcendental music in OBEs, NDEs, deathbed visions and other states of consciousness thought to be conducive to ESP.

And finally, nowhere does Grosso address certain essential theological and ontological problems impossible to divorce from any deeper analysis of his *Mind at Large* construct. In his attempt to build the case for the actual existence of an "experimenter God," Grosso has not, in my opinion, sufficiently separated that entity from all else in the universe. For instance, it is not clear where the entity ends and his creation begins and vice versa. Are we to assume that the creator and his creation are one and the same thing? Furthermore, it seems very clear to me that a creator God possessing the attributes that Grosso ascribes to his hypothesized deity should, more specifically, be assigned the role of a "demiurgic intelligence" (e.g., see Bennett, 1965) or planetary deity—not to be confused with the creator of whole cosmoses. Once again, Grosso fails to make the necessary critical distinction.

In conclusion, Grosso's scholarship reaches its lowest ebb when he is attempting to construct a coherent and plausible portrait of *Mind at Large*. In the introduction he asserts, overstating the case I believe, that the one purpose of the book is "to draw a picture of *Mind at Large* and show how the concept may relate to our survival, both here and hereafter" (p. 6). However, in the middle of the book (pp. 200–201), where he offers the most extensive single accounting of what that concept means to him, Grosso states that "*Mind at Large* doesn't refer to any 'thing,' it points only to a process" (p. 201). This hypothesized suprarational creative experimentalist, who intellectually deliberates upon and profits by his mistakes, who fashions successively more sophisticated life forms, who works to liberate human consciousness from a dependence upon material existence, points only to a process? Surely, at the very least, these are poorly chosen words with which to describe the entity that is the primary theoretical construct of the

book. Practically speaking, these words are meaningless, as anything existing or conceived to be existing in the universe may be said to "point to a process." As a psychologist, a parapsychologist and a philosopher, Grosso is, I have already stated, a truly inspired thinker, but as a theologian, I believe, he fails to attain the same high standard of insight and clarity.

The true worth of Grosso's book lies not, in my view, with his underdeveloped and overly obscure construction of Mind at Large, however profound the idea may be. Rather, Grosso's scholarship reaches its zenith when he is integrating theories of psi, OBEs and NDEs into the frameworks of depth psychology, consciousness research and evolution. It is in his vision of the human species as the vanguard in an evolutionary push, a push bursting beyond the very confines of space and time—as we currently recognize these parameters of human experience—that Grosso has, I believe, established himself as one of our day's foremost visionary philosophers.

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